1. Why I went & how I worked

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose...

From this hour I ordain myself lo'd of limits and
imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the
holds that would hold me.

I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the
south are mine.
—Walt Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road'

Six journeys, three fields

I went to the forest, the pond, the shoreline; I went to the red desert, the
high prairie, and the meadow, and home again to the plateau, because I wanted to see what
the experience of nature writing has been, how it still is, for writers who have been at it much
longer than I have. I wanted to make this inquiry while I wrote my own book of home, *The Blue
Plateau*, and so reflect on my own writing experience and my own home country in the light of
what I learned from my journeying into nature writing abroad.

I went looking for the arts and disciplines of a tradition I hoped was also mine. I have undertaken
here, not just a piece of scholarship, but a kind of apprenticeship—admittedly transitory and
hasty—to some writers and their places. I have made a journey among mentors, in search of a
community of writers; and it was an inquiry among forests and meadows, rivers and deserts, ponds
and seashores that had inspired works of words I admired—an inquiry after the music and lore of
those places I sensed in those works. I wanted to find out what some writers of place had to tell
me, had to show me, about the work of witness; and I wanted to see what the edge of a forest and a
pond and a long shoreline and a desert and a valley of wind and a meadow might tell me about six writers who have borne them witness.

At the heart of this study lie six journeys. I took myself to talk with five authors I admire—and to consider another, long dead, without whose work the work of the others is almost unimaginable. And I wanted to have those conversations, to take those walks, within the landscapes in which each writer has made a home; within the natural history from which perhaps their writing emerges. I went; I saw their country; I met these writers; we wandered and conversed about the writing of the wild. If it didn’t work out as neatly as I’d planned, that was because I’d imagined it too simply.

I wanted to spend a few days with each writer in his or her home place. As it turned out, I was able to do this with only three of my subjects—Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams and Laurie Kutchins.

The time I spent with Laurie Kutchins I spent in a landscape where she now lives and writes, where she parents and teaches, but which she does not love and does not write much of. She feels, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, exiled from her birthplace, from the cradle of her voice, Wyoming. But I went driving and walking in that country myself—the valley of the Wind, the prairies and ranges of Wyoming’s south, the young mountains of the Snake and Yellowstone.

I couldn’t talk with James Galvin in the country near Tie Siding where all his writing has been grounded, where most of his life has been lived. I couldn’t ride there with him as I’d hoped. But I travelled to Iowa City, where he was teaching, after visiting that country by myself, and I talked with him at length. Though I saw his country, though we spoke of it and of his writing when we met 800 miles away east, I did not get to see him at home. I didn’t witness him and his landscape in conversation. It made my fieldwork no less rich; it made my understanding of the connections between his world and his words, if anything, richer.

With Peter Matthiessen, my time was short—just an afternoon. Long enough, I think, for the work I had to do. I sat with our conversation, had in his kitchen and along the sea shore of the South Fork of Long Island, for a long time back home, reading through his thirty books all over again. I found, sitting and writing by another shore, nearer home, that a pattern emerged from that short conversation and that long reading that demanded a chapter.

I met other writers whose work I had hoped to cover, but did not—John Haines, Bill Kittredge, John Daniel, Richard Nelson, Carolyn Servid, William J Lines. My experiences and conversations with each—particularly with Richard Nelson and William Lines—were remarkable, and each deserves a chapter here. But I simply could not house in one study all the writers, all the landscapes, I visited. Sometimes, my engagement with them yielded too much material for me to
reduce to the size of a chapter; sometimes, because of their modesty or the inadequacy of my own questioning, my time with them yielded too little. I thank them for the time they gave me, and, above all, for their beautiful work.

There were some writers I had hoped to meet and write about here, but could not—Linda Hogan, Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. Who knows what those conversations might have yielded. All three writers, I should note, were happy to meet me and disappointed that our paths could not cross. I thank them for their generosity and, again, for the beauty of their work. Though they are not here, I have learned much from them.

And there were writers I had not intended, when I set out, to cover, but did—Laurie Kutchins or James Galvin. I had not, to be honest, heard of them. I met Laurie in my travels and shared conversations with her, time with her in Virginia, that opened my mind to thoughts I had not had before.

I have found my own understanding of this literature enlarged and made more complex as I’ve travelled, so that, for one thing, I have ended up including two poets, Kutchins and Galvin, in a study that thought it was anatomising the essay. Galvin, though a poet first and always, is best known for a work of lyric essay, *The Meadow*, and is also the author of a novel. Kutchins, too, is the author of a few lyric essays and has a large prose work, on wind, in mind. I included them because they and their work have helped me toward an understanding of something I was seeking all along, though I may not have known it at the beginning: the work that music does, that lyric does in text, and how well that element of language serves and renders what is wild, poetic, essential and irreplaceable in landscape. I have included them because their work helped me realise my original conceptions of nature writing were too narrow. I have included them because I could not, in the end, leave them out.

And then there is Henry David Thoreau, who is many things, all of them essential to an understanding of this literature—but he is certainly no longer, literally, alive. And yet I visited him at Walden Pond. I have included him because my travels took me, with many of these other nature writers, to Walden Pond, an experience so powerful I felt goaded to consider him too. So much has been said about Thoreau, the modern father of this writing—of nature writing, I mean, and even, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, I suppose, of the modern lyric essay—that it felt preposterous to include him here. All I can say in my defence is that he and the pond seemed to insist, and that his prose embodies some ideas he himself articulated about the capacity of a certain kind of factual writing to sing the music (the wildness) of the place it concerns. So he is here too, he and the pond from which *Walden* rose.

I wanted to observe, if I could, how places speak to authors; to learn what witness means, what inhabitation means; what intimacy with place looks and feels like; to notice the ways some writers
approach the wild in places they love, and how it approaches them. I went to look for the ecological imagination at work.

Though I have left undone some things I ought, or had intended at least, to have done; and though I have done some things and covered some works and worlds I had not intended to cover, still, with these six writers, in these six places, on these six journeys, I have done roughly what I set out to do. I have gone as a writer, a student and a critic to some places about which some fine writers write, or where they live and work; I have seen what I have seen, heard and felt what I have heard and felt, of the relationship that holds between those places and those writers; and I have had the chance to consider the connections that run from place to writer to work and back the other way. I have been able to wonder, in place, how the work of witnessing place is done; and how, sometimes, a work may express a place in words.

I went as a witness and as a writer—I went as a nature writer, if you like—among three kinds of terrain: the writer’s home landscape (usually also the landscape their work deals with, or at least the landscape in which they have done their writing); the life and nature of the writer themselves, as I encountered them; and the country of their text, of their writing. I wandered and conversed in these three realms with each writer. This was my field work, and these were its fields. I went to witness—to listen and question and take note. I didn’t want just surfaces; I wanted to plumb the depths. I went seeking patterns of meaning, listening for the essential music of place and personality and prose and their interplay. I went as a scholar, a phenomenologist, an ecocritic, a student. But I cannot, I find, fail to be the kind of man I am as a writer, even when I work within the constraint and with the disciplines that scholarship entails.

The ecology of listening—the writer as critic; the critic as participant

I broke bread with these people (all but Henry David Thoreau); I stayed sometimes in their homes. I made friendships with them. To some extent, of course, this was necessary for the kind of intimacy, closeness, my project demanded: to allow me to watch them at the work of witness; to know the nature of the space in which they write; to get a feel for the whole person they are when they do both things. Without their trust, I could have had no acquaintance with them, their secret places, their real lives and thoughts. Without that I could not have had the richness of conversation I shared in.

‘Great criticism doesn’t commandeer its subjects,’ wrote Pulitzer-prize-winning critic Margo Jefferson, speaking of John Berger, in the New York Times Book Review recently; ‘it collaborates with them’ (Jefferson, 2002, p 31). Criticism demands detachment, but also, I think, a sympathetic understanding of the work and its creator; respect for her creativity; knowledge that her work will always be a larger thing than any criticism can construe it as. Mine is an inquiry begun out of passion and sympathy for the work of my subjects. Love stirred it. But critical thought
accompanied it. Though mine is not the great criticism Jefferson had in mind, I have tried to collaborate with my subjects, as John Berger has done. I wanted to let these writers speak for themselves; I wanted to cast light on their places and their literary engagement with them out of conversations and wanderings within country. I wished not to emaciate these lives and works under the scrutiny of a narrow critical stance. As Martin Heidegger might say, I wanted to let these works, these words, these worlds be what they are. I wished to discover something within them, maybe some answers to my questions, but not to commandeer them to my purpose. I got close to my subjects, but I remained detached.

This is what I try to do in my work as a literary critic and interviewer too. I have a sense that we get the best out of most people by engaging with them respectfully, encouraging them to elaborate ideas, rather than forcing them to defend accusations, or allowing them to deliver practised responses by pretending disinterest and insisting on an atmosphere of civil distance. Conversation prospers when the listener shows respect and interest, friendliness, if that is appropriate; when the speaker understands that the words pass back and forth inside a relationship, rather than as answers to a set of questions.

This is not, in other words, a dispassionate, disinterested inquiry, though it is careful, orderly and marked by hard and critical thinking. This is the kind of inquiry, as I will elaborate in the next chapter, phenomenology enjoins; and it is the kind—lively, narrative and engaged—that ecocriticism encourages. I held engaged, respectful conversation with my subjects, their work, and their home places. I went with questions, and I made sure they arose in conversation; I carried them into silent conversation with the landscapes I entered—the McKenzie River Valley, Walden Pond, the Long Island shore, the redrock desert of Utah, the prairies and ranges of Wyoming and Colorado. I listened to the wild—with these questions in my mind—in all these places where Lopez, Thoreau, Matthiessen, Williams, Kutchins and Galvin have listened too. I came away with much more than I had hoped for.

But if I gathered evidence passionately, personally; if I had encounters with these writers, their places and works, rather than mere visits; if I came to know them, at least a little, from the inside; still I have, as every witness, every decent writer and every scholar must, set down what I saw, what thoughts arose, what things I learned, with as much precision as I could. This study considers with detachment, it recalls, calmly I hope, fieldwork that often moved me deeply, in which I formed attachments to people and places that will long outlive the conclusions I set down here. I came home with hundreds of pages of field notes, and in the writing of these chapters I found that ideas, connections, conclusions arose that had not occurred to me in the moments of my interviews and journeys. I questioned and rejected conclusions I had drawn at the time and drew new ones. Those ideas and unexpected dawns of awareness are the children, I suppose, of
critical reflection upon the notes and memories of close encounters with places and their writers. They are part of the phenomenological inquiry that began in those fields.

My encounters, my meetings, my naturalist’s engagement with these three fields—country of mind, text and home place—these were my data; these were what I witnessed. This study is the articulation of witness, the second face of witness, the one turned toward one’s readers—it records what I discovered in those moments and the patterns that emerged in my mind, in quiet and critical reflection, back home. My going into these North American terrains was my sensing; the reflection that has become Writing the Wild is my making sense.

You will find me here in the telling because I was there in the field. (Again both phenomenology, my guiding methodological idea, and ecocriticism, my critical approach, encourage acknowledgment of the researcher’s participation in the inquiry.) The fields of my witness—my reading texts, my conversing, my walking through landscapes—were what they were because of my presence in them: not that I created them, but that I affected the shape and nature of the experiences I had there because of the way I found myself taking part in them. It is right, I think, that I notice the way I was present; it is right that I note my participation in these encounters; it is right that I, too, am embedded in this study as a writer and wonderer. Not to do so would be to make this account, this critical reflection, false.

_Ecocritical narrative_

This critical study proceeds in narrative. It tells a story—though not always in a straight line and not always continuously; in fragments, rather; episodes and excursions. And it grounds itself within the natural histories it concerns. Ecocriticism has made a virtue of such narrative techniques. ‘Ecocriticism without narrative,’ writes Scott Slovic, ‘is like stepping off the face of a mountain—it’s the disoriented language of freefall’ (Slovic, 1999, p 37). Narrative that acknowledges the presence of the critic in the inquiry; that describes the relationship between critic, subject and place as though it really happened; that sets its inquiry down in specific geographical ground; and that favours the (intelligent) vernacular over the disembodied diction of conventional critical discourse—such criticism is likely to engage its readers and, with luck, win their trust without compromising its critical integrity. That is the kind of writing many ecocritics advocate and practise. It is also, I believe, more likely to disclose the reality of what took place in my encounters and to elaborate clearly what my mind has made of it. Such language, the phenomenologists would say—though few of them practise what they preach (and soon you will be thinking that I am another of them)—sings the lifeworld of the research experience. In collaboration with the texts and authors I study here, I have tried to speak, as they do, in what Slovic calls ‘the language of solid ground’ (Slovic, 1999, p 34).
Despite my coming among them in this way, I met some resistance among the writers I interviewed—resistance to my inquiry into the nature of their witness to place and their creative process; suspicion about my purpose and the value of such research. Had I not gone among them as a fellow writer (an apprentice writer, not a peer), equally respectful of the mysteries that hold at the centre of one's witness of the world, I would not have worked through that resistance. I know that many of these writers would not have been as generous with their ideas on writing the wild as they were; nor would they have allowed me to see so much of the terrain of themselves at work.

The quality (and, I think, the accuracy, liveliness and truthfulness) of my data, the yield of words and ideas, depended on my capacity—which often seemed limited to me, and yet it worked, at times, well enough—to create a space in which talk on these matters was as natural as a conversation among friends; in which it was safe for them (and me) to acknowledge deeply held ideas (some of them unfashionable among critics these writers have encountered before) about where the writing comes from; in which true things might be spoken and real encounters between people (my subjects, my self) and country might take place. My work depended on my nurture of trust. I got what I got in this inquiry to the extent that I convinced these writers that, while I came with all my critical faculties engaged, I came not to reduce their work and the ideas they have about it to a size that fits some model I carry with me, but to understand their writing as well as (perhaps even better than) they do; and that I would go away and find words and a theory, perhaps, large and clear and good enough to express the phenomenon I encountered.

I experienced among all these writers a distrust, of varying intensity, of conventional literary analysis. Part of that resistance arose from bad experiences some of these writers—like most writers—feel they have had at the hands of academic and journalistic critics. Part of the distrust I met had to do, in some cases, with a feeling, as Laurie Kutchins put it to me, that 'the less I think about how I am writing, the better I write.' In other cases—with Lopez particularly—what I met was the opposite anxiety. I sensed not merely mistrust of my inquiry as a new attempt at a flawed and inadequate enterprise; I sensed the anxiety of a writer who had thought deeply and written carefully, and often, about the matters I wanted to talk about, that he might not put it so well in conversation, or that I might misconstrue his words. He seemed concerned that, after all his other words, too much might turn on this one conversation.

Beyond this fear, which I hope I allayed, Lopez and some of the others expressed, usually without words, a conviction that the best of their reflection upon the nature of witness, the business of language, the language of places, was written in and into their work, and that I should look for it there. I sympathise with this position. We should read more, and more thoughtfully, and interrogate authors less. And yet I know that inquiry is inevitable, and that it can throw light on text. Just as a painter or a composer of music can help us experience their work by speaking of its
composition and ideas, the process of their creation of it, so a writer can help us too. Readers need to learn a way of speaking about texts that takes their eyes to its composition, its relationships of shape and sound, its patterns and voice and music. Writers—some writers—can help us with this. So I tried simply to coax these writers into talking—and once they sensed my seriousness and sympathy as a fellow writer, that task was not so hard.

Two of these writers—Kutchins and Galvin—teach writing at university. For them, particularly for Galvin, speaking about forms and structures suited to one’s subject, about sentence shape and line length and rhythm and tone, and how writerly disciplines and choices about such matters bear on the fitness of one’s work for the landscape and people it concerns—all this came easily. A writer who teaches college is used to talking about technique and the creative process, even about witness. Williams and Lopez, though fulltime writers, are well used to speaking of such matters too; each has had college placements and has spoken widely about the nature of their work and its intentions. Nonetheless, all these writers showed some reluctance to talk about their own work.

Terry Tempest Williams told me that once, after she had spoken of her work at a literary conference, she overheard one scholar say to another, ‘You see, this is why it is better when they’re dead.’ Meaning, she supposed, that the writers need the scholars to explain to readers and students what the writer means in her work, indeed, to explain what it means. Meaning that a writer’s carefully crafted words are not enough on their own; meaning that a writer’s understanding of what it was they were making is to be mistrusted.

Terry also once asked the ecocritic Scott Slovic, ‘So what exactly do you do as an ecocritic?’ Slovic responded that the ecocritic’s role should not be to ‘help people understand’ texts that are themselves ‘perfectly lucid and even eloquent.’ The critic’s role, said Slovic, is to set those texts in broader and deeper contexts than writers usually want to do themselves, immersed as they are in their ‘own specific narratives’ (Slovic, 1999, p 37). That context might include the work of other writers in the field; the shared purposes and characteristics of the literature; elements of the biography of the author and the natural history of the work.

This ecocritic—I mean myself—has tried to set his subjects’ work in such contexts. These authors’ works are quite eloquent on their own, and I have been careful to let them stand, to let them be. They do not need my commentary, and they deserve to be read without it. Yet, perhaps, each author’s work may yield more of its texture, nature, larger musical form, its patterns—as indeed a place will—if it is witnessed in a certain way: generously, patiently, lyrically, even ecologically. I discovered much more within the works of these writers the more I learned to read them in this way—with both intimacy and detachment; in the context of their natural and human histories; with a sense of them as terrains, as places, enfolded with mysteries and complex structures. They grew for me as works and their authors grew for me as people when I began to
read them as one might read a catchment, or a landscape through time. And when I entered those works again and again, bearing in mind the ideas—about form, structure, musicality and witness, for instance—that arose among us in conversation.

_Pilgrimage and criticism_

My critical path was, as I say, also a pilgrimage—into astonishing landscapes and among great writers. I have emerged from it changed. At its outset, the ecocritic and nature writer John Tallmadge commented to me that ecocriticism encourages pilgrimage—critical pilgrimages among sacred literary sites, texts and their authors. I chose these writers because I like their work and between them they represent something of the diversity of the literature. I chose them too because I am drawn to the landscapes they write—some, the arid ones, more than others. Among them are several of the best-known and most senior writers in this field, and some others, as I've mentioned, who are barely nature writers, in most people's eyes at all. These contrasts are interesting, but they are accidental. I was guided, on the whole, by what I love. My sample is not really meant to be representative—except of the very best that landscape-oriented literature is capable of.

This is the narrative, then, of a quest. I journeyed to fathom some questions about how places and prose accounts of them are connected. So each of the chapters of part three speaks not only of one author's work and place but of those deeper questions. Each chapter carries those questions forward toward answers. In part four, I consider what answers my journey has yielded. This is a narrative of an ecocritical quest.

But how is a pilgrim, even an ecocritical one, to keep his head among the wonders and revelations? Scott Slovic himself has sagely counselled me that it falls to a critical inquirer to test carefully the claims writers make of their work, its origins and its intentions. He warned me to be careful of poetic claims authors sometimes make, for instance, about their belongingness in place, and the way their writing arises from a certain ground. He speaks wisely of the capacity of all of us to mythologise ourselves, our work, our places. But I think I have listened to these authors with due care in this study; I have listened critically, while respecting the integrity of what they shared with me. One listens—as a friend, as a writer, as an ecocritic or phenomenologist—for the truth or lack of it with which someone speaks to you. One is discerning. One listens critically, but one listens with sympathy. Otherwise, indeed, what one hears may not be the truth. It may be the shallow, flippant or guarded response an artist gives to questions that imply a distrust of an artist's word.

I think the writers in my study have told me what they believe to be true about the way they listen to the wild and the way they write it. Among the writers I spoke with, I found little or nothing of the wishfulness of thinking Slovic and others have sometimes experienced among some
writers of environmental prose—the protestation, with little evidence, that a writer is of a certain place. Where I have concluded that a writer’s prose reads, in some way, like his landscape, like her landscape, these are conclusions I have drawn, you will notice, from my own reading of these three terrains—text, ground and author—rather than the wishful claims of the writers themselves. Where, as with Williams, Kutchins and Galvin, authors made a claim for connection between their lifework and the country to which they feel attached, I have explored those claims for meaning and integrity. I did more than accept them at face value. And I found among these writers modest, though earnest, expressions of a wish to belong or a feeling of connection to certain geographies; I found practices of attachment, words of love, disciplines of belonging to particular places among these writers—above all, the work of dedicated witness these writers undertake daily in their writing.

*Would the real nature writer please stand up*

All of these writers were anxious not to be seen as nature writers. No one, it seems, not even I, likes the label. And there are problems with it. It implies to many people that the writer in question is a literate naturalist—a nature lover, an observer of birds and rivers and so on, who writes descriptions of what they see, often romantic or awestruck or else narrowly scientific. The name diminishes the literature. These are writers with a landscape orientation, a leaning to a larger world than society alone. And they are right to reject the label. But it is a term already old. It is serviceable and inclusive, and it brings to mind the land and most of the writers who have come before in the tradition I want to explore here. So I will use it, but I will use other terms, like ‘the literature of place,’ ‘the literature of nature,’ ‘landscape writing,’ ‘place writing.’ Two of these writers—Galvin and Kutchins—wouldn’t be on many people’s list of nature writers, anyway; they are poets and lyric essayist to whom places matter. They have that additional reason for resisting the tag. Even Peter Matthiessen is at the margins of this literature, since he has written many novels and would be more widely perceived as a travel writer and explorer. And Lopez, Thoreau and Williams, though more aptly located within a nature writing tradition, are also writers of the first rank, all questions of nature and landscape aside. The work of all of the writers I consider here is not the work of the literate naturalist, though all these men and women are close and passionate watchers and defenders of the land and all its citizens.

I have approached this inquiry with a generous but also a more literary sense of what this writing is than is perhaps conventional. This approach helped me stir rich and wide-ranging conversations from these writers—deeper and wider and richer by far than if I had approached them as mere nature writers.
Resistance

There was, then, much reluctance to overcome—far more than I had anticipated. Out of modesty, fear, writerly scepticism and even embarrassment at what a lifeless and marginal literature nature writing can be made to seem, all my subjects, all these writers, resisted me at first. That, I think, is how it should be. Originality grows out of working up against resistance; honesty depends upon trust that is established by trial. Collaboration was hard won, as all genuine partnerships and conversations tend to be. They do not happen glibly, or if they do, they are worthless. But, once won, the yield of these collaborations was rich, and I hope I treat it here with respect.
2. Back to the places themselves

A phenomenology of nature writing

Thus nature maintains itself without my concurrence; before it all my subjectivity has no standing and is dissolved.

In taking it to myself, I find an incomparable satisfaction.

—Robert Gray, 'At the Inlet'

Nature writing is a phenomenological enterprise. So is Writing the Wild.

Nature writers turn to the experience of being present within the living world—some particular part of it. They sound that presentness—within-nature for its texture, weight and implications; and they hope to resound that encounter in words. Like phenomenology, nature writing begins in silence (Spiegelberg, 1994, in Crotty, 1996, p 278). Nature writing is mostly a matter of listening, of attention to concrete living detail and the larger order it implies and articulates. It attempts to relinquish conventional ways of seeing; it tries to step outside the constraints of self, of 'mankindness,' as John Haines has put it—and touch, share, the life of country as deeply as is humanly possible. It works at transcending self and locating identity within a place on earth. It works the ground between the sensing, thinking body of the subject and the animate body of the world. It goes to the wildness of things, as Gary Snyder has written; to the wildness of mind and prose; to the poetics of place and its depiction. Much of this endeavour it shares with phenomenology.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty encouraged philosophers and researchers to rediscover 'wild being.' Like Husserl before him, he urged researchers to seek the 'inherent essence of appearances' (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p 3), and he felt that one could only come to discern 'the lifeworld' of things—of anything that appears to human consciousness—if one attained that 'wild,' original, intuitive state of mind, if one oriented oneself to the phenomenal world with an attitude unconstrained by human culture, language, thought, presumption (Crotty, 1996, p 275; Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p 4). Phenomenology is supposed to take 'a fresh and unprejudiced look' at 'human experience in and of the world' (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p 1). This could work as a description of the disposition and purpose of the nature writer too. Nature writing attempts a
kind of wild being and wild writing. It listens to places and human experience within them, and it wants to honour the life of what it witnesses in the manner of its telling—as phenomenology does too. Like phenomenology, nature writing is a first-person enterprise (Crotty, 1996, p 272).

When I began to read about phenomenology, searching for an intellectual framework and a methodology for my inquiry into this literature, it seemed I had discovered, in the phenomenological movement—for it is not, any more than nature writing, a school with a single orderly rubric (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p 4; Speigelberg, 1994)—an approach peculiarly apt for my search. The focus it places on the phenomenon of lived experience, the inner life of the world as it manifests to human consciousness, and the approach it takes to speaking 'poetically' of the ineffable data of lived experience, fit it out well for investigating the writerly engagement with the lifeworld of places.

**Phenomenology—critical reflection on 'the things themselves'**

So, I frame my inquiry into the imaginative undertaking of nature writing within phenomenology. I have employed approaches to inquiry and data collection, and to writing, discussed by Max Van Manen and other phenomenologists.

Phenomenology—or, more properly, hermeneutic phenomenology—that emerged out of the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, asks researchers to 'return to our immediate experience of things' (Crotty, 1996, p 272). Husserl encourages us to go 'back to the things themselves,' 'to set aside all previous habits of thought,' and 'learn to see what stands before our eyes' (Husserl, 1931, p 43, in Crotty, 1996, p 273).

Phenomenology asks us to return 'in contemplative mode' to some experience in our own life, reflecting critically on how the phenomena of that experience present themselves to us (Crotty, 1996, p 273). It demands a willingness to reflect upon our personal experiences of life with intimacy, without judgment, completely open to their own authentic being, willing to know them in that way and speak of them frankly. Ortega y Gasset encourages a frame of mind that 'looks life in the face, realises everything is problematic' (y Gasset in Crotty, 1996, p 273). The facts, the data, with which phenomenology is concerned are the 'things themselves,' the world of lived experience, the living world as we participate in it, and it in us. Phenomenology is a reasoned

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1 Edmund Husserl, phenomenology's foundation thinker, argued that phenomenology could be and must be absolutely presuppositionless; but Martin Heidegger argued later that inquiry and understanding are impossible without some presuppositions (built, for example, into the structures of the languages in which we think and describe). Heidegger sought to merge phenomenology with hermeneutics, the study and practice of interpretation, the process of meaning-making. (See Moran's Introduction in Moran and Mooney's *The Phenomenology Reader*, 2002, pp 2, 18). I use 'phenomenology' in this study. But I mean to include within it the idea and process of critical 'circling back' between observation and presumption that Heidegger advocated. That is how I have proceeded, I think, in this inquiry.
inquiry—essentially descriptive and concerned to make meaning—into appearances; and appearances are everything that 'appears to consciousness,' precisely as they so appear and are experienced, and regardless of their supposed cause (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p. 1). So the experience of grief, of love, of belonging, of communication with the dead, of oneness with a landscape—all these and much else would be the subjects of phenomenological inquiry. It is the nature, the 'inherent essence' (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p. 3) and the meaning of such phenomena that phenomenological inquiry seeks to fathom.

Phenomenology is essentially a way of seeing the real; it is essentially methodological. Its methodology, its way of seeing, is something like what I call witness: it is engaged yet dispassionate; it is intuitive and yet sharply focused; it is generous (I mean nonjudgmental, accepting all phenomena and experiences as worthy of investigation) and yet critical; it is intimate and also detached. Husserl thought that it was possible, so oriented toward life, to grasp the essence of the phenomena one studied 'directly by immediate intuition' (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p. 7). For phenomenology is concerned to engage with phenomena in all their fullness (ibid, p. 2), specifically with the structure and peculiar qualities of witnessed places, say, of aspects of the world, of objects and situations, as a human beings experience them (ibid). Phenomenology is, as I say, a method of descriptive inquiry, concerned to illuminate and clarify what it studies, without resort to 'purely causal' explanations (ibid, pp 1-2). To so engage with life and experience, and so to write up what one observes and intuits, one must put aside one's accustomed attitudes, values, one must resist the temptation to interpret and explain according to received wisdoms. One must be both wild and discerning.

To subject to serious inquiry the essence of our experience of things, one must to return to a precognitive state of mind. Yet we need, at the same time as we set presumption and analysis aside, to take a detached and critical position, reflecting sensitively, precisely, carefully on the quality of a lived experience even as we return to that thing itself. Phenomenology is, like poetry and essay, objective contemplation upon subjective experience, like them, it seeks in the pre-conceptual nature of experience the poetic texture and meaning of that experience.

Martin Heidegger felt, departing from Edmund Husserl, that there could be no 'presuppositionless philosophising' (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p. 18). He proposed instead a methodology of inquiry into phenomena, a process of coming to understand them, that 'circled back and forth' 'between presumption and surprise,' between the noticing, the critical interpretation of what one intuits, and the testing again, against the raw material of witness, of one's emergent interpretations. This he called the 'hermeneutic circle' (Heidegger, Being and Time, 1927 in Moran and Mooney, 2002, p. 18). By this process, he felt, we might approach some understanding of the deep ontological question of 'the meaning of Being.'
But by this hermeneutic circling between intuitive observation of things in themselves and critical contemplation of one’s observations, conducted inevitably in language, we might, following Heidegger, approach a truer understanding of ‘human being-in-the-world’ (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p 19) than purely empirical inquiry, conducted utterly quantitatively, and employing the fierce logic of scientific method, allows us. It is the way I have tried to proceed in this study—observing these writers’ engagements with the world, their reported experiences of writing out of that experience, my own encounters in their landscapes and texts; wondering at what I observe; drawing some conclusions; returning to the writers, the works, the places themselves to test and try the meanings that start to emerge from my descriptive, witnessing engagement with the phenomena of writing the wild and out of the creation of my own phenomenological transcription; trying all the time to let the fullness of my experiences and those of these writers, and the essence of their landscapes and texts sing out in my own writing here.

Dermot Moran reminds us, too, that phenomenology, particularly in Heidegger’s work and after it, has concerned itself with the human encounter with the surrounding world; it extended philosophy’s inquiry well beyond the merely human to the ‘phenomena of the environment itself’ and to the nature of the relationship that might hold between the mind of man and the world beyond that mind (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p 9). I will have more to say about the matter of mind and world in the chapters that follow, particularly in ‘The real world,’ my study of the writing of James Galvin. Again, though, Heidegger’s concern with the ‘human being-in-the-world’ suggests to me that phenomenology is the right way to investigate the nature writer’s engagement with places, in body and in prose.

‘Phenomenology is a reflective enterprise, and in its reflection it is critical,’ writes Larrabee (in Crotty, 1996, p 276). Critical reflection is the central discipline of phenomenological inquiry.

Van Manen lays out the methodological structure of phenomenological inquiry like this:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;

2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;

3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;

4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;

5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;

6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

—Van Manen, 1990, p 31
Phenomenology, then, begins with experience as it is lived, not as it is theorised; it proceeds by the practice of love and attention; and it leads, through reflection and writing, to a text that animates the essence of the thing investigated in the mind of a reader.

The nature of phenomenological research

The researcher involved in eliciting the data of lived experience is obliged to maintain a steady focus on the phenomenological inquiry—toward the object, as Van Manen puts it; not foreclosing discussion by offering premature conclusions; not, either, conducting an inquisition, but offering openings for the other person to offer phenomenologically-valenced reflection (Van Manen, 1990, pp 33, 43). The researcher must be alert for falsehoods and 'superficialities,' while not intruding on the subject's reflective process. The researcher needs to remain 'animated by the object in a full and human sense' (ibid, p 33). Phenomenology asks researchers to live their questions, to ask the phenomenological question from the 'heart of our existence, from the center of our being' (ibid, p 43). Van Manen goes on, 'Is this not the meaning of research: to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that which is put in question begins to reveal something of its essential nature?'

Since I am a nature writer, daily engaging with my place and wondering how it is that it speaks to me, how we relate to each other, what is the nature of my writing when I sit down to it—I am animated by the question I ask. I know that research of the reflective kind the phenomenologists contemplate does not diminish the nature of my encounter, or that of the writers whom I study here, with the living world to a simpleminded explanation. That encounter, that phenomenon, will hold its mystery—the quality it has that lives in the moment of encounter, and can be remembered and weighed and named, but not relived. The mystery of each such moment is a consciousness that lives only inside that encounter. We can reflect on it though. The mysterious consciousness within each such moment feeds and nurtures the reflection, by the inquirer, upon the non-reflective, unselfconscious moment; and it is that reflective act that discovers meaning in the moments, and reanimates them in the mind of the person writing and the person reading the reflection (Van Manen, 1990, p 36).

So, the phenomenological inquiry into the immediate encounter with nature allows that encounter to hold its mystery, while awakening some felt understanding of it in the life of someone reading the text that results (ibid, p 50). Van Manen and others would hope that through an inquiry like mine and the account I write of it, my readers might experience what Merleau-Ponty called 'a direct and primitive contact with the world'—the living world at the heart of encounters like mine with these writers and their landscapes, like theirs with nature, like the universal human experience of participating sometimes in the beat and flow of all creation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p vii; quoted in Van Manen, 1990, p 38). That is a lot to hope for from what seems to me a modest
inquiry. But, all the same, it is in this way that I have inquired, in this way that I have spoken of
my research—in the language of solid ground, as wildly as possible, as true to my encounters with
text and country and author as possible.

Returning to the things themselves—the beings of the nonhuman world, a state of original
openness to the wild—is the first part of what a nature writer attempts. Then the writer attempts
the second part of the phenomenological inquiry—the primal telling. The nature writer, like the
phenomenological researcher, wants, through the language in which she transcribes her encounter
with wildness, to give the reader a direct encounter of their own, if not with that thing itself,
then with 'the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made,' as

Since I am, by nature and craft, animated by and oriented toward the phenomenon of the natural
encounter, and toward its transcription into an enlivening text, I am at ease, as a scholar, within a
methodology that asks of me attention and diction such as those I value in my own writing craft.
There is an argument—I make it in this study—that the nature writer seeks to return to places
themselves. In this study, I try to return there with them, to their primal, wild, yet discerning
engagement with the more than merely human lives of places, and their writing of that wild
engagement—which might, itself, be seen as a primal telling, a phenomenological text.

A primal telling

Phenomenological inquiry aims to express itself in a piece of writing that has the effect that
Woolf describes on its reader. It tries to speak the world of the lived experience, rather than
merely speaking of it (Van Manen, 1990, p 13). This text attempts not just to describe the nature
of the experience discovered, but, in a sense to sing it. It attempts to make it live primally for a
reader, almost as it lived in its original presence, its first and unselfconscious moment. The
researcher, having inquired and reflected on the phenomenon, attempts an 'incantative, evocative
speaking, a primal telling,' which the phenomenologists call 'poetizing' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973,

Phenomenological description, in other words, is more than analysis and interpretation. It
interprets in the sense of drawing out the meanings embodied within, and hidden by, the original
experience. It aims to let the quality of the phenomenon speak through the rendering it makes
of that encounter. Then it characterizes the essence, the structure, pattern and meaning of that
lived experience, which ought to be evident, if nameless, from the rendering of the phenomenon
the inquirer attempts. It aims to show and to name (Van Manen, 1990, pp 24–7).
'The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful,' writes Van Manen (Van Manen, 1990, p 36).

**Phenomenology as a first-person exercise**

Phenomenological inquiry once drew its data from the subject's own life. There is no other lifeworld more immediately and deeply available to the inquirer. My own experience as a nature writer will therefore form a small part of my study here. I will turn to my encounter with the living world as a writer and reflect upon the phenomena of that experience critically.

Michael Crotty provides a model for critical reflection:

Step one—Determine as precisely as possible what phenomenon we are focusing on.

Step two—Consider the phenomenon precisely as phenomenon.

This requires that we

- lay aside, as far as we can, all ideas, judgments, feelings, assumptions, connotations and associations that normally come into view for us when we think of this phenomenon
- open ourselves to the phenomenon as the object of our immediate experience

Step three—Describe what has come into view for us.

Step four—Ensure the phenomenological character of this description.

Step five—Determine the essence of the phenomenon, that is, the element or elements in the phenomenon as phenomenon that make it precisely what it is.

—Crotty, 1996, pp 276–78

At the heart of this process, says Crotty, lies the opening of ourselves to the phenomenon of our own lived experience. This involves a deep kind of listening, according to Heidegger, a surrender to the thing itself, in one's own life's experience, in critical contemplation (Crotty, 1996, p 278).

Interestingly, as I will soon reflect, this is pretty much the mission of the essayist; and essay is the mode of most nature writing.

In this study, my first-person reflection, my consideration of my own experience as the writer of my own emerging book of place, is a small matter, a starting point and a context for my inquiry among these writers and their natural histories. But that inquiry includes the nature and texture of my encounters with these writers, their texts and their landscapes; and so my account of my
fieldwork includes some reflection upon those people and places, those encounters, as they occurred at the time.

**Extending the inquiry to others**

Crotty argues that phenomenology as it arose in the thought of Husserl, Gasset, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, 'is necessarily a first-person exercise' (Crotty, 1996, p 272). In more recent times many researchers have taken the methodology of phenomenological inquiry and turned to the life experiences of other people. In this realm, the phenomenological researcher must elicit data about the lifeworld of a particular phenomenon to which he or she is not a party. Critical to this exercise is putting oneself in the place of the other—an act of empathy. One must 'bracket' one's own ideas, judgments, knowledge and viewpoints, and encourage the other person to reflect critically on the phenomenon of their own experience—in the case of my inquiry, the engagement of each of these writers with land, and their experience of giving voice to that encounter.

Talking with other writers about their experiences, I faced this challenge of 'bracketing'—to use Husserl's original mathematical metaphor for this—my own ideas, experiences and interpretations. I have no idea if I have succeeded. As I acknowledged in the last chapter, my engagements with these writers were not neat and orderly. I shared many of my own ideas; I worked hard to set aside some pure objectivity I was not capable of, and which would not have promoted the dialogues that I wished to arise. I participated not in interviews, but dialogues. I shaped these conversations with what I contributed, and what I heard shaped my thinking in the moment and afterward in the writing. Did I bracket myself fully? I doubt it, though I tried. How does one, as Van Manen phrases it, 'put out of play everything one knows about an experience that one has selected for study' (Van Manen, 1990, p 47)? It is best, he suggests, 'to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories.' Frequently, I shared those things in conversation. I hope I did it—I think I mostly did—in a way that did not colour my subjects' articulation of their experiences of place and writing. I went with ideas, and I threw some of them into these encounters so that I could test them against my subjects' thoughts and experiences. But I was not wedded to my notions. I went to listen and to notice. I listened, on the whole, critically. The process of engaging with the world involves a nature writer in putting aside learned conclusions over and over, to let the world speak over and over, freshly, natively, wildly. My inquiry among these writers and their worlds was a continuation of this practice.

Techniques available to engage in phenomenological inquiry with others include what Van Manen (1990, p 53) calls *close observation* and *conversational interviewing*, along with written reports by people we study, attempting a phenomenological description of the lived experience that concerns us.
So, in this study, I set out to engage in conversational interviews with a few practising nature writers in North America (and one no longer with us). The nature of their ongoing engagement with the more than human world, in places where they have practised sustained intimacy—this was my inquiry here, to set against the nature of my own encounters with a blue plateau.

In a way, the real data of this study turned out to be not so much the reported experiences of these nature writers, but the conversations that took shape between them and me. I mean not only the words we shared but the experiences of light and friendship and tension; I mean the nature of the feelings that arose in me during these journeys and conversations and in my subsequent reflection upon those meetings; and I mean also the quality of the phases of these meetings that took place in silence. It is the lifeworld of those encounters—also my engagement with these writers’ works and my silent conversations with their landscapes—that I turned to when it came time to write this study up. It is that fieldwork I have tried to sing here. I think I was as engaged in and detached from my inquiry as I am when I stand within this landscape of the blue plateau and let it dawn on me.

*This phenomenological journey*

This study is a nature writer’s phenomenological inquiry into his craft.

It began with critical self-reflection—I have included, in my introduction, some fragments of my own responses, as a nature writer, to the questions I am concerned with here. What does it mean to write the wild, at home or in some place? How does the place you write and the place in which you write affect the telling? This is what I asked myself, at the outset; and I never stop. This is what I wondered about as I talked with my subjects and as I wrote up my descriptions of those encounters, back home. So this study begins in self-reflection, but chiefly it circles hermeneutically in the lifeworld of these writers’ raw and textual encounter in the living world.

What transpires between place and author and text in the literature of place, in the writing of nature? How do these authors, and how do I myself, enter landscapes so that landscapes enter them and find their way into words? Or if that is not what happens, what is it that the words attempt and express? What is the relationship the writer, or the writing, makes between her art, his art, and a place on earth?

*Posing the phenomenological question*

Phenomenological inquiry is concerned with the nature of lived experience. So it frames its questions in the form of ‘What was it like?’ and ‘What is the nature of the phenomenon?’ In appendix one, I list the kind of questions I posed in conversation with these authors. All of them were addressed at teasing out the nature of the nature writing encounter, the ‘inherent essence’
of the engagement with the wild, the return to the place itself, the work of witnessing the world beyond the human.

I never asked these questions as a set, one after the other. I shaped and participated in conversations with these questions in mind, and in which most of them—or answers to them—nearly always arose. Sometimes I asked some of the questions directly. Sometimes I steered my subjects toward more particular responses to the questions that concerned me. Mostly answers to them arose out of the conversation itself. Sometimes I thought that an author had said little that bore on my concerns, only to discover on reading my notes later and composing these chapters, that they had said much more than my questions themselves might have evoked; had said things that addressed questions I should have asked but didn’t. It was only in my writing that I discovered sometimes what had really transpired between us; the writing took me to the conversation in itself as it takes me sometimes to the land in itself.

Text and world; the work of essays

Phenomenological inquiry is meant to hold to the concrete and particular. Hermeneutic phenomenology, though, asks the researcher to flow critically between their fresh and unprejudiced engagement with the phenomenon itself, the ideas that inevitably stirred one’s interest in that phenomenon, and the interpretations, the emergent theses, that arise from one’s pre-conceptual witness. The researcher should move back and forth, between presumption and surprise; between interpretation and observation; between abstraction and lifeworld. And so, in this study, there are, as I have said, ideas that stirred my inquiry; there are a set of notions I had—and all of them were refined and made more exact through my study—that I wanted to try against the experience of these writers, my experience of and with them, my listening to their home places, my wandering in the terrain of their writing. This study is a kind of hermeneutic dance between surprise and interpretation; between presupposition and phenomenological observation. It sets a string of (eco)critical questions dancing in the landscapes and conversations in which I took part: In what ways does country—how do particular places and their patterns of speech—enter into, shape, and inform the prose of writers who render landscape, particularly those who have become native to the places they write about? If places speak to us and we try to render their voice and character—and the quality of the song that passes between and joins us—then the genius of the place may shape the words and syntax, the structure and texture, of the writer’s words. It may be the place as much as, or through, the author, that does the writing.

To be more precise, I took these questions—questions I kept asking myself, rather than these writers—about the relationship between a place and a text that responds to it, into the field:
1. Does a place manifest texts as it manifests trees?

2. Can our notion of authorship of works of literature (of place) be extended beyond the writer to the land out of which they work?

3. What influence does the natural history of the writer and the writing have on the nature of the prose?

4. Do writers of land-orientated works of the kind I have in mind here aim to make a truthful impression or rendering of a place? And if so, how may a work of signs, a work in words, be said to attempt or achieve that? Through its musical qualities, for instance, the pattern and quality of its sounds, through the forms it uses, through the quality of the imaginal space it shapes in a reader’s mind, or just through the images it conjures?

5. Can a text work on the body and mind of a reader in the same manner, with the same vernacular force, as the land, as Whitman hoped; specifically, like the landscape it is written out of or refers to? Can prose shape a space akin to the blue plateau, the red desert or the forest’s edge?

6. Does a writer aim to write, in some sense, in the voice of the place? Might that happen? Might a work even speak in the language of the place, without the author’s intention? Is the writing a kind of listening, which a reader overhears?

7. In what ways might a text of place be said to resemble the place in which it is born, to which it is oriented? Can a work of words—intentionally or inadvertently—express a place (as well as expressing its author)?

8. Is it possible for a text to express or sing the nature of a place; or does a text, at best, just point to, just describe, a place?

9. Might we understand a piece of prose as a translation into human language of the nature of a place; or perhaps a transcription of its music (its soundscape and its notional music, its tone and energetic nature) into signs making music as well as sense to humans?

10. What power do texts have to evoke a place; and if so, by what means does that evocation occur?

I wanted to inquire into these questions, all of which—though setting them down makes them sound a little arid and naive—haunt me, compel me, in my own work. They were hard to put. I mostly said nothing about them out loud. But they danced inside my conversations; discussion of them arose out of the more concrete questions I put, out of my conversation’s own natural rhythm. In writing up these encounters, these questions formed part of my critical reflection,
shaping the telling, the primal telling, of what I witnessed. You will see where I come to in the end, where the dance led me.

Writing the journey

I did a lot of listening out there. Often I walked as we talked, and in all kinds of weathers. For this phenomenological work of witness to work, I had to put myself inside some landscapes and some conversations, take part in them while they unravelled, yet watch them closely so that their details and their dynamics did not escape me. This is the work of the phenomenological inquirer, and it is the work of the nature writer. Listening as if nor listening; and then setting down what I heard before the encounters faded.

I chose to tape only some of my conversations with these authors. A tape-recorder can sometimes interfere with the flow and naturalness of a conversation. That happened with one of these conversations, though only for a time, at the beginning. That experience encouraged me to work without the tape on other occasions. Sometimes, out in the field, it was not possible to carry a tape-recorder. Where I did not make a recording, I took notes, and wrote up detailed fieldnotes within hours. Where I made a recording, I transcribed it as soon as possible. My fieldnotes, sometimes scribbled or tapped into this laptop out in the landscape, included observations of my own about the place, about the author, about my own responses to these encounters.

From these notes, I set about writing the chapters you find here. I have sent each chapter to the author it concerns. I have taken into the text of those chapters corrections to geographical and biographical detail made by each author, and suggestions for putting more accurately something an author had said. I invited each author to offer whatever response they chose. I have continued with some of these authors—Lopez and Kutchins, in particular—conversation by phone and email; and sometimes that ongoing discussion has led to insights I have worked into the chapters.2

So these chapters speak about journeys I took and conversations I shaped with these writers and meetings I had with their country. They read the writings of each author in the light of those encounters. In each case, concerned as I am about the real work that writers do who orient themselves toward landscape, these chapters enter three territories and reflect on each as a nature writer might—the country of each author’s mind and nature encountered in conversation;

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2 'I make a point of not commenting on such pieces,' Barry Lopez said to me, 'but I think you have balanced the roles of writer and scholar very well.' 'I have a feeling,' said Laurie Kutchins, 'you know more about my writing than I do. I have learned a lot here, and I am grateful.' Peter Matthiessen felt I had not got his voice quite right—something I have attended to as a result—but found the rest of it, errors of geography aside, 'evocative, thoughtful and thorough.' Terry Tempest Williams, in the end, could not bring herself to read what I had made of our time. Jim Galvin read his, picked up eight small points and thanked me for understanding so well, he said, what he is about.
the country of her or his writing; and the country itself to which their writing is oriented and/or within which it takes place (the natural history, I mean, of the writing).

*Writing the Wild* tells the story of that ecocritical journey. It is a phenomological text. It tells the story, sings the song, of the nature writer's encounter with the wild (mine and theirs); of the wild writing that ensues; of the reasons why this literature matters.
II
3. The essential prose of things,

The lyric stance, the essay and the existence of the world

*A poem is a manifestation of the seamless web of things, that may be named or not named, depending on the way we have cast ourselves in the greater song.*

—Barry Hill, *Broken Song*

*Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed.*

—Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

Prose & prosody

This was meant to be a study of ecological literature in prose; of the essay turning its attention to the land. And, for the most part, it is. This is as it should be. For a start, I work in prose. I write essays. (I came, during the course of this inquiry, to understand the writing I do, the writing of many of the nature writers, as lyric essays. But when I began this study I had never heard of lyric essays. So let me just call them essays for now.) And it has been through the essay that nature and her places have mostly been witnessed in this literature. Nature writing is a literature of nonfiction prose; of essays. For these reasons—my own practice and the predominance of the essay in the literature—I set out intending, as I say, to study essays and essayists and to leave poems and poets to one side.

But, though *Writing the Wild* makes an argument for the particular fitness for landscape witness of the essay, especially the lyric essay, I have not been able to exclude poetry from this study; and this, too, I now realise, is as it should be. To my surprise, I found that, along the way, this inquiry had become in part a reflection on the distinction between narrative and lyric forms; between narrative and lyric sensibilities, structures and forms; and an argument that a place is capable

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3 I take this phrase from Wendell Berry, essayist, novelist and poet, and I use it in his honour. He uses it in the opening line of his poem 'The Apple Tree,' which I found in his *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 1998, p 5.
of experience and expression through a lyric engagement with it. You will see how that happens through the course of the chapters in part three, and particularly in 'The valley of the wind' on Laurie Kutchins and 'The real world' on James Galvin. The writer of lyric disposition writes out of the heart of personal encounter with the world—not about other things (natural phenomena, lifeforms and so on) as though they were objects of study; nor yet about themselves as watchers; but of the lifeworld of what arises for the avid witness in a moment, in a space. The lyric writer gives witness to the broken sequence of what SueEllen Campbell (following Roland Barthes) calls figures, those fragments of encounter, those steps within what seems also to be a dance, those momentary and, at once, meaningful ‘attitudes of the body,’ in the wild, in love, in contemplation. The lyricist writes out of those figures; their writing belongs to that space. Such a writer might write in verse or in sentences. The difference between a poem and a lyric essay, I argue later, when each is made by a writer of lyric sensibility engaging musically with land, is so small as hardly to matter—though it does still matter, at least to the maker of the work. For poems not only look different to prose, they may come from a different place and so operate differently upon a reader-listener. Many poets think there is magic in poetry—James Galvin and Laurie Kutchins among them; so too Edward Hirsch. The poem comes from air, depends upon voice, descends from song, is organised by music; it chants and enchants. (Lyric prose may do much of that too, but we will get to that.)

Poems employ schemes and designs in their structure, such as patterns of rhyme, rhythm and meter; they break language into lines. The line orders a poem; grammar orders prose. This has implications in writing for rhythm in particular and for music in general. Line breaks, even where they structure lines of unequal length and divergent pulse, give a piece of writing beat. We read by that beat. And beat is music's basic ordering, patterning device. Poems are musically ordered. Prose, as I say, is grammatically ordered—by the sentence and its lore. But prose has rhythm too, and so it is capable of music, since it is made of fragments of patterned sound, phrases whose

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4 See pp 32–4 of this chapter in which I discuss 'the middle voice.'

5 Campbell makes her book of essays, Bringing the Mountain Home (1996), out of such figures, known, she writes, 'from the inside, with my bones, my muscles and nerves, my heart.' She explains her idea of the 'figure,' which she takes from Roland Barthes' A Lover's Discourse in her preface, pp x–xi.

6 See the discussion in 'The valley of the wind' of the distinction between lyric and narrative approaches, drawing on Ellen Bryant Voigt's The Flexible Lyric (1990); and my discussion in 'The real world' of the lyric essay and the differences between prose and poetry.

7 See Edward Hirsch, How to Read a Poem, 1999, p 5: 'I made it out of a mouthful of air,' Yeats said of a poem; Hirsch quotes this and agrees. Every poem is made out of breath. The lyric poem exists in the register between speech and song, writes Hirsch (p 9).
voices rise and fall, as well as mean. Its music, though, will always be less regular, looser, lacking the quality of meter that belongs to the poem.

Some poems observe strict rules about line length, line number and metrical pattern—fourteen lines of iambic pentameter make a sonnet, for instance. Prose obeys no such formal rules. But some things we call poems—without line breaks, or with a pattern of lines so irregular as to more resemble, in its sound-effect, a piece of shapely prose—obey few rules of prosody either. Some prose, though less rhythmically structured than most poetry and never broken into lines, clearly sings to us in a musical voice, which is highly rhythmic if not strictly metrical. And so the line between poetry and prose can blur. Musical works of words, works of lyric qualities, have more in common with each other perhaps—whether or not they are composed in lines or paragraphs—than a work of lyric prose has with another work of prose ordered as narrative—storytelling, exposition, argument and so on.

The distinction that matters may not be the one between poetry and prose but the one, as Ellen Voigt argues in 'The Flexible Lyric' (Voigt, 1999, pp 121 ff), between narrative and lyric discourse.\(^6\) And perhaps it is lyric writing—which we might call, for now, works uttered through the first person,\(^7\) attentive to figures, to moments and spaces; and voiced in what we would recognise as song, not merely speech—rather than just verse forms that Confucius had in mind when he said, as William Packard puts it, that 'poetry is the return to the right use of words, to the precise and magical relationship of words with music and the other intuitive rhythms of the universe' (Packard, 1992, p xv). Lyric writing, poetry and prose, understands its source as lying beyond the writer's self. The lyric arrives, as a suggestion, and is worked by the poet into an utterance 'conformable to something out there'—whence it comes—'in the whole swarm of language and energy cycles and the great cosmic flow of things.' This is how William Packard puts it in his classic study of poetry, The Art of Poetry Writing (1992, pp xv-xvi; his emphasis).

Poetry, says the poet and critic John Hollander, in Rhyme's Reason (Hollander, 1981, p 1) is largely a matter of trope, 'figures of meaning such as metaphor and metonymy.' Verse is a matter, he says, of 'scheme or design.' Poetry, understood in this way, might include all writing that proceeds nonliterally and sets down words and phrases not just to carry description, sense and narrative, but for their music, their texture, their rhythm, their capacity to move a reader not just by what they


\(^7\) See my chapter on the work of Laurie Kutchins, 'The valley of the wind,' where I discuss the lyric/narrative distinction at greater length, relying on Voigt's writing to do so.

\(^8\) See Edward Hirsch's How to Read a Poem, 1999, p 15.
mean but by how they are. Most of the writers in this study of mine write prose of that kind. Lyric prose might count as poetry, on this measure, though it is certainly not verse. And much of the prose in the nature writing tradition is prose of this kind—poetic, lyrical, not merely narrative.

And so, although I concentrate on nature essays in this study, I will be talking about poetry all along. I will be talking about lyric listening, lyric writing, mostly in prose but sometimes also in poetry. I will be talking about pieces of writing that want to witness ‘the essential prose of things.’

What I had thought of, then, as a study in nature-writing essays turns out to be a study in the lyric apprehension of place (a study that begins in this chapter). Barry Lopez wrote once that ‘the land is like poetry; it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life’ (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 274). It is that coherence, almost inexpressible, for which the lyricist of place reaches. Sometimes it will be a poem she needs in order to find and express it; sometimes a stretch of prose.

_Cleaving to the real_

I have an idea that the kind of engagement with the world that the essay asks of an author may cut it out uniquely for witness, particularly witness of the land. For the essay, along perhaps with the poem, asks a writer to imagine and express the world of his or her own actual experience. It demands of a writer both detachment and intimacy at once, and it asks her to make up nothing. It asks her just to stand and look and listen. To witness. This is not the work, or not so purely, that the novelist does.

The essay cleaves to the real world. It reflects on the nature of what is actual. It speaks of a world—events, places, books, people—that a reader could find beyond the pages of the text. Both writer and reader understand that this is so. If you write a book about a certain meadow and give me enough clues to its geography, I could go and find it, as I do in ‘The real world,’ and compare that place with the one in the book.

Fiction, to put it simply, and to distinguish it from essay, fabricates story and character out of the matter that life presents. The novel or short story tells the story of people and places taken from models in the actual realm, transfigured through the author’s work of invention. Its subject matter is invented, to a greater or lesser degree. It is the understanding that the reader must not take the novel as a depiction of anything actual that sets the fiction apart from other works of literature. Nonfiction, writes Lawrence Buell, particularly environmental nonfiction, ‘makes discourse accountable to the object-world’ (Buell, 1995, p 91). It makes a claim for realism that all its readers understand.
The novel does not so much see as invent. It does not, at least not literally, witness; it creates. It attends to the world and turns it, on the page, into what it is not. It creates a world one does not expect to find outside the novel’s pages. It fabricates a reality, taking that which is and altering it, composing a narrative that doesn’t so much depict reality as arise from it; it heightens or alters and comments upon it. The world of the novel, we all understand, is a creation of the author’s mind, made with reference, usually, to a real one—an allegory of it, a comment upon it, a variation on reality’s themes. The novel gives us the picture of a world that lives only inside that story. If a novel seems to evoke well an actual time and place, then so much the better. The world of the text is meant to exist on its own—has its own dynamic and logic. The text is what counts, not the world to which it indirectly relates, of which, it is, of course, born.

So, fiction invents. The world fiction speaks of is conjured in a human mind. All works of art are made, of course, in minds. (Their composition, I suggest in this study, may be influenced by more than just the mind of their author; and if that is so then it is so for a work of fiction as much as it may be for a poem or an essay.) But the novel, more than any piece of art, and in sharp contrast to an essay, speaks of, fabricates, a world that does not exist (not exactly anyway) outside the work; the world of the novel was born only in the mind of the author. Take away the novel and there would never have been such a place or time or story. Take away the essay and the place and time and story remain.

The contract that arises, unspoken but understood, between author and reader differs fundamentally between fiction and nonfiction. Implicitly, the fiction writer invites the reader into an invented world. Implicitly, the essayist invites the reader into a rendering of the actual world, a world of people and places they may meet and recognise beyond the text—though, without the help of the essay, which probes the mystery of those actual people and places, they may never know them as deeply as they do in and through the essay. The novelist asks us not to look for this place they render anywhere but in their rendering. The essayist knows we may compare their art to the original; even invites us to do so. The essayist says ‘I went here; I saw this.’ The essayist witnesses, and we may legitimately compare their witness to the thing it bears witness to. This is the deal with all nonfiction. Not with fiction. The essayist invites us through the text to some places and parts of the lived and living world. Nonfiction points to the world beyond the text. Fiction points to the world within—made by—the text, and only then, beyond it, to the sources it drew on and transfigured into fictive life, into a simulacrum of a world.

But I may be pushing an important, and perhaps obvious, distinction farther than I should. I am also assuming something that prevailing literary theory does not allow me to assume—that there is an actual world existing independently of a writer’s rendering of it—something I will turn to in the next section.
Both essays and novels are works of literary production; both tell stories; both aim to engage through music and narrative, in different measure according to the writer's nature and disposition. All of it is writing. There is even an argument—which Annie Dillard makes, for instance, in her *The Writing Life*—that the novel chiefly 'presents society,' that it 'aims to fasten down the spirit of its time, to make a heightened simulacrum of our recognizable world in order to present it shaped and analyzed' (Dillard, 1989, p 73). It mostly concerns the social world, the human realm. And if it presents that, it does so by distortion of some kind, quite deliberate, by reshaping the actual into exaggerated form, in order, as Dillard writes, to comment upon the state of society, to diagnose its malaise. Dickens did this, for example. So did Faulkner. Many novels, more and less literary, distill, distort, abstract the largely social aspect of reality in order to comment upon it. But this is not witness. It does not plumb and resonate the mysteries of the real—'metaphysics,' Dillard calls that work, and it is done, she suggests, mostly by poetry and nonfiction (Dillard, 1989, pp 73–4). I am emphasising the fictive, fanciful, inventive element of novels not to suggest that they do not have regard to the world, but to make a case for the qualitatively different relationship that essay-writing forges between a writer and the world; the fundamentally different nature of the work of nonfiction, particularly when it is deliberately lyric. In the essay the writer puts his or her imagination to the work of witness rather than invention and/or editorialising upon the current surface of the social world. Occasionally, of course, the novel witnesses too, transcending the social realm and the narrative mode, where it has mostly worked.\(^{11}\) The essayist imagines and tries to render what is real—deeply, structurally, poetically, eternally real—in a moment, in a place, in a life. The novelist takes what she encounters in the world and uses it to make a story, to invent a world, even if her purpose, through that invented reality, is to comment on the one she observes in the streets.

*Fiction, the literature of fact and the existence of the world*

But the very idea that a world might exist beyond a text is heretical these days. Prevailing literary theory, perhaps because it ignores the work of essays and regards only fiction as literature, ends up denying that a literary text may have any connection to the world (that is, to any world beyond its sentences and pages). In my chapter 'The text & the world' I develop, following Lawrence Buell, Joseph Carroll and others, a critique of that theoretical position (Buell, 1995, p 84).\(^{12}\) But let me begin it here. It is already begun—because to attempt any kind of meaningful

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\(^{11}\) See footnote 16 in this chapter, where I cite some examples and say a little more about this.

\(^{12}\) I have more to say about this matter of the text and the world in my chapter of that name below and in my chapter on the work of James Galvin, 'The real world.' In those chapters, I draw on the work of Kate Rigby, Joseph Carroll, Glen Love, Paul Carter and others, who offer well-theorised roads around the gulf between the text and the world that yawns in much contemporary literary theory. All this matters to me in this work because I also wish to offer an understanding of a certain kind of writing in which a reciprocal relationship is observable between a work and the place it witnesses—something that many theorists would regard, obviously, as inconceivable.
distinction between fiction and nonfiction and to distinguish between a lyric and a narrative enterprise in literature is at once to put pressure on a theory that depends upon the notion that every work of literature is merely an act of fabrication. If every work of literature set out to fabricate worlds, then one might try to explain all writing in terms of the writer’s inner life, cultural assumptions, gender and politics; one might see a text merely as a thing—an utterance, an artifact, a finished body of signs—to be considered without regard either to the real world to which it might seem to make reference or even to the author who composed it. One might see a book as a freestanding thing, a textual reality, with its own intratextual rules and norms, a world of its own, capable of no meaningful reference to any other world. This is how literature has come to be read among theorists these days.

‘All strains of contemporary literary theory,’ writes Buell, ‘have marginalized literature’s referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual “reality” ...’ (Buell, 1995, p 86). Literature for many literary theorists has lost its power to refer to, to represent or speak for the world beyond the page (ibid, p 86). It is thought to have no mimetic function. And so, few conventional readings of literature spend much time on the business of witness—they don’t regard it as a task literature attempts or would even be capable of (ibid, p 86). Perhaps, as Buell argues, the conclusion that literature is incapable of witnessing the world has been reached because English departments have forgotten about the essay, have focused almost exclusively on fictive texts (ibid, p 84), and so have imagined the function of all writing as narrative rather than lyric. Perhaps the world has been banished from the page because of this conflation of ‘literature’ with ‘fiction.’

Seeing all writing as fabrication leads theorists to argue away the world, to deny that a writer might be engaged in an act of witness; to disparage the twinned notions I explore here that a place in the world might participate in the authorship of the work and that a work may be expressive of that place.

But to see all writing as fabrication, as narrative creation, is not an adequate explanation of the writing enterprise. It ignores the lyric project I have already alluded to; and it ignores the work of the essayist. Pieces of literature, such as essays and many poems, written specifically to witness parts of what their authors encounter as an actual, autonomous world, are not fictive or artifactual in the same way novels are. Essays set out, as I have suggested already, to imagine, explore and articulate encounters with an actual world that goes on even when the writer’s back is turned,

13 ‘One basis for this divergence between commonsensical and specialized wisdom may be,’ Buell goes on, ‘that the modern understanding of how environmental representation works has derived from the study of the fictive genres rather than nonfiction’ (Buell, 1995, p 84).
goes on and on through the long ages of the earth, even when her eyes are averted. Unless we are
to ignore the difference between fiction and nonfiction; unless we want to dismiss as groundless
the conception nature writers have of what it is they have experienced and what it is they do on
paper; unless we are to disregard the phenomenon of witness that this study explores, then these
works of nonfiction demand a reading that takes into account, the material world to which they
refer—that considers the possibility that such a world exists beyond the text, and that the text
attempts a representation of it, or that some relationship may hold between the work and the
place it bears witness to.

Not all literature fabricates. There is a literature of fact—largely ignored by literary scholars in
the twentieth century—a literature in which the work's connection to reality is not attenuated
in the way it is, avowedly, in a novel. Nonfiction does not invent worlds; it engages with worlds; it
knows them; it speaks of them and what it learns in them. Lawrence Buell suggests that, because
of its obsession with the idea of a work of literature as a construct (Buell, 1995, p 83), literary
criticism has failed to produce a theory capable of adequately assessing what nature writing
attempts. Buell tries to retheorise what he calls 'nonfictional nature representation,' in order to
explain the relationship between the text and the world in a way that pays regard both to the 'art
of fabulation', which all literature, including essays of place, carries on, and the work of depiction
and expression, which essayists imagine they are also carrying on. I turn to Buell's retheorisation
of nonfiction, and offer my own elaboration of it, in 'The text & the world.'

It is my hope that the inclusion of nonfiction texts within the purview of literary analysis might
encourage a critique of prevailing literary theory; and that may lead to a restoration (and
renovation) of a traditional understanding of literature—fiction and nonfiction—as the work of
artists seeking to know and speak of the world. This is the conception of literature Joseph Carroll
and Glen Love\textsuperscript{4} argue for, for instance. For if nonfiction differs in some way, as it seems to, from
fiction; if an essay is not the same kind of thing as a novel; if it is meaningful to say that it exists in
a kind of relationship with the world beyond the text, then how do we explain the difference
without letting the world back in? If nonfiction exists, in other words, then the world exists; and
so does the possibility of representation or some other kind of relationship between world and
text. If we concede that there is a literature that witnesses rather than fabricates, or if we
concede that all literature does, in part, what nature writing says it does, which is to seek to
know the nature of the world that houses the writer (and all human beings), then what is it that
literature can bear witness to, if not a world made of places and other things, which exist

independently of language or one artist’s interpretation, or of any cultural construction (Carroll, 1995, p 3)\textsuperscript{25}

Getting over the fiction addiction, transcending the limits of a narrative conception of all writing, remembering the work of nonfiction writers, particularly the lyricists of place that I am concerned with here, may help us restore some life and richness and usefulness literary theory; may help us reconcile it with what Buell calls ‘commonsensical’ understandings of literature and its relations with the world. And it will allow the world of places, the natural history of a text, to factor, as they should, in our readings of works of words. One of the things I hope to show in this dissertation is how books are elucidated, our understandings of them, their structures and resonances deepened, by readings that pay regard to the world.

Let us presume, then, that this is an easterly breeze that comes in through the window this minute from among the eucalypts, and that the Kedumba Valley, though neither I nor you can see it, lies out there beyond these trees, beyond these words, under this wind; and let me say some more about the essay and its relationship with the solid earth.

\textit{Essays and the witness of the world}

I have spoken already, by the way, of works of nonfiction as imaginative. An essayist, like a poet, tries to imagine how the real world really runs just here. That reality, particularly when one is dealing with the world beyond the human, is a complicated matter. None of us can ever hope to witness it—apprehend and write of it—without an imaginative leap beyond what we can observe; or, if you like, a leap \textit{into} or inside, what we can observe. A nonfiction writer imagines reality,

\textsuperscript{25} I explore Joseph Carroll’s arguments further (in ‘The text & the world’), but let me summarise them here in support of this point. Carroll argues that writing is part of a human endeavour (the writer’s, specifically) to come to know the world beyond the page; that it is part of a practice of coming into intimacy with the world beyond the human, beyond the merely personal; that it is part of what Carroll calls a writer’s ‘cognitive mapping’ of the world; that it is part of one human organism’s (I mean the writer’s) orientation to his or her spatial and physical environment (Carroll, 1995, pp 2–4). That is what writing is, says Carroll. Literature—poem and myth, fable, essay and story, all of it—is one of the things mankind has learned to do, through his evolution, to survive—specifically it has been a vehicle for human interrogation of the world around him, a means to discover, explore and express his relationship with the environment in which he finds himself. Carroll sets literature in a much larger context than that imagined by poststructuralists. It is one of the things humankind has learned to do, just as birds fly and build nests. Writing, like flight, has a natural history; it takes place in the biotic, not merely the human, nor merely the cognitive, realm. Carroll traces literature back to biology; he remembers its evolution; he attempts to explain writing as though an extratextual world really existed—which, of course, it does. Evolutionary theory is premised upon the idea that there is an actual world of weather and danger and fire and shelter, and that it is each person’s and each species’ capacity to adapt itself to what is not merely itself that allows it and its kind to survive and prosper. Literature is a human adaptation to the actual world, Carroll argues, made out of his intercourse with it; and literature is an ongoing enterprise of wonder, mapping, and belonging—a means by which mankind has gained and spread wisdom about the human and nonhuman nature of existence.

This is, if you like, a ‘nonfictionalist’ reading of the literary enterprise. All literature is part of a practice of coming to know the world, in Carroll’s conception, not only nonfiction. All literature, not only nonfiction, is a response to, and an expression of a relationship with, an actual world. Literature is a biological act, performed by human beings out of their desire and need to know the actual world in which they live.
something like a geologist or archaeologist, for instance, or a physicist imagines it. These people, unlike novelists, are not working in the business of make believe or fancy. Yet they are imagining things that lie inside what is observable—coherence or poetry or music; ancient, fragmentary, infinitesimal stories. To imagine is different than to invent—it is to form an image of something in one’s mind, it is to intuit a whole from the parts, the pattern expressed by the particulars. Nature writers, in essay form anyway, imagine how the world is going on, in its own way, relatively unaffected by the writer’s own presence, as though the landscape and people’s lives within it had a life independent of their observation and expression of it. And much of the life of places they will have to intuit from those fragments and cadences, those few surfaces and biographies they can observe. It is this discipline of imaginative engagement with the real, with ‘the essential prose of things,’ of the patterns at play in the actual world, that gives the essay a special role in that process of cognitive mapping of places that Carroll spoke of; that cut it out for witness and may allow it to express in its sentences something of the genius of the place, the character of the essential prose of local things.16

The essay, Franklin Burroughs wrote in a review of Jim Galvin’s book The Meadow, ‘offers the reader the simple authority of the eyewitness’ (Burroughs, 1994, p 144). Thoreau, Burroughs notes, famously advocated a literature of fact in which each writer, above all set down an account of his actual life; and Thoreau, in writing such an account himself, Walden, learned that the depiction of one’s actual experiences on solid earth demands a kind of art, a music and an image-making, much as fiction does, and that the witnessed world is not so solid and actual a thing as he once imagined.

16 In concentrating on the fictive element of the novel and in emphasising fiction’s fanciful aspect, I am, maybe, repeating the mistake of the literary criticism I am myself critiquing. I am exaggerating the degree of many novels’ separateness from the world; I am making too much of one—admittedly important—element of fiction. Novels, too, imagine how the real world really is; novels, too, draw on what is actual; novels, too, through invented scenarios and places, can give the solid earth and its people second life in art. The larger part of many novels, Moby-Dick for instance and War & Peace, is made of well-researched and nicely turned fact. The novel has a history in which it has often been much more than a work of fiction. The novel has long been a work of entertainment, of satire, political and social commentary and instruction. In the time of the troubadours, it was a work of literary art made up of some fanciful, some factual, accounts of battles and love affairs and so forth; a mix of philosophical reflection and straight narrative, song and pamphleteering. This is still the case; and yet it is the novel’s fictive element that sets it apart in bookshops, libraries and most academic study.

What about novels like Cormac McCarthy’s, Jim Galvin’s, Peter Matthiessen’s, Tim Winton’s or Helen Garner’s, say; Herman Melville’s or David Malouf’s? These and many others unfold in real places, places you could find on a map, go off and visit. In such books, what transpires may be invented—and even then may be closely based on real events—but it occurs in places that do exist outside the work of art, poststructuralist notions aside. And what about that great work of fantasy fiction, The Lord of the Rings, which creates a world of seasons and bioregions, of realistic geographies and cultures and languages that are shaped by them? This is a novel that invents a world and yet comments on, bears a kind of slant witness to, the world of tress and wars and quotidian concerns we recognise. To see this work chiefly as a work of fancy is to miss its point and nature.

Clearly, everything I say here about the work of witness—the witness of land, in particular—takes place in such novels too, and in many other works of fiction. Fiction may also witness the real world, then. But witness does not define fiction as it defines the essay. We all know that there is a difference between Cold Mountain, say, and Out of Africa; between Alice in Wonderland and The Voyage of the Beagle; between The Voyage of the Narwhal and Arctic Dreams. Only in an essay are you saying ‘I was there, and I saw this.’ You are always pointing to, you are always speaking of ‘the solid earth, the actual world,’ as Thoreau put it in Ktaadn.
(ibid, p 144). Still, no matter what artistry and fabrication an eyewitness needs to render their witness truthfully, they are called upon to apprehend the actual and report on it well. The essay stands in a different relationship to the world of geology, biology, politics and physics—the world in which our imaginations and inventions function, in other words—than the novel does. The essayist draws on, speaks of, points us back to, the uninvented world; the witnessed world beyond the page. This task sets the essay apart from the novel and tethers it to the world.

It is a literature of firsthand witness. It seeks, it writes, it is, the essential prose of things.

The essayist takes reality and writes of it, reflecting on it as they go. The nature essay sets out to put parts of the actual living world on paper, to represent reality, just as the landscape painter does. The essay reflects on, it records, it engages with and sets forth the nature of things.

And the essay keeps the author present in the text while also demanding a particular discipline of the author: that they write what they see and know—not to show off or to say something of themselves, but to speak of the lifeworld of an experience they have had and dwelt upon; to speak of it with detachment and disinterest, as though it were not merely their own, as though it belonged, almost, to someone else. Without the presence of the witness there can be no essay. And yet an essay is not about the witness in much the same way that an landscape painting is not about its painter, though in both cases the work depends upon the artist’s presence. The good essayist is represented most truthfully in their work in the same way a landscape painter is represented in her painting—not by a physical representation of her form on the canvas, not within the letter ‘I’ in the essay, but in the nature of the work, the way the strokes are made, the way the view is chosen, the way the sentences are uttered, the silences left between them.

Essays work in the first person, in other words, but if they are any good, they do not write about their author. Essays turn to the material of personal experience because they understand that, engaged with thoughtfully, the material of personal experience, knowledge, dream and reflection has a certain kind of weight and value, a veracity, nothing else can equal for any of us. An essayist asserts that what she reports is true, that it really happened within her experience; and the success of the essay depends upon her convincing her reader of this. An essay is always an assertion of truth, but truth of a particular kind. Each of us, essayists included, is intimate with what goes on in our own life, what one encounters oneself, in a way we are intimate with no other material. To explore that material and relate it well, the author must practise a rigorous objectivity. The genre, invented in modern times by Michel de Montaigne, demands it.

The essayist—at least the good one—speaks not about personal experience, though, but from it. This is what Ellen Bryant Voigt calls the lyric point of view, neither focused merely on the self, nor utterly on the place (or the lover or whatever), as though it were a mere object. One’s own presence in the space and moment one’s poem concerns, writes Voigt, 'becomes only another of
the phenomena crowding around him or her' (Voigt, 1999, p 178). From a lyric point of view, 'one's relationship to one's materials presumes that significance lies in the world, not in the poet's will to create it' (ibid, p 178). By contrast, the narrator, making a story with beginning, middle and end, orders what they see; making a narrative, they invent a world (their text). They create. It follows that, for the narrative writer in his or her relations with the world, significance lies within themselves, in their capacity to make something of what they see.

One can begin to see how a predisposition toward the narrative (novels, after all, are chiefly narrative forms; they invent; they narrate) among literary scholars may have led to the theoretical conceits I have mentioned here already—the notion that culture creates nature, that the world is an invented thing and the text an artifact not any kind of voicing. If one may stand and one may write lyrically, then writing itself may be understood as something quite other than invention—as a listening to the world, a singing with the places one witnesses.

Voigt is talking of the lyric stance in poetry. But she may as well be speaking of the essay. The essay is a lyric form, in this sense. It is predisposed to trust the world, particularly but not only, that part of it the writer has encountered. It writes out of that encountered world, the figures of experience in the actual realm—it expresses that. It is not himself or herself the essayist writes about, nor do they imagine they are making a creation that is independent of the ground from which it arose. They are witnessing a small part of reality. And for witness one must be both present, alert for what else is present, and detached—having the experience, involved in the figure, and reflecting upon it; one must be capable at once of encountering phenomena and noting one's encounter.

The essay is a lyric engagement with the world.17 It listens. It attends to the actual. This makes it, of all literary modes, the most apt for giving expression to aspects of the real.

What an essayist relates has value not as personal, biographical data, but as phenomenological data: it speaks of something that belongs to human experience of and in the world. 'Every man carries in himself the complete pattern of human nature,' Montaigne wrote in 'On Repentance.' Observed with critical reflection, my experience may therefore speak of the larger realm of nature, and human nature, to which it belongs. It only does this if the essayist transcends self-absorption, transcends ego. To write in the first person in this way is always a test of character, and some, of course, will fail. They will boast or curse or blame or preach, or otherwise lose our trust. They will lose the detachment that the essay demands. For the essay calls a writer to engage intimately

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17 I will come later to the idea of the lyric essay, a term that might seem, given this reflection, a tautology. It is a term that dwells on a kind of essay writing that proceeds more by music than by discursive argument and that uses a musical diction. It witnesses the world, rather than narrating it. See pp 73 ff and chapters eleven and twelve.
with a subject matter—the natural world, for a nature writer—and at the same time to stand
detached from it, so that she or he can see it clearly. The essayist must not get lost in what is
merely personal in that encounter. The attempt to enter into the lifeworld of a particular
experience, transcending emotion, mood, fashionable thought, race, class and authorial stance: this
is the work of the essayist. To witness the world as an essayist—to see it and write it—you must
be wholly yourself, everything you are, utterly human; and yet you must be more than merely
yourself. You must be present, but present as everyman, as everywoman, as the man or woman
nature takes shape as, in your form.

The essay tells speaks of, sings of sometimes, the actual world in a personal voice—out of, but not
merely about, personal encounter with the world beyond the self. It seems to me that essay is the
literature that a writer will choose, who wants to explore what is real, whose mind wonders most
of all how things go in this world; the kind of mind for which earth, actuality, is enough; the mind
that does not want to invent or fabricate but to know. It asks what is not what if? It asks what is
the nature of things here and how they work and how they came to be. It wants to engage with
this world, just as it is, not a world something like it, such as the novelist imagines, elaborates and
explores.

The essay calls for the same paradoxical combination of forgetfulness of self and presence,
disinterest and engagement, ruthless attention and reflectiveness, exactness and imagination, that
marks the relationship we must have with the natural world if we are to understand and belong in
it, rather than play out our dramas upon it. The essayist tries simply to describe their experience
in the world without judgment, to read that experience-in-the-world, like a score, like an oracle,
and to give it expression in apt and shapely words. The author is present in an essay—is present
with the phenomena of remembered, lived experience, and living thoughts—exactly as the human
being must be present in a landscape to know it and begin to give it voice in words.

The essay and the art of nature writing

In their introduction to The Norton Book of Nature Writing, John Elder and Robert Finch offer this
comment on the correlation between essay and the nature writing venture:

To a distinctive degree, nature writing fulfills the essay’s purpose of connection. It fuses literature’s
attention to style, form, and the inevitable ironies of expression with a scientific concern for palpable
fact. In a time when the natural context of fiction has been attenuated and when much literary theory
discovers nothing to read but constructs of self-reflexive language, nature writing asserts both the

18 See the introduction to Phillip Lopate’s The Art of the Personal Essay, 1994; Scott Russell Sanders’ essay on the
essay, ‘The Singular First Person Singular’ 1991; and my essay on the nature of the essay, ‘Nothing But the Truth,’
humane value of literature and the importance to a mature individual's relationship with the world of understanding fundamental physical and biological processes. Alfred North Whitehead called for just such a balance in this eloquent passage from *Science and the Modern World*: "What is wanted is an appreciation of the infinite variety of vivid values achieved by an organism in its proper environment...There is no substitute for the direct perception of the concrete achievement of a thing in its actuality. We want concrete fact with a high light thrown upon what is relevant to its preciousness."


The nature essayist gives the reader their personal observation, their direct perception, of organisms in their 'proper environment,' throwing the light of their own contemplation and wondering on those lifeforms through the art of their sentences, so that the living world lives more fully for a reader than it might otherwise; helping a reader reconnect with the place in the essay and, more generally, with their human relationship to the earth.

*The middle voice*

So, the essay is premised upon the existence of a world—on a reality that lives independent of the imagination that looks into it, independent of the words that speak of it. The essay depends on a world and on an author—it stretches between them, author and solid earth, speaking of, made of, both of them. In his book *The Lie of the Land*, Paul Carter touches on 'the middle voice' in literature (Carter, 1996, p. 331). (In Greek grammar there was a voice between the active and the passive, in which the writing subject was not the agent of the action, nor was the sentence's subject the passive recipient of the action. The middle voice expressed the agency of the space between writer and place, subject and object.) English grammar these days acknowledges only the active and the passive voices. Yet we still hear the middle voice. It is the voice we experience in essays and other literature, the voice of a 'dance of words,' the sound of 'a poetic exchange' between the writing subject and the experienced place or event. The words seem to come not from one or the other but from between them, from the space the perceiver moves within, participates in, in their being there, their moving about and their listening. The middle voice expresses the lyric experience of reality: this is what arose when I was there; this is how the place seemed to me; these things took place, and I was among them. It is the voice, I guess, of phenomenology too, and often of nature writing. It is the voice one needs for reporting the lifeworld of encounter, of presence, of the life of experience-in-the-world. The middle voice 'dissolves the subject-object relation,' Carter writes, 'grounding each in the other, continuously redefining both in terms of each other, so that the two sides exist echoically or simultaneously' (*ibid*, p. 331). It is, as I say (though Carter does not), the lyric voice. In Carter's conception, the 'I' or the author of a work in the middle voice is not a defined and finite identity, a resolved and finished self, not merely this man or woman moving within but keeping separate from what he or
she observes. The middle-voiced writer is not separable from what they encounter—is not merely an agent of action, or even of observation. Nor is what he or she observes reducible to lifeless object. Each affects and is affected by the other. And the voice we hear belongs to them both; the self of the piece of writing is a self composed of its many figures of participation with the place. The middle voice is the voice of reciprocity; of intersubjectivity.

The writer engaged in such a relation with a landscape, or any other subject matter, is a self living within that moment and space, in the process of continuous making and unmaking (ibid, pp. 331–32), is a mosaic of many selves touched by many parts of the other she engages with; and the words she writes are made not so much by her—or even all those many bits of herself—but by the relationship between herself and the other. This is the kind of self the essayist must be, this is, I mean, the kind of participation in a place, this is the kind of ecological imagination of self and world, the lyric writer must enter into, as I imagine their artistic project here—and it is not far from the kind of thing the poststructuralist imagines the writer's engagement with the world to be, except that the essayist, and I along with them, is readier than the theorist to trust in the continuing existence of the world when my back is turned, when my engagement with it ceases. This listening-becoming is the nature of the essayist's engagement with the real. And the middle voice, belonging to the ground between the essayist and the place he imagines in this way, is the voice their work speaks in. It is the voice of all the writers I consider here, I think. What it speaks of is the timbre and dynamic of the relationship that plays between that writer and what is not merely the writer—between, say, the writer and the land.

The lyric point of view is the middle voice—it speaks from within a writer's encounter with the other. It speaks of the space and time they share. It is the voice of the world of a moment's encounter between a listener and what the listener hears. It speaks for the many pieces of a place, for instance, that make themselves apparent to the perception of the witness; and of the witness in whom those pieces resonate.

*The lyric stance*

But perhaps what I am describing here, with the help of Carter's 'middle voice' and Voigt's 'lyric point of view,' is not a genre—neither the exclusive terrain of the essay or lyric poem—but a stance, a way of imaginative being in the world. Because it inclines the man or woman who writes and imagines this way toward what is real, rather than toward fantasy and invention, it is the defining posture of the essayist, particularly one who turns to the world beyond the human, the nature of nature. The narrative stance is more natural in a writer of fiction—it is a disposition

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19 About which I have more to say in 'The text & the world.'
toward invention, creation of worlds, invention, fabrication. But you will find plenty of lyric novels. So too the lyric stance, the middle voice, the business of witness—these are not necessarily the preserve of the essay. You will find them in fiction (in a writer like Faulkner, for example, Ondaatje, Melville and others) and, of course, in poetry—which is where Voigt explores the lyric point of view in 'Ruthless Attention.' We would call writers who apprehend the world and write within this mode 'lyric.' Equally, you can read plenty of essays in which very little lyric or middle voice is apparent. And among the essays of which that is true—discursive, narrative, expository essays—you will find many that might be called nature writing.

But essays—real essays, like those Burroughs had in mind, and Scott Russell Sanders, Montaigne and myself\(^{28}\)—are mostly lyric. And when they are, they have this special role to play, witnessing the real world from within.

The essay is always personal, then, and always more than merely personal; it is intimate and detached at once. It speaks for this man or woman and this place; for all men and women and all places. It pays careful attention to the world, apprehending it more than merely visually, knowing that all it elaborates is how one or two of the many faces of the world seem, how they look and how they speaks, to this one witness. The essay is a practice of attention, a wondering about the real, a dance with it, well made for nature writing.

\(^{28}\) See Scott Russell Sanders' important essay on the nature of the essay, 'The singular first person,' *Secrets of the Universe*, 1991, p 187; and my own essay on the essay 'Nothing but the truth,' *Quadrant*, 1991. Montaigne, father of the modern essay, speaks of the art of the essay in his essay, 'On repentance.' Sanders reminds us that, in *Nature*, Emerson, another master of the genre, encouraged writers to 'fasten words again to visible things (Sanders, 1991, p 190), a good working definition of the essay and a reminder of the connection of the words and voice of the essay with the things to the things of the world, to which it cleaves.

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature?
—Henry David Thoreau, ‘Walking’

To feel and speak the astonishing beauty of things—earth, stone and water,

Beast, man and woman, sun, moon and stars—

...For man’s half dream, man, you might say, is nature dreaming, but rock

And water and sky are constant—to feel

Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural

Beauty, is the sole business of poetry.
—Robinson Jeffers, ‘The Beauty of Things’

Nature writing is defined not so much by its form (the essay) as by its endeavour: the imaginative encounter with actual landscape and the rendering into language of that meeting, that entering into the life of the wild world. But there is more to it than that. This literature is also characterised by the nature of its disposition toward reality, which is to see nature (the world, if you like, the actual earth) as the whole, and culture, society, this man, this text among its parts. Nature writing stands inside nature—inside nature somewhere in particular—and looks and listens to a whole world of matters from there. It considers many things from this large perspective, from nature’s point of view—matters of politics, aesthetics, language, authorship, morality, culture, humanity and so on. It takes an ecological view of all things, not just landscape; even authorship, selfhood, the source of language and meaning. Theory asserts that men and women make meaning in the world; nature writing senses that it is the land that does that—it is the land that is, and we are there within it, trying to perceive and understand and express it all greatly. Whatever it is we come to know, we’ll learn by paying attention to the world, we will learn by listening. And then we may speak of what we come to know in writing that rings true to the land, its patterns and the wisdom they reveal. If we are truly wise, we will know

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11 See SueEllen Campbell’s fine essay on theory and ecology, ‘The Land and Language of Desire,’ in Glotfelty and Fromm’s The Ecocriticism Reader, 1996, p. 124. I use ‘theory’ here as she does, meaning the various theoretical positions about text and textuality that can be grouped under the heading ‘poststructuralism.’ See her essay on pp. 124 and 133. ‘Theory sees everything as textuality,’ she writes there. I have more to say about these matters in the next chapter; but this is an argument for a new conception of writing, place and their interrelationships rather than a full engagement with poststructuralism and the rest of contemporary literary theory.
that we know nothing more than the land has known since the start of things. Meanings dawn like days; it is not will or language that makes them.

Nature writing is, to use the jargon, biocentric. It returns the natural order, all of it, to the ethical and aesthetic purview of mankind; and it returns mankind—all of us, and this writer in particular—to the natural world. It wants us to understand writing—particularly that which is oriented toward the land—as the work not merely of a man or a woman, but of nature, and of nature, in particular, here. For this literature is always located. It starts from the ground in one place on earth and resonates what wisdom and music it discerns there

Thenature of the beast

Since nature includes everything, nature writing has everything in its contemplation. But, without for a moment surrendering the idea dear to all of us (humans) that humanity is sacred, that the works and days of men and women are the proper domain of all literature, nature writers try to contemplate nature—everything born, all things, all creation—'as if human domination never existed,' as John Hay puts it in his essay 'The Nature Writer's Dilemma' (Halpern and Frank, 2001, p 8). Nature writing writes not so much about nature—though it does that, of course, too—as from inside nature. It is not merely a kind of literary naturalism, a well-turned documenting of the marvels of the non-human world—though nature writing, as I will go on to explain when I set out a revised taxonomy below, also includes such writing.

It is ecologically imagined, landscape-leaning, literature, mostly in nonfiction. It tries to set aside the presumption of the primacy of mankind. Yet it is deeply concerned with our fate, among the fates of the places of earth and their other inhabitants. This means that, while it is oriented toward what is normally called the natural world, while it engages with land and extends its compassion and imagination toward it, nature writing is concerned with the whole world really, but a world conceived as made of places, a world conceived as a network of ecological connections and life stories, of bird and river and sky and mountain and mankind. Without for a moment losing sight of the importance of matters human, this literature understands social, cultural and political history as fragments of the natural history of the world and its places.

Works of nature writing are marked by attention to the scientific as well as the poetic nature of the land they engage with; by a concern for literary style (catching the tone of the place as well as voicing authentically the thoughts of the writer that arose there) as much as for an exact, often detailed, and scientifically sound, rendering of its ecology (Stewart, 1995, p 219). This writing draws on many disciplines and ways of knowing, including the life and earth sciences, geography,

22 See, on this point, Campbell, 1989, p 128; Sanders, 1996, p 189.
scientific and philosophical ecology, the arts, anthropology, metaphysics, religion and linguistics. And it asks many questions—chiefly about how best to lie together on the earth—but it asks them in, and about, places, not merely in and about society.

Joseph Wood Krutch, a scholar and nature writer, typified nature writing as 'experience with the natural world, as opposed, for example, to science writing, which is knowledge about natural phenomena' (Stewart, 1995, p 219). 'While remaining true to empirical facts' and 'using the powerful instrument of expressive language,' nature writers take readers to parts of the world still rich in biodiversity, wildness and natural integrity and delve into questions as deep as 'how our minds and hearts determine what we see and what we are blind to, how our perceptions determine what we value and therefore preserve, and, by the same token, what we enslave, desecrate or plunder' (ibid, p 219). Generally, the author goes to a place and renders her experience of it, his participation for a short time in its life, into prose that aims, among other things, to give that place a second life in the imagination of the reader.

But it is rarely so functional as that. The nature writer, by her witness of all of nature from the inside out, by his noticing and by his writing, is trying to know and elaborate the world differently; is trying to discern and voice the realities that run through the nonhuman world, the world beyond our selves, and through the mind and body and very being of each of us human beings, discrete though each of is from each other and from the rest of creation. In his essay 'The Nature Essay in the West,' Thomas Lyon quotes Edward Abbey, in Desert Solitaire, wishing for 'a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with the non-human world and yet somehow survives intact, individual, spare'—which is as neat an expression of an ambition for the lyric point of view as you could ask for. Through such a practice as Abbey speaks of, Lyon argues, the nature writer enters into the paradox of the natural order, the order that runs through the living world, in which systematic unity and selfhood coexist (Lyon, 1987, p 259). So nature writing concerns reality; it wishes to set humankindness back down inside its natural history, it wishes to house us—starting with the writer—again in an order of things larger than what our own minds and actions alone have conceived, have brought into being.

Thomas J Lyon begins his essay 'The Nature Essay in the West' with these words on this theme:

The function of the nature essayist, as Henry Beston pointed out some forty years ago, is like that of the poet. Both attempt to reforge a fundamental continuity between inner and outer, so that for the reader the world is alive again, seen precisely for what it is, and the mind is alive to it. To have known the beauty of the world, seen with unclouded eyes the sheer wonder of a clear river or a mesa or a cottonwood tree, is to be in some sense and for that time, psychologically whole. The deepest attraction of the nature essay, probably, is this basic rightness of gestalt. Good nature writing is a recapturing of the child's world, the world before fragmentation, the world as poets and artists can see it. The best
nature writing has this, and has also the reliability of science, for a true completeness must, logically, include the objective aspect of mind as well.\textsuperscript{33}


Lyon argues that nature writing attempts, through its clear-eyed, ecocentric witness, a kind of mystical reunion of the human, including the author, with the world. Writers of the American West, he argues, particularly emphasise this idea of the continuity between self and world—he points to Mary Austin, Joseph Wood Krutch, the poet Robinson Jeffers, and Gary Snyder.

In nature writing, the idea is that the land is the thing, is the whole, is the mind: we are a part of it, one of its ideas, one of its essential elements. It tries to imagine the world this way, beginning, usually, with the author’s particular encounter with it, within it.

This literature does not so much attempt to write about nature—this place, this landscape—from one person’s viewpoint, as to write one life—within-landscape from nature’s viewpoint. And the life in question is the life usually of the writer, him or herself, lyrically disposed toward the place, a listener within its sphere, a kind of everyman-poet. Nature writing concerns and tries to express the music that plays from place to man or woman. It is, as Krutch puts it, the ‘experience \textit{with}’ place that the nature writer wishes to sing—its shape and texture; all that it suggested; its reality and implications. The almost indecipherable coherence of the land in one place—including one man or woman’s witness of it. And if the writer speaks of other matters, she speaks out of that space, within the land; and the voice she uses is that of her conversation with a place.

This literature writes of places; it writes of human relationships, some of them with wild places, with birds and rivers, meadows and weather; and it writes of them from a viewpoint grounded inside nature, inside the land. It attempts to restore mankind to nature and nature to mankind. In doing so, it joins an ancient conversation, perpetuates a much older literature, and it continues an ancient understanding of reality.\textsuperscript{34}

‘The great casualties of modernism,’ Barry Lopez writes, ‘are nature, the diversity of human tradition, and the particularities of place.’ The real enterprise of this literature—he offers ‘nature writing, landscape writing, the literature of place’ as its possible names—is not the contemplation

\textsuperscript{23} The Beston reference is to a foreword he wrote in Herbert Faulkner West, \textit{The Nature Writers, 1939}, pp 5-6.

\textsuperscript{34} You can see how this conception of the writing project places nature writing at odds with the conceits of that literary theory which dismisses any relationship between text and world, and regards all meaning as made by man; all ‘places’ as culturally constructed. Campbell explores this fundamental divide in her ‘The Land and Language of Desire.’
of nature; it is the attempt to reincorporate 'nature into the meaning of human community,' the restoration of nature into 'that moral realm' (Halpern and Frank, 1996, p 329).

Nature writers place their faith in wilderness—understood as the order of things within which humankind lives, the bed of our own being and genius. In 'The Nature Essay in the West,' Thomas Lyon quotes Joseph Wood Krutch, an east-coast humanist who came to the west and nature writing in mid life and wrote in his very last published essay:

Faith in wilderness, or in nature as a creative force, has the deeper, possibly the deepest, significance for our future. It is a philosophy, a faith; it is even, if you like, a religion. It puts our ultimate trust, not in human intelligence, but in whatever it is that created human intelligence and is, in the long run, more likely than we to solve our problems.


Though this literature of nature is grounded in the life of places and their inhabitants, it is better, suggests Barry Lopez, to understand nature writing 'as that strain of American literature that, more than others in the States now, is pursuing the ancient discourse on human fate' (Lopez, 1999, p 19). How are we to live well and with integrity, in dignified relationships with other men and women, and with the land: that is what Lopez imagines this ancient discourse to be. This is the large question nature writers keep before them, and they look, as ancient wonderers always looked, first to the land itself, of which we, too, are part, for guidance. Lopez, both a leading practitioner of the craft and a thoughtful commentator on it, has also said that, though it builds on a tradition of writing already old in American letters, nature writing's present flowering 'really signals a shift in direction for American literature, away from a concern with the pleasures, the pains, and the fates of the self toward a concern for the mysterious web of being in which we are all delicately suspended' (Lopez, 1992, in Murray, 1995, p vi).

The origin of the species

Lopez, along with many ecocritics, traces the tradition, philosophically and stylistically, to Henry David Thoreau's Walden, first published in 1854. Walden is the seminal work, from which the literature of nature, with all its distinctive characteristics and diversity, has grown. Thoreau's other works, above all his journals, not written for publication but deeply influential in the years since his death, also belong in the nature writing canon: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849), The Maine Woods (1864), Cape Cod (1864), and the essay 'Walking' (1862), which begins 'I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness,' setting the tone, taking the ecocentric ground, for the writers who would follow him into the landscape.
Nothing comes from nothing though, and other works anticipated, fed, and came before Thoreau's. In 1775, the father of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, wrote a sustained, rigorous and beautiful argument for the intelligence and rights of animals in his 'The Defense of Raymond Sebond;' and Gilbert White's *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, recounting the life of his small parish, came out in 1789. (Thoreau had read White.) A tradition of nature poetry and prose existed within Taoist thought and literature in the East, arising out of Buddhism's engagement with the world, stretching back to the fifth and sixth centuries of this millennium and epitomised by Basho's seventeenth-century haiku and travel sketches such as *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Little of this literature reached the west, though it did touch Thoreau and is evident in his writing. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* appeared in 1836. Emerson's transcendental philosophy influenced Thoreau deeply, and, though *Nature* retains a human-centredness from which Thoreau progressed, it was this book and its author that embarked him on the experiment in solitude at Walden Pond.

Before Thoreau, too, came what Michael Branch has called 'a rich tradition of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century natural history writing,' particularly the works of botanist William Bartram, ornithologist Alexander Wilson and painter John James Audubon (Branch, 1996, p 282). But, however influenced by what came before him, Thoreau's writing, his discipline, his experiment in dedicated witness, offered up a template—though, like all great works, it was inimitable—for an entire literature. More than anyone before him, Thoreau, in his writings, brought together, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, the lyric, the humorous, the opinionated, the philosophical, the scientific, the utterly personal, the vernacular, the scholarly, the artistic, the apparently accidental. He brought together the land, the lyric and the essay. He made a new form and offered up a kind of prose fit for bridging nature and culture; fit for writing the wild. There are times when his writing seems not so much his work as nature, itself, writing. He became everyone else's starting point.

For all that, the literature that rises in Walden Pond is so various as to almost defy categorisation, as we shall see when I propose a taxonomy of nature writing below.

*Nature, writing: nature's writing*

In order to characterise this literature, I want to look at three views of it from three of the field's eminent minds. One is perhaps the preeminent nature writer Barry Lopez; another is the ecocritic and Thoreau scholar Lawrence Buell and the third is the poet and nature essayist, the teacher of literature and environmental studies Gary Snyder. Each of them has anatomised this literature.

In his essay 'Back to the Source', Barry Lopez offers something close to a definition of nature writing:
The happenings and relationships within a place, including those involving human beings, compose the nature writing narrative. They are the story not the setting. And good nature writing is fluent in nature, comfortable with certain of its manifestations in the local plane, familiar with some names and habits of trees and birds, watercourses and animals. This runs against the current of most literature we are used to, which puts nature in the background, objectifying it, or using it to emphasise and symbolise the essential drama of the story—the human events. Most of our literature is about society and a kind of human nature abstracted from the rest of nature. ‘What is missing from much recent fiction,’ wrote Scott Russell Sanders in his seminal essay, ‘Speaking a Word for Nature,’ ‘... is any sense of nature, any acknowledgment of a nonhuman context’ (Sanders, 1996, p 183). Nature writing, by contrast, engages with the ecological whole that contains society and the human psyche. Nature and a place are loud within it. Not only is nature writing grounded in a particular place, with a fully articulated human and nonhuman context; that place is what the story tells.

As John Haines reminds us in ‘Reflections on the Nature of Writing’ (Haines, 1996, p 88), nature is an inclusive force. ‘It is about us and within us, a necessary part of everything we are and can do, of everything we make, even the books we produce. It is in the dust of our carpets, in the spiders and roaches that seek whatever household crack or crevice exists for them, and in the shifting foundations of our buildings. It is in the squalor of the streets and neighborhoods of our cities, where Nature, shunned otherwise, returns in the form of random violence and deliberate criminality. It is in the decay of our political systems, and in the confusion and incoherence of our public discourse. Strictly speaking, there is no life apart from Nature.’ Nature writing considers all of life, especially human life; but it remembers that everything is run through with nature, is naturally constructed. And that makes all the difference.

What distinguishes the nature literature is that it remembers to heed and render respectfully the nonhuman, as well as the human; not merely as context, not as objects, but as a community of subjects, as Thomas Berry puts it (T Berry, 1999, p 8 and passim).

Nature writing, says Lopez in his second point, has, since Thoreau, turned its mind to the relationship between person and place, culture and nature. This is its perennial theme. Each of the works I list below as a nature writing canon, and all the others in the genre, reflect on how we humans are to return our ways of living on the earth to a healthy, intimate and sustainable
relationship with all the other beings we share earth with. Philosophically, each piece of nature writing contests the piece of thinking that has brought us to the ecological crisis we find ourselves in: the idea that the rest of nature is there only to serve us; that each other species alive has no rights as we have them, or at best inferior rights; that the world is here for our use. Nature writing wants to restore wonder and respect for nature to all our cultural practices—to our very way of life.

This, then, gives rise to Lopez’s third point. Since nature writing proposes what Aldo Leopold called a land ethic—an extension of our moral obligations, of our care and compassion, to nonhuman life forms—this literature has always been concerned with matters of justice and compassion. For Lopez, nature writing is always about the ways in which we can rethink the world and our participation, how we can practise all manner of care, so that justice may pattern human society and its relations with the rest of creation. Justice, in nature writing, is not only social, it is natural. It is meant to extend to all things, in its philosophy. This land ethic is still a radical proposition, and it demands a kind of spiritual practice, a transcendence of human selfness, an extension of respect to all of life. To extend such an ethic to all creation calls for a capacity to sense and respect the sacredness, dignity and integrity of all living things. Renewing intimacy with the living world implies surrendering a secular attitude to life (T’ Berry, 1999, p 24). Nature writing invites a reader to forego a materialist view of nonhuman forms. And so it is deeply a spiritual literature. It thinks beyond the self and beyond the human. It rediscovers how animate the landscape is. It reenchants the world. It wonders and witnesses.

Lawrence Buell, in the seminal academic book on nature writing, *The Environmental Imagination*, proposes four ingredients ‘that might be said to comprise an environmentally oriented work,’ (Buell, 1995, p 7). By ‘environmentally oriented work’ he means more or less what I mean here too: nature-oriented literary nonfiction. His four ingredients are these:

1. ‘The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.’ This corresponds closely with Lopez’s first point. John Haines puts it this way.

> We speak of nature, of the natural world, as if that were something distinct from ourselves and the social world we appear to have made, seldom noticing that we are in nature and never out of it; that our cultures, our civilizations, for what these may be worth at this moment in time, not only depend directly on nature in a material sense, but are in some way an expression of that nature, a reflection of it in shape and detail.

2. 'The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.' Buell elaborates here the ecocentric orientation of nature writing. It values all life, acknowledging the sentience and intrinsic value of the more than human as well as the human.

3. 'Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.' A land ethic runs through nature writing, in other words. This literature puts human activity back into its context, imagined from an ecological ground; but it foregrounds human responsibility for exercising restraint in our way of life out of respect for other lifeforms, and invites us to make good the damage we have already done to the earth, having forgotten for so long the accountability we owe to the rest of creation. E O Wilson has said that '[n]o intellectual vice is more crippling than defiantly self-indulgent anthropocentrism.' (Wilson, 1978, p 17; in Buell, 1995, p 9). And despite all the evidence, the sin persists, bolstered by evidence of human technological ingenuity and prowess, and our apparent triumph over nature's forces. Nature writing's strategy is to induce a healthy modesty, encourage a 'sane kind of plenitude,' as John Haines expresses it, entreat restraint and discipline and care by giving rise in readers to renewed love for the world. Nature writing, from its beginnings, has sustained a criticism of the arrogance and recklessness of an anthropocentric way of being in the world. As the degradation of the planet has advanced, so this critique has deepened. Nature writing asks us to notice, first, how we humans consider only ourselves; it asks us to extend our sense of moral obligation to the rest of creation; it asks us to own up to the damage we have done and to restore the places we have wounded in our self-interested occupation of them; and it enjoins action, locally focused on behalf of places and their people.

4. 'Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given ...' Buell reminds us here that in this literature, nature lives and evolves; that human activity participates in an order of rocks and weather and organisms, all of which got this way as the world unfolded, and are on their way to being what they will be next week, next geological era. A wild system rules. It orders all things, even us; and it never stops. Though human impact on other life forms has been excessive, even this process of cultural selection (T Berry, 1999, chapter 3) takes place in 'a universe ever coming into being through an irreversible sequence of transformations ... For our present Earth is not the Earth as it always was and always will be' (ibid, p 27). Nature writing writes places-through-time; it imagines them as long and unfinished processes.

Nature writing, suggest Lopez and Buell, takes the living world seriously. It does not treat it instrumentally; it does not think it away and elevate culture over it. It turns to nature, entering the nonhuman world imaginatively, in an effort to know it, to hear what it has to say.
Among the ways it takes the wild seriously is to turn to it as an aesthetic guide. Acknowledging that the roots of all our thoughts and ideas, our language and arts and literature, lie in nature, many nature writers, none more than Henry David Thoreau and Gary Snyder, turn to the shapes and patterns within the unlettered world for schooling in the craft of expression, for a kind of wild aesthetic to shape their prose. Here is Thoreau on the point:

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring...—ay, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.

—Thoreau, 'Walking,' 1864, p 650

In his essay ‘Unnatural Writing’ (Snyder, 1995, p 170), Gary Snyder proposes that writers turn for schooling in their writing craft, for a template for ordering their own expressions, to nature herself:

The craft could be seen as the swoop of a hawk, the intricate galleries of burrowing and tunneling under the bark done by western pine bark beetles, the lurking at the bottom by a big old trout...

This he calls ‘nature’s writing.’ A writer attempting the same elegant expression in prose that birds achieve in flight, water in fall, rock in repose, might also perhaps be attempting the kind of literature those other forms express: nature writing then might itself be nature’s writing. Writing that attempts to give voice to place—in texts that humans can follow—might be seen, in Snyder’s view of literature and in Thoreau’s imagination of a poetry so natural it carries earth and bears fruit, as nature, writing: that is, nature in the act of writing, through the body and hand of an attentive human, its memoirist, its amanuensis.

In ‘Unnatural Writing,’ which had its first outing as an address to a nature writing conference, ‘Art of the Wild,’ in 1992, Snyder proposes a jaunty and ambitious set of injunctions for a ‘new nature poetics.’ Snyder, who is a nature poet and essayist, a natural philosopher and a writing teacher, emphasises, in this prescription for a literature of nature, both craft and intellectual discipline. He encourages inventiveness, experimentation with language, wildness and artistic courage, along with the wise but eclectic use of science and other disciplines, other ways of seeing the world, in its composition. Here is what Snyder proposes for ‘nature’s writing’:
That it be literate—that is, nature literate. Know who's who and what's what in the ecosystem...

That it be grounded in a place—thus, place literate...

That it use Coyote as a totem—the Trickster, always open, shape shifting...

That it use Bear as a totem—omnivorous, fearless, without anxiety, steady, generous, contemplative, and relentlessly protective of the wild

That it find further totems—the world of nature, myth, archetype, and ecosystem that we must investigate

That it fear not science. Go beyond nature literacy into the emergent new territories of science: landscape ecology, conservation biology, charming chaos, complicated systems theory

That it go further with science—into awareness of the problematic and contingent aspects of so-called objectivity

That it study mind and language—language as wild system, mind as wild habitat, world as a 'making' (poem)...

That it be crafty and get the work done

—Snyder, 'Unnatural Writing,' 1995, pp 171-72

Barry Lopez’s three points capture elegantly the concerns of nature writing. Larry Buell’s four points articulate these differently, in the language of the ecocritic. Snyder adumbrates, using a poet’s diction, some elements of aesthetics, process and content implied within the others’ points. Other nature writers and scholars have attempted summaries of the genre, notably Scott Russell Sanders in his essay ‘Speaking a Word for Nature’ and his book The Country of Language (1999). No definitive statement exists, nor could it. Perhaps none is possible: this literature, like all nature, is an evolving process. It continuously emerges. Wildness runs through it.

To summarise:

1. This literature of place and nature writes as if nature and places—not just people—really exist and really matter; it points us back, places us back within, the body of the actual world, the solid earth; it restores mankind to nature, nature to mankind.

2. It imagines ecologically—that is, it imagines the writing taking place, emanating from, inside the matrix of relationships that are a place; it focuses, as ecology asks us to, on relationships between, not separation from; it imagines and writes the lives of human beings and communities as
expressions of and participants in landscape; it tries to see and depict human lives from the longview of the land itself, as the land or the place might understand them; and it imagines the writing, among other things, as one of the way the place articulates itself, as a piece of work expressive of the nature of reality there, as true to it (ideally) as its other natural manifestations, the lives of people and plants and rocks and rivers that play out there.

3. It writes places as communities of subjects, to use Thomas Berry’s memorable phrase; it essays a kind of inter-subjectivity with places and their occupants: the writer is present in place and in text, but shares the space (of place and text) as one of many living subjects; it looks on all forms within a place, composing that place, as a community of subjects.

4. It centres itself not in the human, the personal, the self, but in the place, on a part of the land; it sees the place as the story, not merely the setting; it is ecocentric, biocentric, place-oriented, landscape-leaning; but it is not concerned only with natural history, with frogs and rocks and mountains, but with as many matters, human, moral, political, spiritual, as any other literature; it is just that it looks at them from nature’s point of view, not merely mankind’s, this man or this woman’s.

5. It practises a land ethic and an aesthetic of wildness—it extends care to all things within the land, and it hopes to write as naturally, in just such an authentic vernacular, as the place expresses itself in birdsong and cliff fall.

6. It pursues, and perhaps even embodies, a set of dignified relationships among all things on earth from which justice might result for all living things, including ourselves; it pursues not just social justice but natural justice; it encourages us to see the world and live in it differently.

7. It presumes that nature is primary and that it constructs, gives rise to and explains everything else—including society, human nature and acts of writing.

8. It carries on a land-oriented spiritual practice that sees the whole of creation as animate; all life as sacred; and the world beyond the self as the appropriate realm for attention and care and art—if you like, it enlarges the scope of notion of self to include the community of relationships within which one human life unfolds.

9. It attempts to reawaken human beings to the intelligence, substantiality, wonder and dignity and life of our places; it explores the continuum between people and land; it tries to restore our inner lives and landscapes to the life outside us, to the landscapes in which we move; to knit culture with nature.

10. It bears ecological witness—seeing life from inside the landscape; practising attention to habits and voices and lives beyond the merely human (and also the human); finding forms and words to
speak in that are themselves true to the nature of the place, a music as authentic as those that run through the place itself.

**A taxonomy of nature writing**

At the start of his 1989 anthology of American nature writing, *This Incomparable Land*, Thomas Lyon proposed a taxonomy of American nature literature, in the attempt to 'see what is important about the genre and how its themes are developed' (Lyon, 1989, p 3). And, he concluded there, 'whatever the artistic means chosen, and whatever the type of essay we may choose to call a piece of nature writing, the fundamental goal of the genre is to turn our attention outward to the activity of nature' (ibid, p 7). This is a humbler way of putting nature writing's ambition than Lyon used in his essay on the Western nature essay in Taylor's massive *A Literary History of the American West* (1987); and it is less far-reaching than the project Lopez, Buell, Snyder, Abbey and Thoreau himself envisaged for the literature. And yet, perhaps it comes to the same point. Nature writing directs us to the larger order of things; it may even voice the larger order of things. It seeks human, personal, universal meaning in the order of things of which humanity is just one manifestation. It asks us to see with nature's eyes.

Going on, thinking very hard and straight about the genre, Lyon suggests that 'the literature of nature' has about it 'three main dimensions': 'natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretations of nature' (ibid). And the relative weight each of these elements receives in a piece of nature writing gives rise to the seven categories of the genus that he sets forth—more philosophy and less personal response; mostly personal response; mostly natural history information, and so on. Lyon cautions that these categories overlap and 'intergrade.' 'Order is the dream of mankind,' wrote someone; but nature will not be ordered, nor will even the works of mankind, most notable when they rise from a close relationship with nature's 'chaotic' order. 'Nature writing is not in truth a neat and orderly field,' he says (ibid).

Although he does not comment on it there, Lyon identifies nature writing, in this taxonomic analysis, with the essay. It follows from what I have said above that the essay is the form one would most likely chose if one wanted to combine those three elements of informing, responding personally, and reflecting philosophically. But, as we have seen, it is not, and need not be, the only one.

It strikes me too that the three elements Lyon touches on suggest a literature without the depth and resonance of the literature I know. He misses, I think, the poetic, lyric element of much of

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25 Lyon's anthology was republished in 2001, minus the samples of nature writing, as *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing*. 
this writing. His scheme overemphasises the informing and reporting elements of the literature of nature, and rather misses the singing. This has the effect, I think, of embracing some works into the field that hardly belong there—the field guides and texts, the straight information manuals, the functional naturalist prose, that would fill all of his first and much of his second category.

These are Lyon’s categories of nature writing.

Where the giving of information ‘is almost the whole intention,’ we get the first category: ‘Field Guides and Professional Papers.’ I can’t imagine many such works of this kind that I would want to call nature writing. I am not even sure it is useful to include them. It stretches the meaning of ‘literature’ to a degree that renders it close to meaningless.

‘The natural history essay,’ Lyon’s second category, puts ‘expository descriptions of nature’ into a narrative design, to tell a story or make an argument with it. Instruction in the facts of nature remains the chief object. The instructive narrative may be unfurled in the first or third person. Information here outweigths personal response. There may be a fair bit of philosophical interpretation. Some works in this category will be more like literature and others more like information texts. Lyon includes as examples Rachel Carson’s The Sea Around Us, the works of Anne Zwinger and John Hay’s Spirit of Survival. All three are literary works; Carson’s and Zwinger’s read to me more like the works of naturalists who can write well. I wonder if John McPhee’s monumental Annals of Former Worlds fits in this category: it narrates the geology of North America through his travels across country with geologists; and it includes (especially in Rising from the Plains) some very moving passages, emotionally charged and beautifully composed. It is an example of the give within these categories perhaps. Tim Flannery’s ecological histories of Australia (The Future Eaters) and the United States (The Eternal Frontier) fit more certainly in this category, along with Ian Plimer’s A Short History of Planet Earth.

The introduction into the narrative of the author’s experiences in nature, her thoughts and responses, carry a piece of nature writing across into the category of ‘the ramble.’ Lyon calls this ‘a classic American form.’ I wonder if it is not more of an eastern American form. Lyon gives as examples Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and most of the writing of John Burroughs. This form seems particularly well suited to pastoral landscapes. There is not much wilderness in this form, although one could think of examples set in the sparer landscapes of the American West: Joseph Wood Krutch’s The Desert Year, for instance. The 2001 edition of Lyon’s book places Richard Nelson’s The Island Within, set in southeast Alaska, in this category; but somehow this misses the heart of that book, its Thoreauvian ethos and shapely, celebratory rhetoric. Rambles seem to me a blend of pastoral meander and memoir. I will suggest, in a bit, a revised taxonomy, in which the ramble disappears and is replaced by a new category defined by its strong lyric and
narrative elements. Most of the books Lyon envisages in the ramble would then find a new home as nature essays, essays of experience in nature or this new category of lyric essays of place.

Once the writer's personal experience in nature frames the narrative and takes over from 'natural history facts' the literature of nature moves into a different realm. Lyon calls it 'the nature experience essay' (Lyon, 1989, p. 6). Perhaps this is the heart of the genre. Lyon divides it into three subtypes: 'solitude and back-country living,' 'travel and adventure,' and 'farm life.' To that list is being added these days 'urban life.' *Walden* is the prime example of the solitude book. Lyon suggests Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* as well. There are many others. Lyon puts Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* in travel and adventure. *Of Wolves and Men*, I am thinking, might belong more with the natural history essays. Much of Peter Matthiessen's writing also belongs well in travel and adventure. Farm life would cover Wendell Berry's pastoral writing (Lyon offers *A Continuous Harmony*).

Somewhere in this category of nature experience essays might fall the writing of John Haines (solitude), Aldo Leopold (who flows readily into a category of more philosophical writing), Gary Snyder (who also writes philosophy of nature), Linda Hogan, Carolyn Servid and others.

Lyon calls his last category, distinct from essays of nature experience, 'man's role in nature' (*ibid*, p. 4). These are 'analytic and comprehensive works on man and nature' (*ibid*, p. 7). Philosophy and politics predominate here. These are books about ecological ethics and politics—more or less elegant disquisitions upon how we might compose a more just and workable relationship with our places, with the whole of the earth. These books expound and even preach; they warn and castigate; they propose other ways. They do not show; they tell. Much of Wendell Berry's writing falls under this head, along with Thomas Berry's and perhaps George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*. Lyon suggests Joseph Krutch's *The Great Chain of Life*. I would add Gary Snyder's essay collections *The Practice of the Wild* and *A Place in Space*.

I wonder where this leaves narratives such as James Galvin's *The Meadow* (or even my own *The Blue Plateau*) set in one distinct locale but composed mostly of the experience of other people than the author in nature—books of landscapes written through fragments of other people's stories, some of one's own encounters, natural history tableaux, personal reflection. Later in this study I suggest that these are lyric essays of place. I'm not sure how they might fit into Lyon's taxonomy. The texts I have in mind, like novels and poems, dedicate most space to showing; little to telling. Their prose is compressed, textured, musical. What reflection and expounding occurs is laconic or lodged in an episode, unspoken.

Perhaps there is at least one other dimension to take account of in analysing this literature—a literary dimension. I mean the lyric or poetic quality of a work on the one hand and its approach to narrative structure. Perhaps I mean what Lawrence Buell calls 'stylization' and 'lyricism' (Buell,
1995, p 94 ff); the qualities of originality, freshness and power Thoreau alludes to when he speaks of a writing capable of expressing nature; the wild aesthetic, the craft and craftiness, the poetry that Snyder encourages. The way these elements—the writerly, literary qualities and aspirations of a piece of nonfiction, as opposed to its informing, reporting, reflecting elements—play in a landscape-oriented work affect deeply its capacity to move us, to sing the places it witnesses. If this literature of nature is indeed a literature, then all its works must, to some degree, be characterised by some such qualities; and the best of them, all the works I consider here, for instance, are. Such lyrical elements will weigh more or less heavily in all the works within the literature, but if there were nothing of the 'vascular,' as Thoreau calls it, no 'blood writing,' as Tempest Williams calls it, then the work would not be literature; it would not be a work of nature writing. Lyricism as a stance, lies at the heart of this writing. And musical, structural, stylistic matters are its expression. It listens and it sings. It is not enough to observe. Take away a voice, a poetic and musical quality, and you will have a scientific paper, a piece of nature appreciation, a natural history textbook or a wildlife brochure. You will not have nature writing.

The best essays always have used stylistic devices to engage and stir us, to evoke their subject matters truthfully. In some of the works I look at here, these storying, lyric qualities play so profoundly and the informing function play so slightly that we may have gone beyond the borders of the genre that Lyon had in mind. Yet the works of this kind I consider in this study—Williams', Kutchins', Galvin's—clearly fall within the bounds of a literature of nature because of the seriousness of their authors' dedication to the ecological imagining of the land, and of us within it. And even at the heart of nature writing, among what Thomas Lyon calls essays of nature experience, in Lopez, Thoreau, Beston and Leopold, in Austin, Hogan, Dillard and Carson, music runs; and it counts; it accounts for the lastingness of these works and for their capacity to evoke the world and to point us out into it again. Factual prose without more will not do that. Wildness must order the writing—it needs to feel alive as places do, as complex and spacious and, in Snyder's sense, unfinished, always becoming, like a poem.

Adding these artistic elements to the dimensions of the literature of nature mucks up the orderliness of Lyon's categorisation, but it would make it more complex and faithful to the project of this writing, to its faith in wildness, its attendance to nature's music. It would allow us to rule out some texts that few of us would think of as literature—at one end of the spectrum, the books Lyon includes as field guides; and at the other end, many books about ecology and man's role within it, that have no literary character. It would allow in much rich and searching writing that otherwise might escape, and which clearly belongs in a literature (even a nonfiction literature) of ecological imagining.

There seems to be a new kind of writing in the literature of nature, and much of it has about it a lilt of poetry, a feel of story. It is part of a new wave of nonfiction writing, most of which has
nothing to do with nature writing. Though its roots go far back, its current manifestations are newer than Lyon's categorisation, first made in the late 1980s, and so it is unfair to expect him to have covered it. This writing even has a name—literary or creative nonfiction. It is a burgeoning field of publishing and MFA study. John D'Agata has coined the name lyric essay for some of this literature. Among the landscape writers, Terry Tempest Williams, James Galvin, Bill Kittredge, Mary Oliver, and Laurie Kutchins, to name a few, write this way. Creative nonfiction and lyric essay, though seeming new, were clearly foreshadowed in the personal essays of Emerson and Thoreau, of Beston and Eiseley and, later, of Annie Dillard; in the form, in other words, in which this literature of nature took shape, as well as in the works of many writers beyond that realm, such as James Agee, whom Franklin Burroughs holds up as an exemplar of this kind of lively, literary essay in his essay on James Galvin, 'Landscapes of the Alternate Self' (Burroughs, 1994), to which I refer elsewhere. D'Agata argues that lyric essays are as old as the ancients. Even if that is so, the form is, for whatever reasons, prospering all of a sudden; and one of the fields in which it flowers is that of nature writing.

Memoir is one form of nonfiction prose that has also boomed in recent years, a central part of the upswing of creative nonfiction. And among the memoirs, some of them unconventional in form, are many that also class as nature writing. Compared to the books that come to mind under Lyon's categories 'ramble' and 'nature experience essays,' these books impose the frame of the author's own life story, or part of it, much more thoroughly upon the narrative, while still imagining it to a large extent through the prism of place, the eyes of nature. The trajectory of a human life shapes these books more deeply than has been usual. In the encounter with the rest of nature, the narrator (or sometimes his or her subject) is foregrounded, the place is backgrounded. But there are enough such books, many of them by women, within the field of nature writing, to mark a new departure in this writing: just to list some, Gretel Ehrlich's *TheSolaceofOpenSpaces* (1985), Mary Clearman Blew's *All But the Waltz* (1991), Franklin Burroughs' *The River Home* (1992), William Kittredge's *The Hole in the Sky* (1992) and *The Nature of Generosity* (2000), James Galvin's *The Meadow* (1992), Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* (1992) and *Leap* (2000), Kathleen Norris's *Dakota* (1993), Annick Smith's *Homestead* (1995), Mark Spragg's *Where Rivers Change Directions* (1999), Linda Hasselstrom's *Feels Like Far* (1999), Linda Hussa's *Lige Langston: Sweet Iron* (1999), Cynthia Huntington's *The Salt House* (1999), Carolyn Servid's *Of Landscape and Longing* (2000), T Louise Freeman-Toole's *Standing Up to the Rock* (2001), David James Duncan's *My Life as Told by Water* (2002), John Daniel's *Winter Creek: One Writer's Natural History* (2002) and Lisa Knopp's *The Nature of Home* (2002). Some of this is nature writing as memoir; memoir as novel; novel as fragments of

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prose poems. But all of it is nature writing. There is so much of it, we may need a new category in the taxonomy of nature writing. But, though it is new—and much of it is Western, I notice, drinking from that stream of tough lyric, story-rich writing the West has encouraged—it draws on older precedents: Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa* (1937), Wallace Stegner’s *Wolf Willow* (1962), Gavin Maxwell’s *Ring of Bright Water* (1969) and Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It* (1976). Perhaps it takes the personal element that has always been present in the nature writing literature and emphasises it; perhaps it is part of an expression of the notion of an ecological self that has been part of the deep ecology and ecofeminist writings of the last twenty years.

**A new taxonomy of nature writing**

I have found it useful in my own teaching and in my talking about this literature of nature to outline a revised taxonomy, bowing with respect to Thomas Lyon’s original, refining it to accommodate this emerging writing and to take account of the lyric element, which is nothing less than essential in categorising this literature. My revised taxonomy of this literature of place is premised upon two extra dimensions—narrative technique and lyric quality—to go with the three Lyon proposes: natural history information, reports of personal experience in nature, philosophical reflection on nature. Any work that had none of those literary elements would not find a home in my understanding of this writing—since it is a *literature* we are talking about here. So I drop Lyon’s first category of field guides and texts. I also let go of Lyon’s ramble category and replace it with a new one. I abandon it because, though I understand its logic within his scheme (the balancing of personal response and nature information), I have never found it useful in characterising works within the genre. Natural history essays account for the more formal, impersonal works; essays of experience in nature encompass others, where the personal element is stronger (adding also a subcategory for nature-oriented garden writing); and a new category takes care of others where memoir, music and narrative define the work.

To the right of Lyon’s central category, essays of experience in nature, I add a new category—**lyric essays of place**. Within it, I distinguish two subtypes: nonfiction novels of place/natural history memoirs; and prose poems of place.

Lyric essay is as difficult a term, no doubt, as ramble—and similar in many ways, except that it alludes to musical exposition as well as informality of narrative shape. My subcategories, too, are unsatisfactory units, since many of the works I have in mind for each of them might belong in either place and partly also in Lyon’s other categories. But I follow Lyon in acknowledging the necessary slipperiness of such imposed categories. Between them, they serve to accommodate, though, many works of creative or literary nonfiction, in which authors approach nature and its part in human community with the narrative strategies of a novelist or memoirist; or with the feeling for lyric of the poet. Just as Lyon’s three dimensions always apply in some measure, so, in
this literature of nature, do these elements of story and lyric. _Walden_, for instance, and the work of Barry Lopez, the writing of Peter Matthiessen—all these are strong on lyric, yet grounded firmly in the territory of the personal essay and the naturalists' disciplines of informing, reporting and reflecting. Where the narrative and lyric dimensions dominate those factual and ideational dimensions, without abandoning them, we meet works of a different nature. These are the works I have in mind.

I call them lyric essays—taking the neat and suggestive nomenclature elaborated by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall in the literary journal _Seneca Review_ (D'Agata and Tall, 1997)—because the works I have in mind fit the description D'Agata and Tall have made of lyric essays. These works are grounded in the real world like essays and yet they do not expound arguments, summarise nature or elaborate philosophical positions in detail; rather they mention facts, hint at conclusions along the way; they work with whatever comes to hand; they chant places rather than describing them, and they let their own unsteady progress through places and lives, and back and forward through time, shape them as a novel or a cycle of poems shapes itself—apparently accidentally, without the sense of order that attends traditional essays. They don't think aloud about nature; they don't report back from places; they tell places like stories and they sing landscapes like songs. They are narratives in which it seems the people, around whose lives these tales take shape, enact the land.

These are not accounts of experiences in nature; these are stories or poems of place-drenched people, of communities or lives in landscape. They are stories of the real world, musically told, chanted almost.27 There are enough such works to justify a new category in the taxonomy of nature writing, lyric essays of place.

I want to account, in the first subtype (natural history memoirs and novels of place), for those lyric works in which, though everything that happens is steeped in place and natural history, a novelesque or memoir-like narrative drives the work along—examples include Norman Maclean's _A River Runs Through It_, Terry Tempest Williams' _Refuge_, Mark Spragg's _Where Rivers Change Directions_, Karen Blixen's _Out of Africa_, William Kittredge's _Hole in the Sky_ Gretel Ehrlich's _The Solace of Open Spaces_, Linda Hussa's _Lige Langston: Sweet Iron_, Kathleen Norris's _Dakota_ (also part prose poem), even Peter Matthiessen's _The Snow Leopard_, as much a journey of the soul as a journey through a landscape. Perhaps Annie Dillard's _Pilgrim at Tinker Creek_ belongs better here too than where Lyon places it, as a ramble. It has about it much of the lyric essay.28

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27 'The lyric essay,' write D'Agata and Tall, 'partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form' (D'Agata and Tall, 1997, p. 7). I say more about the lyric essay in 'The real world.'

28 It is hard to decide, though, whether it is more memoir than prose poem; and it is also a candidate, because of its playful braininess, for the last category 'man's role in nature.'
The human element—usually a time in the life of the author, sometimes times in the lives of other people, always in place, in landscape—is foregrounded in such works, just as it is in a novel or memoir; the author pays attention as a novelist or memoirist might to the slow revelation of human character and the shape of an unfolding drama which seems all the time to be just an expression, articulation or small transformation of the place itself, of the landscape. These lives and these events are like the fall of a rock face, a drought or a fire in the long elaboration of the place.

Where plot is more sporadic; where the composition is more lyrical than linear; where the work is made of fragments in which steadily the place and its people take shape—where the lyrical, in other words, drives the work more than the narrative—we have prose poems of place. This is the second kind of lyric essay I have in mind. The best example—though it has elements of novel and memoir too—is James Galvin's *The Meadow*. Another might be John Haines' *The Stars, The Snow, The Fire*; another, if it is not a memoir, is Norris's *Dakota*, which, in the words of *The New Yorker*, 'by skilfully weaving together whatever material has come to hand...' contrives 'a powerful evocation of an experience [of place, of belonging, of spiritual geography] that is notoriously difficult to put into words.' Terry Tempest Williams' *Leap* and her most recent book *Red*, composed of essays, comprising a kind of memoir, also fall under this heading. Perhaps, too, going further back, this is where Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain* sits best; and alongside it, Henry Beston's poetic journal of a year at the sea's edge, *The Outermost House*.

Standing apart from such works are the philosophical and polemical works Lyon calls 'man's role in nature' and I call, here 'culture and nature.'

A new taxonomy of the literature of nature might go like this:

- natural history essays
- essays on experiences in nature
  - solitude and back country living
  - travel and adventure
  - farm life
  - garden life
- lyric essays of place
- nonfiction novels and memoirs
prose poems

- culture and nature.

But such a taxonomy is only useful to the extent that it points up the elements that are embodied, to larger and smaller degrees, in all the writing in this literature. I think this new taxonomy does that. Nature writing passes on information and recounts personal encounters with nature and the places of the earth; it reflects philosophically and politically on the fate of the earth; and it makes musical accounts and tells true stories of landscape-shaped lives. Connections count more than differences in this literature; and yet there are differences—one of the reasons for its life and vigour, its endless capacity to adapt and renew itself. And that is the second reason why a taxonomy helps: because it acknowledges the diversity—of intention, form, subject matter, style, voice and geographical characteristics—in the literature of nature.

A nature writing canon

A number of anthologies of nature writing now exist, perhaps the most comprehensive of them being John Elder and Robert Finch's *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), a second edition of which appeared in 2001. It includes the work of many new writers in the field and some more from outside America. A new edition of Thomas Lyon's anthology *This Incomperable Lande* appeared in 2001, along with a new edition of Daniel Halpern and Dan Frank's classic collection *The Nature Reader*. John Elder has also edited an encyclopedia of nature writers and writing: *American Nature Writers* (1996). From these works and others, it is possible to make out the shape and character of the writing called these various names, but mostly plain old nature writing. It is possible to detect the great diversity of forms and voices within it. And it is possible to put together a list of the books that compose a canon of this literature. In the country of all these books, the same waters flow, waters that had their rise in Walden Pond. But reading them you can see how the tradition has been renewed and refreshed as it has flowed.

This would be my nature writing canon: Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789); William Bartram's *Travels* (1791); Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* (1850); Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), *Journals*, and his essay 'Walking'; Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872); John Wesley Powell's *Exploration of the Colorado River* (1875); John Muir's *The Mountains of California* (1894); John Burroughs' *Riverby* (1894); John Van Dyke's *The Desert* (1901); Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (1903); Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* (1928); Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937); Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949); Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Desert Year* (1952); Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey* (1957); Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America* (1959), *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (1972) and *The Snow Leopard* (1978); Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960); Rachel Carson's sea trilogy and *Silent Spring* (1962); Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (1962) and *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969); John Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967);

I have left many works out. This list is partial in two senses—it has holes in it, and it reflects my own taste, despite my efforts to cover the bases. But it shows the size of the literature, and if you read all those books you would discover its taxonomy-defying diversity, its liveliness. It includes several from outside the United States—Gilbert White, Karen Blixen, Gavin Maxwell, John Baker, John Fowles, Tim Robinson, Richard Mabey, Michael Viney. These are only the best works in a large, growing and various genre.

Although, I have said I am focusing on essayists, it would be wrong not to mention the poetry of Wendell Berry, William Everson, Robert Frost, James Galvin, Jorie Graham, Seamus Heaney, Robinson Jeffers, Laurie Kuchins, Denise Levertov, W S Merwin, Mary Oliver (who is also an accomplished nature essayist—*Blue Pastures* (1995) among others), Simon Ortiz, Pattiam Rogers, William Stafford and others. The work of such poets is, according to Lopez, 'essential to an understanding of the genre' (*Lopez, 1999b, p 19*); and the fiction of Willa Cather, Jim Crace, William Faulkner, Charles Frazier, Herman Melville, Alistair MacLeod, Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, E Annie Proulx and John Steinbeck, along with the fiction of some of the
nature writers I have listed above. (Again, this is a hopelessly incomplete list.) In the works of all these novelists many of the concerns of nature writing are played out, and landscape lives as fully as it does in the works of the essayists.

Two continents

As my small canon shows, the great bulk of this literature of nature has taken shape in North America. Why should this literature have flourished there, when it has not done so, for instance, in a land and culture, Australia, that is similar in many ways to North America?

Part of the answer lies in the triumph of the essay there, the ongoing renewal and liveliness of a literature of fact. For essays, engaging as they do with the nature of what is actual, have usually and quite naturally turned their attention to land and to the natural history and ecology of human society, psychology and so on. Witness Seneca, Cicero, Montaigne. If you are witnessing, surely the relationships between the wider world and the human would be one of the things you would witness. But why has the essay done so well there, and why so often turned to landscape? For the essay—the personal and engaging form it is meant to be, not the reduced and formal disquisition that stands in sometimes for it—has declined in England, where literature has been colonised almost entirely by fiction; and it has never really, so far, got off the ground in Australia. To the extent that the essay has been written in England and Australia, it has looked less often outside the social realm.

In the essay 'Landscapes of the Alternate Self,' of which I made mention earlier, Franklin Burroughs observes that the personal essay 'offers the same tempting amorphousness, autonomy, and freedom from traditional entailments that the unclaimed continent offered Euro-Americans' (Burroughs, 1994, p 2). This idea links the flowering of the essay in North America since Emerson to the nature of the land itself—its generosity, its diversity, its wildness, its invitation to adventure and inhabitation—as well as to a disposition toward discovery and possession that characterised the western expansion and settlement of North America. It suggests the rich idea that the land itself demanded or at least encouraged a literature of personal essay, such as has prospered there since the 1850s. Burroughs has the landscape-oriented essay particularly in mind, essays such as he writes himself, such as Thoreau wrote, such as James Galvin—whose book The Meadow Burroughs reviews in his essay—writes. The essay is well made for witnessing such a land—in all its elusive, vast, various and dramatic reality. And the same set of landscapes that suggested the essay as an American form, suggested themselves, quite naturally, as the fit subject matter for the form.

I wonder what it is about this land of mine, then, that has failed to inspire much essaying into it with words as good as Thoreau's or Leopold's, Austin's or Galvin's, Lopez's or Williams'. Australia has not produced many essayists, fewer nature essayists and fewer still in whose writing the land
itself seems to speak. Is it, perhaps, that our writers have gone to country with too much of the literature of a small island in mind (The United Kingdom, I mean, the motherland), too much of the diction and sentimental imagination of English romantic poets (whose words were suggested by lusher, more pastoral landscapes)? Have we gone with too little of the wonder and excitement, the openness to new kinds of country, that the American frontier awoke (admittedly after a couple of hundred years of settlement); too little of the autonomy and inventiveness of literary expression American writers demonstrated from Emerson and Whitman, Dickinson and Thoreau on?

Is it that the Australian land itself defeated what stirrings of originality arose, what temptations to wander with freshness into unfamiliar territory, to open one's eyes and witness without prejudice? For the land defied notions of the sublime—born in European landscapes, carried in European images, spoken and sung with a northern European music—with which many writers went to it; it disappointing pastoral visions of rolling grassy plain, steadily flowing river, towering range and delivered instead landscapes of impossible sparseness and difficulty, ground of low relief, landforms restrained in their gestures, sclerophyll trees and heath and grasses, saltpans, dryness, weirdness of form. So far at odds, aesthetically and formally, was all this from the urbane pastoral ideal and its expression in conventions of diction, voice and style in the English prose in which emergent Australian literature was so steeped, that the dissonance silenced for a long time not only the kind of intimate, mindful, musical literary engagement with landscapes that gave rise to the American nature writing tradition, but much personal-essay writing, much lyric nonfiction of the kind that Burroughs celebrates in the United States. Perhaps the land conquered in spirit those who went to conquer it. Its silences silenced the essayists, anyway.

In any event, Australia does not have a strong tradition of essay-writing in the Emersonian, the Montaignian, the Baconian, in any, tradition. We have and have long had, as I will argue in 'The silent continent,' historians, journalists, polemicists, intellectuals, ratbags, apologists, pamphleteers, some of whom have written memorably—Geoffrey Blainey, Manning Clarke, Robert Dessaix, Bob Ellis, Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes, Valerie Lawson, Don Watson, Judith Wright. But we have had few essayists. One thinks of Walter Murdoch and Charmian Clift, Douglas Stewart and Marjorie Barnard, Jill Ker Conway, Helen Garner and David Malouf, one or two others. The list is too short to make a tradition, though it seems to be growing of late. Perhaps the land suggested that reality here had no poetry in it; that the world of fact could only be engaged with practically, and that a literature of fact, likewise, could have no music or wonder in it. Much of what passes here for essay is oddly stiff and formal, utilitarian, didactic, rarely engaging, rarely even attempting to hold that ground I have described above, where the essay lives—the middle-voiced, the reflective, the lyric, the wondering. And it is partly because we have not had essays—at least not the kind of lyric nonfiction that true essays are meant to be, that compose the American tradition Franklin Burroughs has in mind—that we have not had much nature writing either.
If the land has defied and defeated the essay here so far, I can't believe it is forever. I think it is more likely we are only just now finding ways to witness this land, to know it and let it speak. We Europeans are only recently coming to sense the music in the earth here. So perhaps a literature of witness, of essay and other forms of literary nonfiction, may emerge with more force and character. And perhaps more of it will engage with the land—this is already happening. But I will return to this.

Let us say, then, that the landscape of North America has itself begotten this literature of place—encouraging wonder and lyric, nurturing contemplation of the actual world, the solid earth by virtue of its demonstrable wildness, its generous scope and diversity, its great scale, its high drama and grandeur, its fecundity and pastoral plenitude in the east, and its sparseness and toughness in the west. 'The first and greatest influence on nature writing, of course, is the land itself,' writes Thomas Lyon (Lyon, 2001, p 26). He means the American land, all its rich landscapes, in particular. 'The setting,' Lyon goes on, 'that F. Scott Fitzgerald described so memorably as "the fresh green breast of the new world" continues in mythic potency to generate profound allegiance and durable affirmation' (Lyon, 2001, p 35). After a time, a way of writing, if it is widely enough practised and read, sustains itself, like a healthy habitat. And so the literature, once begun, has gone on in America. After Thoreau came Muir and Burroughs, then Austin, then Leopold, then Abbey and Snyder and all the rest. But why did it take hold in the first place? Why were conditions right for its propagation and spread? Is there something about American culture, itself shaped, of course, by the encounter with American landscapes, that helped give rise to Thoreau and all his progeny?

For all of the superficial similarities between the settlement of North America and Australia—the vast scale and essential wildness of both landmasses compared to the settled old world out of which the settlers came; the prior occupation by indigenous peoples; the extension of frontiers from east to west, led by pastoral and mining interests; the taming of wild lands in a spirit of capitalist enterprise—four factors make the two stories fundamentally different.

First is the matter of time. European settlement of North America began over two centuries before the British settlement of Australia—its roots reach back to premodern times, to an age of idealism before the Enlightenment. Britain colonised Australia from 1788. European life in this land has a history that does not run back past the Enlightenment. This has endowed Australian cultural life, particularly the apprehension of the land, with a much less romantic, a much more sceptical disposition. Matter had already been rendered unmysterious in settlers' imaginations before they ever beheld this place.

Second, there is this matter of cultural disposition or national temperament. North America was settled in a very different spirit than Australia. The one was settled in idealism; the other
unwillingly and utterly pragmatically. America was an enterprise of conviction, an attempt at
a new Jerusalem, from the puritan beginning; and American thought and governance have carried
a spiritual note, oriented toward and fed by the new land, from the start. America was also a
statement of idealistic nonconformity—it was, after all, puritans who founded her, turning their
backs on all that England and the old world meant. It was founded in, imagined in, faith. Australia,
by contrast, was always utterly a secular idea in the minds of its newcomers. Australia was a
convict colony, founded in pragmatism and without any hope or ambition that a new kind of life,
a new nation, might rise here. Australia was never the promised land, as America was. Australia was
never a new beginning. It was not, until very late in the day, an idea that sang in anyone's
imagination. It was just a gaol to which no one came by choice; a gaol that gave rise to a nation.

Australia was not the child of nonconforming faith, nor of conformity, nor of rebellion. It was an
enactment of Britain, an attempt by that power to rid herself of people it wished gone. It began
as a place of exile and became an unchosen home for many who could not leave. Australia is an
accidental nation, which spread herself, out of need (of food and water), out of a secular, imperial
spirit, out of adventurism and toughminded entrepreneurialism, out of creeping national ambition,
over a landmass that could not have been less in keeping with the aesthetic and dreams of those
who built that nation and those who reflected upon its building.

That is the third, telling, difference: at settlement, there was not a plant or animal native to the
new country—Australia, as it came to be called—that had any place in the European imagination,
memory and culture with which Australia was settled. America had some strange things, it's true,
but it had wolves and deer, elk and mountain lion, beer and salmon, squirrel and acorn, oak and
chestnut, snow and ice, four differentiated seasons; it was in the same hemisphere, so Christmas
fell in winter, Easter in spring. Australia spoke to its settlers in a bafflingly foreign language
—kangaroo and wombat; emu and platypus; cockatoo and kookaburra; eucalypt and waratah; aridity
and sclerophylly; restrained seasonal variation; and being south of the equator, Christmas fell in
summer. It is impossible to overestimate the sheer otherness of this place. This part of the new
world—it is, in fact, geologically and anthropologically, the Old World, of course—offered no
'fresh green breast' to succour the newcomers. Australia greeted the scepticism, the pragmatism,
the resentment and opportunism of its white settlers with a landscape of bewildering and
unrelenting foreignness, of scratchiness, hardness and aridity. This was the antipodes, the
underland, the diametric opposite of the known world. A hard place to love—unless, like the
indigenous peoples (whose existence here, in spite of all their battles with them, the new
settlers officially denied) your culture had grown from that antipodean earth. This was a land
of denial, of irreconcilable oppositions.

There is a fourth thing that distinguishes the Australian experience from the American. For
among these antipodean oppositions, from the very beginning, was that between the city and the
bush. Australia, unlike America, or at least to a much greater degree, was urban from the start, more than it was agricultural. Its geography did not encourage or sustain the kind of network of large inland agricultural communities that emerged in the eastern states of America and even in the midwest and west; it bred a few large cities at its edges, centres of culture and commerce, connected as much to the European world over the seas as to the great land at their back. An overwhelming preponderance of Australia’s people has always lived in the urbs and suburbs, rather than on the land. One of the things that this has meant is that culture, including literature, has been identified with and coloured overwhelmingly by an urban sensibility. Literature has belonged much more to the city than to the country; urban and then suburban life shaped Australian literary diction to a large degree. And Australian cities were already large and sophisticated—provincial cities within a proud British Empire, as David Malouf reminds us in _A Spirit of Play_ (Malouf, 1998, p 66)—before much of the country was very well known. City and bush have been, as I say, divorced from the beginning.

The literature of landscape we have made, therefore, has tended to take as its models for literary engagement with landscape the works of other citified cultures—it has written about landscape as Rome’s writers did, as London’s have. Australia has written pastoral (Seddon, 2003). A pastoral engagement with land is sentimental and escapist rather than realist and vernacular. In it, nature is a foreign place to which one escapes, when one can, the dirt and world weariness of the city. Pastoral does not witness. It is not written from within nature or a place, but about it from the city. It idealises or demonises; and it sounds, even at its best, unrooted in the soil of the places it evokes. The place escapes it, usually. It is an idyll of landscape made in the city. This is the nature of the greater part of the Australian writing about place in what we have of a literature of fact. It is also colours much of the rest of our place writing, in fiction and in poetry. Given the factors I have outline, all of which encouraged a turning elsewhere, rather than an entering and listening, for the words and forms one might need to express this place—this is unsurprising. But it has yielded a literature, until recent times, innocent of much of the texture and tincture of the real land here.

The fact that this is so throws some light not only on the natural and cultural history of nature writing in Australia but also in the United States.

*American wilderness and the spiritual imagination*

In his essay ‘Foreign Notions,’ the Australian nature writer William J Lines puzzles over the differences in the tone of intellectual life, specifically in the literature of engagement with place, in America, a country where he has lived half his adult life, and Australia, where he was born. Because of the history of Australia’s settlement, Lines argues, the spirit of her intellectual life, of much of her literature, and all of her articulated thinking about land has been carried on in
a 'secular, rationalist, progressive' vein. Because we have seen the place that way we have
spawned only a feeble literature of place, he argues. Its diction is utilitarian; its notions conform
to a progressive idea; it does not perceive in wonder; it does not sing praise and love (Lines, 2001,
pp 49 ff).

Lines says he grew up in Western Australia with a longing for country, with an urge to defend it,
and with a love that found no echo, he says, in very much literature he read here and therefore
no voice with which to name itself; and he did not find a literature in which land was sung,
progress was questioned, an ethic of land was extolled, man's dominion was questioned, until he
went to America in the 1980s and read himself into the nature writing tradition: Aldo Leopold,
Edward Abbey, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, Wendell Berry.

Embodied in that literature—inherted from two hundred years of cultural history before Thoreau
penned Walden; inhereted from the puritans—Lines found to his delight, as nowhere much in
Australian letters, a spiritual cast of mind; a diction with its roots in the Bible; a rich, and storied
vernacular voice; a questioning of the ethos of development; a quality of love; a sense of a life in
nature as sacrament and duty; a bias in favour of the body of the earth just as it was, as opposed to,
say, pastoral ideas of country. He found a loyalty toward the landscapes of the North American
and an intimacy with parts of them, a longing for such acquaintance and a partisanship on their
behalf. He found a literature marked by bold criticism, unembarrassed spirituality, by wonder,
and by intimacy with, loyalty toward, native landscapes. Lines puts much of this down to a spiritual
tradition, an inheritance of wonder and nonconformity that began with the puritans and deepened
with the transcendentalists, where wildness itself was fashioned into an ideal, where spiritual
instincts were pointed outward into the field; and to whatever mysteries make one culture distinct
from another.

Nature writing, the writer Michael Pollan suggested to me in conversation near his home in
Connecticut in the fall of 2000, continues the spiritual tradition of American intellectual life. You
can trace it back, he said to me, to the sermons of the puritans and the transcendentalists, to
Emerson. And in that tradition of spiritual thinking, land, particularly wild land, has always
featured. When I talked with the nature essayist Edward Hoagland in Vermont a week or so later,
he spoke of nature writing as, among other things, biblical; of failed nature writing as 'bad Bible.'
Implying, I guess, that good nature writing might still be biblical, but good in the ways the Bible
is also good—as in Ecclesiastes, for instance.

The land and an idea of its wonder and promise lie close to the heart of an American sense of
identity. Roderick Nash argues in his seminal work Wilderness and the American Mind that
'wilderness was the basic ingredient of American civilization' (Nash, 1982, p xi). He means both
the nature of the great, relatively untamed spaces American settlers found and the idea of
wilderness with which Americans sought to give their new civilisation 'identity and meaning'
(ibid, p xi). After the War of Independence, Nash argues, American nationalist thinkers turned to wilderness—wild, bold, beautiful country without counterpart in the old world—as a symbol and embodiment of what it was to be independently American (ibid, p 67 and passim in chapter 4). But this was not a new idea. Nationalists drew on a hundred years or more of swelling appreciation, in diaries and travelogues, in paintings and novels, for the woods and plains, the vaulting peaks, the grasslands and coastlines of the continent, nurtured by the artistic climate of Romanticism, but founded in the ideals with which the new world civilisation was set down upon American ground.

American landscapes could almost have been invented to meet the needs of the American romantic imagination, they meet so well its hunger for embodiments of the sublime—in the east, rugged coastlines, fertile woodlands, arable fields, noble mountains and valleys like Virginia's Shenandoah, subtropical forests and Everglades, wide rivers; then the snow-topped alps of the west, mountain meadows and prairies, the gaping chasms of the Colorado Plateau, even the badlands and mesas and cactus of the southwest, the gothic forests of the northwest. And not only did they answer well to the sublime, they suggested and accommodated well enough, too, the wild dreams and lies and wishful thinking of American boosters and swindlers and more innocent optimists cut from the American pattern (Boorstin, 1966, pp 230 ff). In Australia, in a later time, a more dour people found landscapes incomparably less dramatic, at least at a glance; they found flatness and infertility and monotony of form on a scale beyond belief. It is a land, for all its incredible diversity (which you see once you get your eye in), that deals in semitones and cryptic understatement. This landscape had no time for romantic dreams and visions of the sublime: such notions perished fast under its skies, in its dry latitudes, in its red, depleted soils. It did not seem—unlike many parts of America, and particularly in the eyes of a more pragmatic, less optimistic people—the right place for love; it was not the kind of ground from which even laconic lyrics of place readily rose.

Then, in America, out of that distinctively American cultivar 'transcendentalism'—rooted in puritanism, influenced but not enthralled by European romanticism, swayed by the empiricism demanded of the new science of the nineteenth century, and interested not in a patriotism of nation but a patriotism of land, an ethic of place—came a 'wilderness philosophy' (better called a wilderness philosophy, since Thoreau's seminal clause read 'in Wildness is the preservation of the World'), a proto-ecological way of seeing the world and writing it (see Nash, 1982, chapter 5). Accompanying the lofty, earnest and idealising attitude to land in America, accompanying also a simple human hunger for ground to feed a family and make a future on, went a rapacious utilitarian view of landscape, a commodification and parcelling up of unclaimed country—common to Australia's experience—which travelled west and south and everywhere with American settlement across the continent (Boorstin, 1966, pp 242 ff). Out of the tension between these two irreconcilable approaches to a generous landscape, and cutting against the grain of the second—the mercantile, reductive, realtor's approach of the city to the country—the literature of
place found its critical voice, its nonconforming theme, its countercultural stance, its leaning toward land—the natural order of life, untainted by base human aspirations.

And so, with Lines, I would argue that the rich American literature of place grows out of an intellectual culture steeped in land-love, wilderness-orientation, spirituality, nonconformity, idealism and plainspokenness—the upside of its puritan beginnings. And with Burroughs, I would argue that it grows out of the landscape itself. It suits it. That literature really begins with Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and Whitman. It responded to the challenge of Emerson's exhortation in *Nature* for Americans to seek their own 'original relation to the universe,' and to seek it *here*, around them on American earth. The literature that ensued amounted not to a continuation of European pastoral, but to what Terry Gifford would call 'post-pastoralism.'\(^9\) nature seen freshly, listened to for its lyric, the world reimagined from local ground. If Nash is right, the general loyalty and leaning toward American ground was already strong, even instinctual, by then—in cultural and everyday life, even if it had not yet found authentic expression in American letters. By the 1850s, America had already had nearly two hundred years in which to fashion the foundations of a native literature and a relationship free of the secular, rationalist paradigm born of the Enlightenment. This was an advantage Australia never knew.

No similar spiritual, idealistic sensibility emerged in Australian thought, and transcendentalism never took deep root here. European culture came to this continent (in the late eighteenth century) already freighted with scepticism, empiricism and the ideology of industry, traits of course that are not all bad. The intellectual and cultural taming of this land took place in that later time with that modern, secular cast of thought already settled in the minds of many of its writers and thinkers. It was a hard land for European eyes to know and love in any case. What greeted soldiers and convicts, pastoral settlers and exiles, opportunistic and romantic pioneers, men and women of scientific or bureaucratic mind was nobody's idea of the sublime. Much of the place, covered in outlandish trees, inhabited by bizarre and ungovernable animals, was weird and wild, yes, but it was all made on a pattern that had no place within a European landscape aesthetics. In any event, by contrast to America, pragmatism reigned in the imaginative occupation of this antipodean landscape; and it continued to speak with an English diction, even when an Australian accent formed itself out of our engagement with the land. It made a literature that has mostly noticed the ways in which the land does not conform to that imported idyll, the ways in which it is inadequate to sustain European notions of pastoral life; it has made a literature that has too often dwelt on the bizarre and grotesque, has sentimentalised or caricatured the landscape and its people. Even where writers have gone to the land to hear it, and they often have, they have given us literary impressions of these geographies that seem to

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bear no relationship with the original, made as they are out of phrases sounding out a music that has no origin in the land.

The geography of silence

Australian geographies have remained close to silent in our writing (no matter how much we have written about them), particularly in what we have had of a nature writing literature in this country. This is starting to change. This silence (and the dawning change) is what I explore in the next chapter. It is the outcome, I think, of an inability or unwillingness to enter into the authentic life of Australian places, to take a lyric, biocentric stance within them, to listen, dance in these spaces, and then utter the song that those places embody—the instinct and process that is nature writing. 'The silent continent' also reveals the limits of the pastoral aesthetic and point of view, which is itself part of the colonising gaze; and it proposes, following Paul Carter, a model for a truer lyric apprehension and expression of country, an Australian post-pastoral, a musical reimagining of both place and prose, which has of course been alive in this landscape from the very beginning, in the languages and the sacred geographies sung and danced and trodden out by the land's first people.29

29 Two important exceptions to the great Australian silence are Barry Hill's Broken Song (2002) and T G H Strehlow's Songs of Central Australia (1971), of which Hill's long and marvellous book is largely a study. Hill notes that Strehlow, in that book, despite its pastoral intonations, 'has drummed the musicology of the sounds [of the Aranda people of Central Australia] into us,' and through them the 'basic tonal patterns of the sounds that have for so long belonged to the earth' of their country (Hill, 2002, p. 13). Hill's own book, a sustained practise of attention to the poem of the ground of Strehlow's own listening, is tuned, as few other Australian books in my reading are, to Australian land (and that land's people and their songs), and expressive of them in its sound patterns. I came upon Hill's book—and through it Strehlow's—too late to take proper account of it here.
5. The silent continent

I am the silent continent. My silence reaches to the stars. My life is inarticulate and secret.
—Marjorie Barnard Eldershaw, 'A Mask of Australia for Inaudible Voices'

Keats didn’t know
about all those syllables, ‘forlorn’, ‘who’d never heard
a sound like the bushfire’s crow
—Robert Gray, 'Black Landscape'

And so, because Australia—the land and the nation, and the culture that has grown up between the place and its people—is not America; because she is herself, we have never had much nature writing here.

Because of a truculently secular artistic tradition; because of a sustained imperial or colonial apprehension of the place (which was seen for how it was not England rather than for how it was itself; for how far it was at odds with the England in whose image and in whose name the new society was being made); because of the absence of the kind of robust and rigorous spirituality of place, the philosophy of wildness that Emerson and Thoreau, and earlier the puritans, gave America; because loyalty to this continent for what it is rather than what it is not has been a long time coming; because we have not had much time, really, to learn to love (to earn the love of) this difficult and self-possessed landmass; because, in other words, of who we are, where we are, how we saw, how we began, what we have become—because of all this, nature writing, as William Lines notes and Pete Hay have observed, ‘is a tradition (poetry excepted) that is strangely absent in Australia...’ (Lines, 2001, pp 49 ff; Hay, 1998, p 2).

Australia has, in other words, no literary tradition comparable in quality and nature to that spawned by Emerson and Thoreau. Not that it wants an American literature. It wants, and waits for, an Australian literature of place in whose diction and grammar and music the characteristic geographies of this continent speak authentically, as the North American equivalents seem to speak in the best North American nature writing. It waits for a lyric nonfiction that engages intimately with Australian places and rings with their very nature, as Walden rings with Concord and The Meadow rings with Wyoming. Australian literature still waits for its ‘histories of the sun-soaked, heat-struck canyons of the Hamersley Ranges, odes to the Yilgarn reds of the Western
Desert, liturgies to the sharp light and brilliant space of the Nullarbor, chronicles of the thump and roll of the ocean in the Great Australian Bight, testimonies to the flux and clarity of light, its tint, harmony, and hue on the gibber plains, epics to the Holocene desiccation of the Willandra Lakes... (Lines, 2002, p 62). We wait still for an Australian literature of place that feels as though it grew here, as native as sandstone scarps and arid grasslands, as blacksoil floodplains and red sandhills, as gibber desert and tropical savanna; as hardy and laconic, as infinitely adaptable and lovely and cryptically various as eucalypt forests. We wait for a literature of fact that sounds out and resounds with Australia; that speaks a sclerophyll tongue like so many of our landscapes, which are what they are, many of them, because of an eternity of lying still while wind and sun, fire and flood have weathered them, flattened their vowels, leached them of lushness and flourish. We wait for a literature of place that could have been conceived under no other sky than this antipodean blue; that catches the lyric of Australian country.

*Australian pastoral*

I am not at all sure what form such a literature might take in English, but I am certain it will write this wildness, when it comes, as didgeridu sings it, as Indigenous languages speak it. Even in our novels and short stories, we have written with too much of England in our sentences, too much of empire in our voices, too much of the sound of a small lush island and too little of a large, flat, dry one; too little of here. This change will come. It takes a matter of a couple of hundred years, if America is a guide, for a new nation to develop a literature that is confident to speak in the vernacular—in the words and accent—that has grown out of its people's encounter with the land; that feels at ease employing the adaptations of thought and speech the new settlers have made on the ground (See Boorstin, 1966, part six, 'American Ways of Talking').

Not only this, though; we have not often approached land, as nature writers in America have, with a sense of its divinity, its rightness just as it is, its dominion over us, our connection with it. Our literature looks, as if from far away—at a curiosity, not a lover or an elder or a mystery. We will look at it, of course, as we must out of Australian eyes. But it is a question of whether one hears and seeks to resound what is there, not what one wishes were there, imagines is there, and not one's opinions about its worthiness; not some comment upon its weirdness or madness, its inhospitality or emptiness, its silence or deadness of heart. To write well in the spirit of the nature writer is to know how to listen and to speak what you hear. You don't have to be American to do that; it does not have to be North America for the land to speak to you. To wonder and witness, in other words, are not exclusively North American habits. They are human. What we shall witness, the places we shall imagine into second life on the page, when we listen and report in the vernacular will be markedly Antipodean. We have not done much apprehending, so far, from inside of our places; nor much writing in which the places—as against our attitudes about the places and the voice of the foreign lands in which those attitudes are grounded—speak.
Specifically what we still do not have is a literature of fact, an Australian nature writing, turned to the nature of these antipodean places and drenched with them.

We have not been completely bereft, of course. Responding to landscape lyrically, thoughtfully, for what it has to say of itself, has been left in Australia very largely to the poets, as Pete Hay notes (Hay, 1998). Australia has a rich poetic tradition, truly local in sound and spirit, and much of it turned to the land. Until the 1870s this poetry, as Marjorie Barnard Eldershaw puts it, was largely 'imitative, the writers solitary, connected neither to one another nor with the soil ... and their work rootless, fashioned after overseas models... It was the predawn, and in it men were writing about Australia, but not in the Australian way' (Barnard Eldershaw, 1939, p 189). She means Henry Kendall's 'sweet, thin lyrics' and Adam Lindsay Gordon's 'swinging equestrian ballads;' in prose, Marcus Clarke's 'standard melodrama of convicts.' The 'Australian way' has come, since then, to Australian poetry and stayed. The poets who have expressed Australia in its own geographies' voices, who have looked hard at Australian things just as they are, who have listened to Australian places, include David Campbell, Robert Gray, Mary Gilmore, Martin Harrison, Pete Hay, Gwen Harwood, Barry Hill, A D Hope, Les Murray, John Shaw Neilson, Eric Rolls, Douglas Stewart and Judith Wright.

It has taken longer, I think, to find the Australian voice in prose. Australia, particularly the bush, has been the subject of much Australian writing from just about the beginning. Australian literature went upcountry early, Barnard Eldershaw wrote in Australian Outline (1943). But the novels and stories about Australian places, set there, did not begin to sound like those places until about the 1890s. Until A B Paterson and Henry Lawson we had an imperial literature narrated in a British accent. From the nineties, Australian stories began to be told in an Australian accent, and behind them, says Barnard Eldershaw, at last 'were the deeps' (Barnard Eldershaw, 1939, p 189). But a hundred years on, the literature of those years sounds self-consciously Australian, a little forced and fabricated.

In 1961, Judith Wright still saw a gulf yawning between the voices of the country and the words our writers had found for it. In her essay 'The Upside-Down Hut,' Wright wrote:

> Australia is still, for us, not a country, but a state—or states—of mind. We do not speak from within her, but from outside: from the state of mind that describes, rather than expresses, its surroundings, or from a state of mind that imposes itself upon, rather than lives through, landscape ...

31 'M Barnard Eldershaw' was the pseudonym used by the essayist, novelist and historian Marjorie Barnard for a number of works written in collaboration with Flora Eldershaw. On the grounds of the similarity of style, most of these collaborations bear to Marjorie Barnard's solo works, it is reasonable to assume that the writing was hers, the organisation Eldershaw's. My own copy, found in an antiquarian bookshop in Katoomba, carries the signature 'Marjorie Barnard,' which has always made it seem like her work.
Intimacy with the body of Australian places—this, above all, is the quality that has been slow in coming to Australian writers. We have written apart from, not as part of, country. Perhaps the land does not love us yet, Wright suggested in her essay 'Biological Man' in 1976 (Wright, 1976, p 169). If she has withheld her love from the invaders, those latecomers who came and assaulted her and did not often stop to listen, who could blame her? Marjorie Barnard Eldershaw, in the beautiful mask that opens her book *My Australia* (1939), envisaged a time when the newcomers would ‘come to you at last in love and humbleness. They will learn of you and follow your ways. You will conquer them, but not by force. They will love and honour and serve you. They will take your strength and secret power, and raise it to another plane. You will be a hearth and a home to a new race’ (Barnard Eldershaw, 1939, p 12). In 2003, as I write this, you can feel that new time slowly dawning, a literary language emerging in which the voice and nature of the land and that of its new people are reconciling; the music of the ‘silent continent’ and the imported music of these people is falling into something like harmony. Love grows; the land seems to speak more in our writing; our writing slowly expresses, does not just describe, the land.

Looking over the literature of the intervening years, from the thirties to the present, one can see how the vernacular of the continent and its people has raised its voice and the voice of the small, lush island has begun to recede. Barnard Eldershaw envisages Australian literature, particularly the novel, as a tree grown from two roots: 'the brown indigenous root and the green transplanted root' (*ibid*, p 187). Over time, the literature comes increasingly to owe more to the ground and the climate in which it is rooted than to English conventions and diction, and the graft takes. Barnard Eldershaw writes that '[t]he Australian earth and the rhythms of the Australian earth are everywhere being brought under the literary plough. All her phases are finding expression in the novel.'

It is instructive that even such a great champion of the local earth as Barnard Eldershaw should have used, in the late 1930s, a pastoral metaphor, in which the earth required taming, cultivating, before it could give rise to a native literature, expressive of it. The metaphor is strikingly apt. For much Australian fiction, even that part of it turned toward the land, until quite recent times carries a pastoral note, even when its characters are bullockies and stockmen and its landscapes are deserts and arid ranges. That note is there, for instance, in Patrick White's *Voss*. It is still there in Thea Astley's *The Drylands* (1999) and Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998) and many novels of both city and bush. In Tim Winton's writing, particularly *Dirt Music* (2001), the plough, at last, is gone, and the land is allowed to sound, in the writer's song, like the land. A land with its own music, which one needs no plough to release, only one's ears and heart and perhaps a little time.
There were earlier novels in which the land found authentic expression, of course, and interestingly most of those were set in outback places. Frank Dalby Davison’s *Man-Shy* (1931), the story of a red heifer running wild in the ranges of southern Queensland, is an outstanding example of a novel in which the country seems alive, its nature authentically expressed. It is a rare example of an Australian novel successfully imagined ecologically—it is written from the heifer’s point of view, even from the point of view of the ranges and waterholes. (It may be no accident that Davison spent some of his youth in North America, where he read and admired Jack London and where he began his writing career.) In other novels, from 1930 onward, literature turns to landscape and increasingly, though rarely convincingly, sounds with its note, smells of its earth, notwithstanding the presence of the plough: Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (1929); the stories, poems and pioneer recollections of Mary Gilmore; the detective fiction and essays of Arthur Upfield; Xavier Herbert’s novels of the Northern Territory, *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1973); Miles Franklin’s *All That Swagger* (1936); Kylie Tennant’s novels of slum and country and her account of Diamond Head, *The Man on the Headland* (1971); Eleanor Dark’s *The Timeless Land* trilogy (1941–1953); Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957); Randolph Stow’s *To The Islands* (1958); Donald Stuart’s *The Driven* (1962); David Foster’s *The Pure Land* (1974); David Malouf’s *Jobbs* (1975) and *The Conversations at Carlow Creek* (1996); Roger McDonald’s nonfiction novel *Shearers’ Motel* (1992); Richard Flanagan’s *Death of a River Guide* (1994); Delia Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds* (1997); Michael Meehan’s *The Salt of Broken Tears* (1999); Alex Miller’s *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002); strikingly in the novels of Indigenous Australians Alexis Wright (*Plains of Promise*, 1997) and Kim Scott (*Benang*, 1999); and the novels of Murray Bail, Thea Astley and Tim Winton, which I have mentioned.

But if we are beginning to get a literature in fiction and if we have long had poetry that is expressive of the country, what is absent is a sturdy tradition of Australian nature essays. We need that for all the reasons I have spoken of already—for expressions of the kind of intimate relationship between a human mind and the world, and the wild, that the essay manages best; for the kind of proximity to the real world of nature that nature writing voices; for all the reasons America—land and people—needed Thoreau and all those who have come after. We need it because we need models of witness, of listening to land, such as the essay, particularly in lyric mode, accomplishes best.

We have a developed nonfiction literature on place and environment, to be sure, but not yet an essentially poetic, spiritually enlivened, personal, lyric, ecocentric literature. We have some works that might fit into the ‘natural history’ and ‘man’s role in nature’ categories; some good journalism and some field guides, some natural history texts and environmental histories. But we have very little in the central categories of the literature of place—little of the literary encounter with land. We have no lyric essays of place. We have no equivalents—with Australian accents and the scent of eucalypt or saltbush about them—of Annie Dillard, say, or Richard Nelson, Barry Lopez
or Terry Tempest Williams, Aldo Leopold or Mary Austin, James Galvin or Henry Beston. Not yet.\textsuperscript{31}

In most of the natural history essays and rambles that saw a brief flowering here in from the 1900s to the late 1940s, Australian places are treated, and the nature within them, as curiosities of this part of the British Empire; they are not treated as Thoreau and Leopold, Zwinger and Mary Austin treat the forms of life they encounter close to home—as familiar, local lifeforms, as neighbours. I have in mind the writing you find, for example in the journal \textit{Walkabout}, first published in 1934, through which—through many otherwise engaging and landscape-oriented writings—a strong pastoral, picturesque, romantic and imperial aesthetic runs. This is Australia the weird and wonderful rendered in polite prose for a curious public disenfranchised from the country’s nature by their occupation of the coast and by their culture, rooted elsewhere, in a green island.

Much of the Australian nature writing regards its subjects with affection and patriotism of an imperial kind; it seems to measure and describe these plants and animals, these places and their odd ways of life, against a set of norms rooted in Britain. It points up Australianess, the strangeness of nature here, rather than engaging with the ‘thingness,’ the identity of this geography, that bird, this range. It is writing that seems to visit country briefly from the city, from the provincial centres of empire, without ever quite growing accustomed to what it sees. It collects; it points to curiosities; it reports on what it finds in a tone rather like a newsreel. Propaganda seems to be one of its purposes. Landforms, weather patterns, animals, birds and plants seem somehow Australian first, oddities of empire second, and themselves-in-the-world a distant third. Australian nature and Australian places appear in these works as objects of fascination, as curios, bizarre, grotesque, quaint; rarely just what they are, rarely with their full embodied dignity intact. They come burdened with attitude—anthropocentric and imperial; and their aesthetic is picturesque and pastoral.

I am thinking of the work, for example, of Charles Barrett and Donald Macdonald, full of romance and elegance and close attention to the world, though it is; and, though it is a delightful memoir of place, Bernard O’Reilly’s \textit{Cullenbenbong} and \textit{Green Mountains}. I don’t wish to dismiss these writers. We have had so few authors who turned with diligence to nature. Tom Griffiths celebrates and details the work of some of them in his \textit{ Hunters and Collectors} (1996). The empire note, the Britishness of these earlier works in the heyday of nature writing in Australia is easy perhaps to understand in the context of its time: at the height of the empire, at the birth of Australian nationhood, in a time when to be Australian was still emphatically to be British and a part of the proud British Empire. All the same, the note is strong and consistent. And it is there well past

\textsuperscript{31} In appendix two I survey what nature writing Australia has, and find more there than I had imagined; and yet I conclude that little of it sounds much like the land it concerns.
one hundred years after settlement. It is there even in the memoirs of the deep outback (see Gunn's *We of the Never Never* (1908); Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959); Buchanan's *Packsaddle and Packsaddle* (1933); Marie Mahood's *Icing on the Damper* (1995)—listen to those titles; a mix of empire and pastoral, though 'Never Never,' used with as much irony as love by Gunn, is rich with a tough indigenous mysticism, suggestive as it is of Dreamtime. It is striking to compare this writing to writing of a similar era in the United States. On the whole the Australian writing does not have about it that quality that allows it to transcend its times and fashions—in the way that Henry Beston's and Mary Austin's, John Burroughs' and Aldo Leopold's very clearly does. That quality is a sensitivity to the life of the place not just the culture and the writer; that quality is a feeling for the ecological whole and its wild music.

One of the books of essays by the early naturalist-writer Donald Macdonald goes under the title *The Brooks of Morning* (1933). There is that pastoral and very British note, again. There are not many waterways in Australia for which the soft, small word 'brook' would suggest itself, if one did not see oneself as British and a speaker of the British geographical diction. Listen to that empire lilt, that sound of an Englishman abroad in this passage about brolgas from *The Brooks of Morning*:

> The most extraordinary of Riverina birds is the native companion, or brolga, and those who have been privileged to see perhaps a hundred of these birds in one of their grotesque quadrilles will not soon forget the spectacle. It is a ballet where the fairies are all clad in slate-grey, with just the merest bit of scarlet about the ear-lobes.


'Grotesque,' 'quadrilles,' 'ballet,' 'fairies'? None of that has much to do with brolgas; it has much more to do with the culture of the northern hemisphere.

In Charles Barrett, a lovely stylist at his best, and a dedicated naturalist and nature lover, the empire note is muted; but it is never absent. Somehow the country, the life of the places he visits, shrinks into the background as he describes it. The empire speaks in his rather awkward dialogue, in his collecting ethic, his unquestioning anthropocentrism, his patronising treatment of the 'natives.' It is there throughout in his stiff and proper diction, the passive voice—the voice of a man of empire, of the city, roughing it in the bush, finding amazing, strange and wonderful things. It is there in his best and most lyric passages, like the opening to *Koonwarra*:

> When black swans go over my house at night, the wild music of their voices takes me again to haunts of *Koonwarra*. It may be a short flight they are making, or a long journey inland to some lagoon where waterfowl nest in peace. I have been among swans in many parts of Australia, stalking them with a camera, or watching through field-glasses the manoeuvres of distant squadrons. One excursion is remembered more clearly than all others; for hosts of black swans, the largest congregation of their
species I have seen, frequent the 'Moulting Lagoon', on the east coast of Tasmania. It is a capital city in nesting-time, this wide, shallow inlet, with nests wherever you look.

—Barrett, *Koowara*, 1939, p 1

Not much of the wild music he hears gets into his own prose. Barrett goes into country behind a camera, sees it through field-glasses, sees squadrons and congregations. Yet he went far and deep, and if more writers here had continued in the same vein we would long ago have got ourselves a nature writing tradition.

Listen to the notes of a very European sublime within this otherwise fine writing by Strehlow about his beloved central Australia. This is the red desert he is talking about here:

[T]wenty-five miles to the northwest the magnificent bluffs of rugged Rutjubma were towering up in almost unearthly beauty, their deep-scarred purple faces softened by a rich tracery of pink veins which had spread through their sharply serrated edges.

—Strehlow, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, 1969, p 1

And, in the same deep outback, arid setting, the pastoral takes over from the sublime:

The hushed morning air was filled with the calls of birds—miners, willy wagtails, and crows—, all of which provided a shrill and somewhat discordant tonal background to the flute-like notes of a pair of butcher birds that were expressing their joy at the break of a new day in carefree songs of jubilation.

—Strehlow, 1969, p 1

The local birds are a 'somewhat discordant' backdrop to the more mellifluous (indeed they are sweet and musical) butcherbirds. But why are the latter read as 'joyful,' 'carefree songs of jubilation?'

This passage from O'Reilly's *Cullenbenbong* reminds us not only how we have rendered tough landscapes pastorally, but how settlers brought with them the very trees and garden plants with which British pastoral scenery is made. This is set in the Kanimbla Valley near my own home, in the Blue Plateau:

It is early winter and golden leaves which fall from the willows are still caught in the eddies and against the planks of the crossing places on Long Swamp Creek ... On the gently-swelling ridge in the fork of two creeks stands a house—the type of house which has disappeared from the Australian scene along with the generation who built it. It is of slabs silvered by the weather; it has a thatched roof and a great stone chimney, and like nearly every other pioneer home it faces the north-east. That was the most important thing, that facing the north-east... It meant that the house faced the rosy promise of every dawn, that it looked into the sun all day, that its flower garden in front was sun-drenched and robust ...
But there is no sunshine as we look at the scene to-day; it is raw and cloudy with the promise of more snow on the ranges; the poplars, elms and alders around the fences lift their bare, forlorn arms to the dreary sky and a sharp wind shifts their fallen leaves.

—O'Reilly, *Cullenbong*, 1944, p 200

This is a lovely passage. I don't mean to disparage it. It is a truthful rendering of the life and landscape of the Kanimbla Valley in the early years of the twentieth century. And it is a pastoral evocation of the place. The wildness of the surrounding cliffs is subdued. The picture is composed around a home and hearth, a garden around that, planted trees around that. You can find in O'Reilly wilder passages, on fire and flood and falling cliff faces, for instance; but the author's voice and the feel of the place, remain the same as they are here: tame, nostalgic, melancholic. The place feels removed in time and character from the real world of the present and the city. It is picturesque, its tones those of a postcard.

Country, wide stretches of it, closely and often lovingly observed, crowds Mary Durack's remarkable, dense and animated memoir of her family's pioneering days, *King's in Grass Castles* (1959). Still, a sense of estrangement from this new land, its hostility and resistance colours the writing. The ideology and aesthetic of colonisation, of pastoral taming and conquest shapes the narrative, even at its most lyric, as here:

Into focus through the blur of years ride these hard, lean, bearded men, quick-moving in their days of slow travel, pitting human will and energy against a strange land's hostility, dotting its grey empty plains with their stock, their homesteads, their fences and yards; and beside them their women, wind-burned, sun-browned, wrinkled before their time, coping, normalising, dedicating to the will of God griefs and anxieties that pedal radio and flying doctor would spare the bush people in years to come.


'Land of Waiting' is the name she gives to the chapter from which that passage comes. That name refers to the Channel Country specifically, and to a time of waiting among the lean, hard men and their women for supplies, good weather and the chance to carry on west. But it may as well apply to the whole landscape they travel in Durack's narrative. In her conception the land is empty and silent, awaiting these newcomer men and women, to discover it and put it to good use, turn it to song and profit, break its hostile spirit, make of it a home.

Douglas Stewart's fishing essays *The Seven Rivers*, (1966) offer up a highly intelligent, careful, humorous pastoral of rivers. He does not colonise places or play false with them out of this pastoral impulse, but you sense he never quite gets over the queerness of everything, even in his astonishment at its beauty. Among more recent books this pastoral and colonial note is falling away. It is not there in Hill or Seddon or Rolls, in Lines or Brownscombe, nor much among the
careful and elegant academics—Griffiths, Sinclair, McKenna, Bird Rose and others. But echoes of the pastoral habit reverberate in Roger McDonald’s *The Tree in Changing Light* (2001), a nostalgic mood, a sense in which the landscape is still silent and inanimate; so perhaps we are not out of the pasture yet.

*Pastoralism*

So a pastoral aesthetic runs through Australian writing about country. Oddly, as I have tried to show, this pastoral tone of voice, this rustication, often carries through the writing even of those who do have an intimate acquaintance with the land itself—through many outback memoirs, through Bernard O’Reilly’s recollections of what was a tough life in the Kanimbla and Megalong Valleys, through Mary Durack and Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Marie Mahood and Bill Harney. It is there in the reports of many even of the explorers. Its persistence among true locals attests to the power of the aesthetic, even in the face of the land itself, and to the capacity of a culture to carry on for many years its traditions, including its traditional forms and words for seeing and writing up landscape, no matter how out of key with life’s actual experience.

We have had an overdose, I think, in Australian place writing, of a pastoralising engagement with land, which has missed the nature of the land it surveys and has even abstracted landscapes in our imagination, has rendered land as ‘a highly selective ideological construct,’ as Lawrence Buell phrases it (Buell, 1995, p 32). Pastoral itself is not bad. But it is, as Terry Gifford puts it, ‘a discourse, a way of using language, that constructs a different kind of world from that of realism’ (Gifford, 1999, p 45). It fabricates landscapes tame enough to house, for a time, a project of retreat and reflection. It does not aim to know them for what they are; it does not seek to express what is real about them. Buell argues that ‘some form of pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without,’ and that it has been necessarily part of the project of American nature writing and must be part of the enterprise of a deepening relationship, through literature, with place, with nature (Buell, 1995, p 32). Buell says he uses ‘pastoral’ broadly to include ‘all literature that celebrates an ethos of rurality or nature or wilderness over against an ethos of metropolitanism’ (*ibid*, note 4, p 439). If one describes pastoral so broadly, one catches its essence but misses its consequences as well as much of its history—in particular the urbane sensibility that has given rise to it, and the taming and idealising operation it has very often performed upon the landscapes it seeks to represent.

Pastoral locates virtue in the natural world, in the countryside in particular, always outside the city. It is a retreat from urban life, an escape to nature. It is, says Gifford, ‘a discourse of retreat,’ (Gifford, 1999, p 45) and it takes as its subject matter the countryside. It celebrates the beauty of the natural world, particularly its grandiose marvels and the small pleasures of rural life. As its name suggests, it favours and idealises the landscapes of agriculture, of farmland and pasture. It
deals in tamed landscapes. Indeed, it constructs Arcadia in the image of the English countryside, and makes of it a place of retreat (ibid, p 46). It domesticates nature and then practises and celebrates retreat within that mild place. A wilderness pastoral, such as Buell imagines, should really be, therefore, a contradiction in terms. Except that many Australian writers, and others, have shown how it is possible to use language to make an Arcadia even of landscapes as little like those in which the mode was born as it is possible to imagine.

In the Australian case at least, there is an argument that it is time to leave Arcadia and its discourse behind, where they belong—in the past and in Europe. It is time to find the wildness of the real world and give it voice. We may call that, as Buell does, an extension of the old pastoral project; we may call it, as Gifford does, a post-pastoral literature; or we may see it as a new literature, part of the literature of place, a larger and different tradition, I think, than pastoralism. But it is what we need, what the landscape cries out for.

As George Seddon reminds us, the pastoral belongs to the city rather than the country. It makes an idyll of landscapes still free of the city's taint. It is a mode practised from the very beginning, from the time of Theocritus and then Virgil and Hesiod, by cultivated urban writers alienated from the values of the urban societies where they lived (Seddon, 2003, p 7). It uses landscapes rather like tourists these days use them; it attends to places not for the sake of the places, but for the sake of the citysider's state of mental health. The result of this use it makes of nature is that pastoral literature often seems to visit places rather than inhabit them; it idealises—but it does not touch and is not touched by—what it sees. The real landscape escapes it.

Pastoral, according to the British poet and ecocritic Terry Gifford, takes a journey from the court to Arcadia and back to the court, renewed (Gifford, 1999, p 47). Its tone is nostalgic—it visits and celebrates a place in which the writer does not and cannot ever belong; it writes a kind of paradise lost. Gifford notes Roger Sales' 'succinct attack' upon pastoral. Pastoral, writes Sales, is characterised by five Rs: refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem, reconstruction (Sales, 1983, p 17; Gifford, 1999, p 7). In seeking refuge, writes Sales, pastoral is essentially escapist; in the reflection it attempts and in the values it purports to rescue, it is selective; in striking a note of requiem for a disappearing landscape, it plays false to reality; in reconstructing places in the image of Arcadia, it simplifies their more complex politics and natural history. Though Gifford does not go as far as Sales in his critique, he argues that in these times of deepening environmental degradation, it may be time for a new pastoral—no longer of retreat to Arcadia, but of reconnection with nature (Gifford, 1999, p 45).

Pastoral ranges, as Leo Marx put it, from the sentimental to the mindful, the simplistic to the complex (Marx, 1964, p 72). I want to be careful not to dismiss an entire literature, and its aptness for the nature writing project, by reducing the whole tradition to its least worthy exemplars. Still,
I think we may have reached the limits of the pastoral mode, particularly in Australia, and chiefly because it is not, at heart, an exercise of ecological imagination. While sympathising with Buell’s generous understanding of the pastoral; while sharing his affection for much of the literature it has produced; while sharing particularly his admiration for the new and tough minded uses to which nature writing since Thoreau has turned this literary mode, I want here to emphasise pastoralism’s allegiance to tamed landscapes and its affiliation with an urban project of escape, an idealisation of countryside. I mostly use ‘pastoral’ here with those attributes in mind. I do this because I think this has been pastoralism’s dominant note—indeed the dominant note of much of our engagement with place—here in Australia. In a land where old-fashioned (as opposed to Thoreauvian) pastoralism is so powerless to render the material reality and music of sclerophyll, arid places, the literature that results is sometimes remarkably, wildly, dissonant with those places—as it is not with the English countryside.

It has been this way in Australia for reasons I have alluded to already—the heaviness and persistence of our English inheritance; the fact that English literature got here so late in the piece, when countryside in England was even more tamed than it was when the pilgrims got to America, and when English Romanticism, the reaction against the English mainstream of science and industry, was already strong; the power of the ideology of British Empire to abstract colonial landscapes into outposts and possessions of an imperial power and a colonial frame of mind; and the overwhelming urbanisation, from the beginning, of Australian culture. These factors have meant that a reductive, distorting pastoral has played powerfully in our literature of place; what Lawrence Buell calls ‘the transmigration of country mythography to the British colonies’ (Buell, 1995, note 4, p 439) has happened here with a vengeance.

Most writers, particularly among the nonfiction practitioners, have tried to engage with country here employing a way of seeing, a set of words and a narrative strategy well-made for middle landscape (Leo Marx’s term for it, half way between city and wilderness), for tidy countryside. But this was never middle landscape, no matter how many settlers imagined it, wishfully, like an English parkland or garden; no matter how much grassland they encountered that had clearly been well-managed by Indigenous fire-stick farmers. This was edgy, sclerophyll, arid country for the most part, incapable of conforming with a vocabulary or a landscape aesthetic that ran to green, to lush, to linear and gardenesque—not wild, for it has been husbanded for over sixty thousand years by men and women, but yet unruly, unconforming, broken, wide, replete with unfathomable secrets of hydrology and soil, of botany and weather.

Without the emergence yet of what Terry Gifford (Gifford, 1999, chapter six) calls a post-pastoral literature—such as Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard and James Galvin, for instance, have made in America—this very English, very countrysided approach to land has gone on and on in a continent where it is perhaps less likely to reveal and express the nature of the country itself than it is
anywhere else on earth. It has not allowed Australian places very much room to be found, to be witnessed, their music heard and expressed.

_Post-pastoralism_

A post-pastoral literature, already as old, according to Terry Gifford, as the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry Thoreau and D H Lawrence, seems to allow such a writing of the wild (ibid, pp 145 ff). The post-pastoral might be seen as a kind of lyric ecological realism. According to Gifford, its note is 'awe leading to humility'; it sees nature as neither kind nor dreadful, but as a cycle of creation and destruction that moves indifferently to human interests; it understands that nature runs through everything and that patterns of life repeat in all things; it sees nature as the author of culture; it knows that ecological awareness, gained inside nature's places, enjoins, in the poet, responsibility for nature's plight; and it understands that what we do to the earth we do to each other (ibid, pp 145 ff).

Pastoral, in other words, remains centred on human concerns, separate from nature. Nature is a theatre for human renewal. Post-pastoral is an ecocentric not an anthropocentric project. This kind of ecological imagining, this ecocentric project, this lyric and critical discourse, this speaking a word for nature itself, for nature's sake, is what nature writing essays. Though we can point to many beginnings, post-pastoral evolved most powerfully in North American nature writing; it began, really, with Henry David Thoreau and the transcendence of the pastoral imagination of the world.

In the middle of the nineteenth century in America, Whitman and Thoreau and others reinvented pastoral. They made a literature that did not so much use nature as speak for it. Indeed, they tried to let the places speak for themselves. They trod the ground, they inhabited for a reasonable time the places they spoke of; and they were reader, as Hopkins and Hardy were in England, to let the places do more of the talking. They gave birth, along with Dickinson and others, to a muscular pastoral, more interested in the wild than the tame; less concerned with escape from 'the real world' of the city than an entry into intimacy with the real wild world of nature—that vast order of life which contains all the rest, even the ways and places of men, but which might best be encountered among woods and fields and seashores.

Australian writing still awaits that kind of reinvention; Australian places still await the post-pastoral.

George Seddon has argued that the pastoral aesthetic held settlers in such sway that we made over large tracts of country to conform closely to its ideal landscape—lightly timbered grasslands, grazed by sheep and cattle—ignoring the needs and nature of local habitats at huge cost to us all (Seddon, 2003, p 7). And just as we have set about the pastoral makeover of Australian landscapes,
where we could, we have also transformed them imaginatively in much of our literature, have spoken of them as though they were pastoral idylls even though we knew, on the whole, they most certainly were not.

The pastoral mode lends a detached, though always sentimental, tone to many of the Australian books of nature. The pastoral is what much of the influential poetry and prose of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson is made of; and because of the influence of that work, it is what the dominant myth of the ‘real Australia’ is made of. It continues in the marketing of R M Williams country gear to city folks, as Seddon notes; in the way the country is made to look in Qantas commercials television travel shows and in the theme of the recent spate of television dramas, where the disenchanted city folks escape to the country or the coast in what is called (using the name of one such drama) a ‘sea change.’ And it colours much of the writing about country that has composed the bulk of our literature of place until recently.

What we idealise—the outside country, the grazier, the sheep, the bush—we also demonise. The pastoral—the arcadian—carries a shadow. We have also, in art and letters and life, demonised the landscape: made it home to demons and fearful things; have spoken endlessly of drought and fire as though the place were morally reprobate in visiting such unnatural events upon us. Sometimes in humour, sometimes in horror. This may be part of what is sometimes called the Boetian or Hesiodic tradition in writing (Seddon, 2003, p 10), where the writer gives a bleaker view—in satire, in horror, in an attempt at dirty realism—of the country. Seddon cites Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man*, Les Murray’s and Hal Porter’s poetry as exemplars, along with Dad and Dave. Pastoralism’s gloomy shadow lies, also, over the landscape of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and in the dark and melancholic landscapes of Frederick McCubbin. This is Arcadia gone bung—the arcadian underbelly, represented through satire or irony, horror or melancholy.

We have, one way and another, misconstrued the Australian landscape too often—frocked it up or dressed it down. We have had either pastoralism or anti-pastoralism. We have squeezed the land into ill-fitting templates, damning or idealising. This comes of seeing it from afar, out of city eyes, out of an imperial imagination, out of an urban sensibility. It has, to be fair, given us some good, even some great, literature. But it has not let the land be the land. Our pastoral and hesiodic literature does not stand still in Australian places just as they are, in the Dasein of encounter with them; it does not give engage just with their own authentic selves, their thingness; it makes them fit a template, an urban and escapist vision of land, born in Rome and carried here from London.

It is time for an Australian post-pastoral literature of place. We need, I think, to push pastoral beyond its tendency to make idylls in the image of English countryside; beyond its habit of escape, of idealisation or demonisation. Or else we need to leave the pastoral behind. We need a literature of lyric engagement with place. This post-pastoral might take from Thoreauvian pastoral its
eloquent nonconformity with urban values; its habit of schooling its diction in the pattern of the
place, not the conventions of polite (or impolite) speech in the metropolis; its attention to the
wildness of all things; its attempt at ecological imagination; its singing with the land. We need, in
other words, a new pastoral, true to and equal to the land itself, this land here, not some other.

We have tried to domesticate Australian places rather than to witness them, with words, for far
too long now. We have imagined them in a language, with an aesthetic, rooted in a small green
island, whose words are too soft for the task, are blunted by it, as the axes of the first settlers
were blunted by the hardness of the gums (A Hay, 2002, p 27). The trees and the soil from which
they grow, the unexpected affection of a sclerophyll landscape for drought and fire: all this has
defied the blunt instrument of the pastoral, cultivated, urbane prose we essayed upon it. For a
long time we have continued to see Australian places in writing as a visiting English person might,
used, as our language is used, to looking at made landscapes, domesticated vistas, fields and glens
and brooks; this is how we’ve made Australian places sound, though this is not how they are. And
many writers have done this, even when they did not think they were doing it. Quaint, weird,
grotesque, strange; or idyllic, magnificent, bountiful, pristine—these words and ideas recur, this
ingrained way of seeing what is here not for what it is but for how it strikes a sensibility, a set of
norms, seasoned in another place of very different dynamics. Arcadia or its baleful shadow.

This continent houses a set of exacting landscapes. They demand close attention. To live in them
you must understand their nature and put aside your preconception of how a place should be, as our
bushmen and pioneers have largely done, though most of their work has been taming and conquest.
Artists, too, have had to forget about the habits of oaks and pines. Words, even more than lines
and colours, perhaps, are freighted with human habits, with human culture specific to a certain
environment. And it has taken longer to find a grammar, a shape of phrase, a sound and rhythm, in
which less of England and Empire, more of these exacting, laconic, sclerophyll geographies,
sounds.

We have needed a way of seeing and of writing more open to wildness. A dissonance sets in, in
much of our place writing, between the places themselves and the language in which we evoke
them. Places and lifeforms within them seem somehow leached of their flesh and blood. We have
not often managed to set aside our attitudes, our human (our Australian) nature and entered into
their life. We have not written much from inside nature here.33

33 In appendix two, I survey the Australian nature writing we have written, using the categories of my revised
taxonomy of nature writing.
Decolonising nature

It is worth remembering that pastorals came to Australia out of England in a time of empire; and, as a result, pastoral's colonising, distorting effect, its capacity to emaciate or even miss entirely the very thing—the land's virtues—that it seeks, has run deep and long in our literature. In a new book, Decolonizing Nature, Martin Mulligan picks up on themes he and Stuart Hill developed in their optimistic study of Australian artistic and intellectual engagement with landscape, Ecological Pioneers—and argues that Australian poets, landscape painters, novelists, children's writers and others have been working in the last generation or so to develop what he calls a kind of political poiesis of deepened engagement with country. It was, as Mulligan acknowledges, Paul Carter who first proposed and anticipated a new ecocentric poiesis within Australian writing—born of the kind of deep and extra-rational engagement with land that I have been talking about here—to carry Australian culture beyond its colonial myopia toward a new intimacy and contact with Australian land (in Adams and Mulligan, 2003, pp 268–89). Mulligan sees the beginnings of that new poeticising of Australian places in Greg Borschmann's work The People's Forest (1999), for example, along with the fiction of Tim Winton, the poems of Judith Wright and elsewhere. But he acknowledges that we lie still far short of a literature that embodies a more grounded relationship with land. We are on the way there, but we have not yet written a 'white fella dreaming' or what David Foster has called 'eucalyptus dreaming' (ibid).

The colonising mindset and aesthetic Mulligan speaks of here, following Carter and Haynes, is that rational and rationalising, pastoral and pastoralising, tame and taming worldview Europeans brought here in their culture, its literature, agriculture and politics, out of European landscapes already disenchanted and heavily domesticated by the time of Australia's white settlement. The white men and women who settled Australia were, in Paul Carter's term, already 'rootless rationalists,' a people without a dreaming, without expectation that land might be lively or mysterious; that it might shape its people rather than merely be shaped by them (Carter, 1996, p 264). Maybe it is not too late to put down roots, to hear a dreaming in the land, to transcend a rational apprehension of place. That is what the literature of place essays, of course. That's why we need it.

If with our writing we have colonised nature in Australia for nearly two hundred years, perhaps at the start of this new millennium we are beginning to find a poetic stance within it, within these landscapes. We may be beginning to see and hear the land, to feel it beneath our feet, to know the nature of the space it makes around us as we engage with it (ibid). Attachment may be growing between an old land and its new people. We are just beginning to run wild in our apprehension and our prose of places—the more it is wildness we apprehend, the less tame our prose may become and the truer to local musics. Love is breaking out. To further our grounding in this place, we need
more than anything an outbreak of lyric nonfiction engaged with Australian country. If we are
going to get our (white) dreaming, we are going to need a literature of nature made up, at least in
part, of lyric essays. And they will catch, in theirs, the lyrics of these dynamic spaces we live
within.

The musical apprehension of places

It is time, Carter writes, for all artists, particularly the writers, to reimagine and renovate their
art. What he has in mind is that writers remember and recover in their writing ‘the earth’s
metrical qualities’ (ibid, p 5). Part of the colonising project of writing—in Australia, in the West
generally, and particularly in the British colonies—has been to imagine the writer’s function as
a standing still and looking at an immobile, silent new land; to imagine the artist’s work then as a
laying down of some mimesis, a replica of the objectified land in painterly or writerly lines. Art
in western imagination, Carter argues, has largely aimed to represent landscape. And it has mostly
been a matter or seeing and rendering a visual likeness—made of descriptive words or lines and
shapes and forms on canvas or paper. Colonisation has proceeded in Australia, Carter argues, by
mimesis. He sees the writers ‘mesmerized by walls of lines and symmetrical paragraphs,’ imagining
their engagement with land according to Western imperial convention, and so missing the country
entirely (ibid).

Even within the Western tradition of thought and poetry, Carter demonstrates, there lies another
understanding of the artistic enterprise. A writer with that conception of the writer’s work
attends to the ‘amplitude,’ the dynamic spatial quality of reality beyond the writerly subject, as it
manifests here, where she moves and notices. The writer, in this tradition, does not aim merely to
see places, therefore, but to experience them through all the senses—particularly that of hearing
since hearing discerns the vibrations, the movements of air which articulate amplitude—as living,
turbulent entities, full of movement, never still. Such an artist conceptualises places as auditory
spaces, not merely visual ones; and he or she understands that the artist is there not to make a
representation of the place in the ‘silent signs’ that letters might otherwise be, but rather to
sound out of the nature of the space with which the writer engages, to voice this dynamic space
of which the writer’s mobile, breathing, speaking presence, and his or her words become a
part—unravelling and making themselves up (those words) like the place, in the pattern of their
coming into being, in their expression, in the writing down and the speaking out (ibid,
p 331).

Such metrical, musical apprehension attends to the whole interplay of forces and movements
within a place rather than fixing on some of its individual objects. A writing such as this,
attendant to the musical reality of places, feeling as well as seeing habitats and ecosystems, and
so connecting with them, may seem to remain at one level a representation of place, but a
representation doing its work as much in its sounds as in its symbols and lines—in its music. And the world it represents will seem to remain alive in the work, through the music of the place caught and expressed in the work. But such a work of letters will also, in Carter’s conception, do more than merely represent a landscape; it will engage with it, dance with it, talk with it, sing with it, move within it—and we will understand it best as that engagement, as a dance with place, an expression of a relationship with it, something arising from the ground between the subject and the place, which, in that work, become one and the same (ibid, p 301).

A writer goes about this poetic engagement with place not simply by listening to and recording its sounds—waves on shore, birdsong, jet’s passage, child’s voice, footfall, rain’s fall on tin roof, and so on. Certainly, coming to know a place as an auditory space will help a writer attend to it more than merely visually—as backdrop or scene, as object. It may help the writer to hear a place, literally, and that will open it up to him or her, deepen his or her engagement with it. But Carter does not propose merely that the writer substitute their ears for their eyes, listening for seeing. He proposes a way of being present, of participating in and apprehending places, and it begins with a new imagination of the nature of place as dynamic space.

And then it proposes not that the writer stand and stare, but that they step into and through a landscape, dancing with the relationships and multiple viewpoints, multidirectional flows of life, that compose it. Stepping—that, according to Carter, is the thing to do. You must move through a place on foot and in mind. You must try to experience it dynamically, all its parts in interrelationship, though most of them will elude you, and with your moving body. Write the nature of the ground, the air, the imaginal distance, between you and all these other inhabitants of a landscape, and among them all. The task, writes Carter, drawing on the work of J J Gibson, is to become a mobile observer; to imagine, to experience, the actual world here dynamically, its lively, interactive fragments; and never from a single, fixed position (ibid, pp 303–04).

A counter-tradition in Western art, writes Carter, transfers attention from the separate objects in view, from the foot and the ground, to the space they all share, they all make; to the ground in between (ibid, p 303). Carter advocates that kind of perception for poets, for writers. One must fragment one’s apprehension, one’s noticing, one’s being and engage with place from many points of view, recording not only those many different perspectives, but implying at least the nature of many of the kinds of relationship of part to part and part to whole that compose this place and texture its space. A writer who perceives place like this, Carter writes, ‘borrows from the facts of auditory perception in order to rescue seeing from the reductionist cast of “visualist thinking,” reinserting it [seeing] into its naturally mobile setting,’ (ibid, p 303) and enlivening that place in one’s words, one’s words with that place.
It follows that such a way of perceiving and writing begins to imagine ecologically, attending as it does to the relationships that hold between the pieces that compose a piece of actual earth; it imagines ecocentrically, since it attempts to perceive a place from many viewpoints, some of them even nonhuman. It is also to experience and portray space as though it were alive and interconnected, like a soundscape—not still and alienated from oneself, like a sightscape. It is to place oneself within a place, part of it, subject to its influence from all of its many directions.

'We are always at the edge of visual space looking into it with the eye,' writes R Murray Schafer in his essay 'Acoustic space'. 'But we are always at the center of auditory space listening out with the ear ... [A]ural awareness is omnidirectionally centered' (Schafer, 2000, p 94). It is ecocentrically disposed.

We might understand this musical engagement with place, of course, as the lyric stance (though 'stance' here sounds suddenly too static). That—the lyric—is the alternative artistic tradition, represented, for example by Rilke and Thoreau, that Carter alludes to. And though prose is not, strictly, capable of metrics, it is, as I have suggested, capable of rhythm and loose music; so it too might do the work of musical engagement, the stepping out, the dance of listening, Carter envisages.

Carter draws on the thinking of phenomenologists of music—F Joseph Smith, The Experiencing of Musical Sound (1979), and Don Ihde, Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound, 1976—to explore and explain the idea of auditory space; the nature of listening; the articulation of space performed by sound, by music, by auditory imagination, and by the musical qualities of language, at least when that language is poetic (Ihde, 1976, p 169). Later, in my reading of Jim Galvin's work, I refer also to the earlier writing of Victor Zuckerkandl, in Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World (1956). Only when I had come to the end of this book and sat to write my conclusion, did I come across David Rothenberg at a conference in Queensland; I encountered him in music and conversation; and then I read his book Sudden Music (2002). Rothenberg, philosopher, writer and musician, ecologist, makes the plainest and most elegant exposition of the ways sound, listening, music-making and chanted story connect us to the deep, animate reality of the earth; and his narrative is also the most compelling because music is his practice. These other writers to whom Carter does not refer add to the chorus of the phenomenology of sound, music, song and poetry begun by Merleau-Ponty, who also famously asserted that to speak is first of all 'to sing the world' (See Ihde, 1976, p 157).

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34 See my chapter 'The essential prose of things'.

35 See also my chapter 'The real world,' where I say more about musical apprehension in poetry and prose.
The phenomenologists, and above all Carter and Rothenberg, help us understand how fundamentally different visual apprehension and expression are from auditory or musical apprehension and expression. To hear something is to be joined to it, since the sound of it reaches a listener without leaving the maker—for example, the sound of the waves I can hear now, or the sound of a chamber group in performance. We are both one with the sound. It joins us. It belongs to both of us. Listening gives amplitude, form, sensuous reality to the space in which the music occurs. And our relationship is dynamic because our sharing the sound depends upon its continuing to be sung or played or whatever; and because sound, voice and music, to be heard, depend on movement through air, or space. The music’s passage makes lively the very space through which it passes—a space that now both listener and maker share. On the other hand, to see something is to experience separation from it. That object sits there, and I see it from here. My seeing it confirms its separateness from me. On top of that, the relationship seeing makes is not lively in the way that the musical relationship is. The space between subject and object is silent and still.

Seeing things takes us to the parts and keeps the parts distinct; hearing things takes us to the whole, places us in our environment, and connects the parts that compose a place.

To engage with space musically is to do what one does when listening, to experience space as though it were lively as it is when it is all sound. But it is not just about listening and actual sound. He is talking about a way of being present and a way of imagining the place in which one is, in that way, present. So to engage musically with a place—to hear it, to attend to the dynamic relationships, fast as the flight of an insect, slow as geology, at play in it—is to join that place and all its parts, to know it, to connect with it. ‘Musical engagement’ here means not just listening to actual sounds; it means imagining a place as a living entity, alive with relationships, with movement fast and slow, with passages of song and interaction, with violence and death and birth, with energy moving through matter and air. To convey that in your work’s music is not just to write of your own engagement with place, nor is it just to sing the space to life for your reader; it is to encompass the reader, too, in the dynamic space sounded out by your writing, by its patterns of sound, its dance of phrases, as long as their reading of your text—while the music it makes in their ears and imagination—lasts.

For Carter, just as land clearance and surveying rendered new lands comprehensible, tame, inhabitable—colonised; so visualist apprehension of them, traditional representations of Australian landscapes in art and letters, also colonised them. Such linear, visualist thinking about art and place precluded real engagement with real places; and the art that resulted often failed even to represent them truly. This was because the dynamic reality, the music (heard and metaphorical) of these places, their true spatial texture, their soundscapes did not and could never enter such texts in the way that they enter and find expression in Indigenous song and dance and speech. Such art
ignored the vibrant, particular, mobile quality of the space in which the seen-things breathed and moved. It missed the land’s amplitude. It saw the forest but it did not experience the way its many trees moved in the wind nor the way they had migrated and evolved through geological time, through Dreamtime, to stand just so on that ridge.

Carter notes how often in our artistic or exploratory dealings with the land we have called it silent (Carter, 1996, p. 7). All along we seemed to know we should be doing more than seeing it. Maybe we did not know, for a long time, how to hear. Rather than learn to listen, we called it silent. Or perhaps, as Carter writes, the colonial project, aligned with the dominant Western artistic paradigm, held even the artists and poets in thrall; and that project ascribed silence and deadness to colonised landscapes, because that helped justify an art and an occupation, whose high purpose was to make the place articulate, meaningful (ibid, pp 6–7).

Many Australian writers, painters and musicians have long transcended the limits of visualist imagination. Peter Sculthorpe, David Malouf, Mandy Martin, Patrick White to some degree, Judith Wright, Robert Gray and other poets, and the anthropologist Strehlow, whose work Carter himself explores. It would be a mistake to read Carter’s critique as a condemnation of all European-Australian artistic engagement with place. Mulligan, as I have noted, sees a new era of poetic apprehension of place dawning. But I find in Carter’s thought a way of understanding the predominant failure of Australian writing to engage ecologically and to express truly the nature of Australian places—even when it has been trying hard to perceive and render truthfully. It has looked, but it has rarely seen; and it has forgotten to listen and dance. Carter’s thought, I hope, may choreograph a new approach to landscape among our writers—lyric and therefore post-pastoral; decolonised and ecological. It is time, indeed, for the kind of lyric engagement with land indigenous peoples have been making in dance and song and way of life for perhaps one hundred thousand years.

If Mulligan is right that we are beginning to perceive poetically and write the land through a decolonised gaze, I am sure Barnard Eldershaw and Judith Wright would warn that we may have some way to go; that we must not presume upon the land’s love just yet. We are still in the predawn. The land is still dark to us. We have been very slow to give her body the love she warranted from the start, slow to hear the mournful, sweet and angular music playing beneath what seemed like silence. When we, latecomers to this place, strike the right notes in our writing of the country, the great land will no longer seem silent to us, as it has seemed to so many writers and as it has been in their writing; and its musics will sound in our writing as they have always sounded in the voices, languages, stories and songs of the first peoples.
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning the following pages. The best possible results have been obtained.
This study is a work of ecocriticism. It takes ‘an ecological approach to literature’ (Glottfely and Fromm, 1996, p xv); it concerns itself with literature that concerns itself with nature, place and ecology; in its reading of literature, it gives weight to natural history and to place—to weather, geology, light, hydrology, botany and biology as they manifest in the author’s or the text’s native place—in the same way that traditional readings of literature give weight to economic history, political science, class, gender, parental and cultural influences, psychology and sexual experience as they bear on the author; it wonders about the relationship between landscape and the production of literature (specifically, the connection between particular places and works that speak of, and out of, them); it imagines literature as an activity of some human beings that takes place within a world of influences, subject matters and concerns not merely human; it
explores ways in which a work of literature—in particular, a piece of nature writing—might be said to bear traces of the place it studies, might even be said to resemble, express and belong to that place in the same way that, say, an indigenous tree, a local dialect or a characteristic light does. It studies literature as though nature really mattered, as though place really mattered. It looks at writing in the context of evolution, biology and geography, not just of the disciplines of the social realm. It is a work of ecocriticism, for these, among other things, are the concerns and approaches of ecocriticism.

Broadly, ecocritics bring the ideas of ecology to bear on the study of literary texts, not only nature writing. In a book that assembled many of the pioneering works of ecocriticism and helped establish it as a field, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism this way: ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p xviii). She elaborates: ‘[j]ust as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies’ (ibid). And further to distinguish this new field of literary study from others, both traditional and modern, Glotfelty explains: ‘Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society—the social realm. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere’ (ibid, p xix). If you surveyed the literature of literary criticism of the late twentieth century, she observes, though you would see that matters of class, ethnicity, politics and gender were taken very seriously, you would find hardly a reference to the earth. ‘Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all’ (ibid, p xvi). This is the failure—the failure to remember the earth and consider its bearing on writing, writing’s bearing on it—that ecocriticism, in its many ways, addresses.

The evolution of ecocriticism

Ecocriticism has not been with us long. It arose out of the awakening in the 1970s of awareness about the environmental crisis, and the elaboration and widening influence of ecological thought in science, philosophy and politics. It was only a matter of time before some literary scholars drew on these concerns and ideas and sought to study literature and its relationship with the world in a larger ecological context. ‘Ecocriticism’ as a term was first used by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’ (Rueckert, 1978). That essay proposes, among other rich notions, the idea that poems might be seen as green plants, gathering, converting and expressing creative energy, helping perpetuate wisdom, generative and regenerative conduits of language and imagination; and it reflected that works like Moby-Dick, Walden and Leaves of Grass, though we have missed this through reading them too narrowly, describe and embody much of the wisdom ecology teaches about how mankind is caught up in
the web of all life. Rueckert applied some 'ecological concepts to the study of literature,' and so began the remembering of the earth in the criticism of cultural products such as works of words. That, in essence, is the ecocritical project.

But why has traditional literary criticism so long ignored the actual earth, the nonhuman parts of it particularly? Why is it such a large step for a literary critic to take account of the natural history of a piece of writing? Kate Rigby, the Australian ecocritic, provides this explanation:

Although the practice of criticism has ancient origins in the exegesis of biblical and classical Greek texts, modern literary criticism only began to be institutionalized as an academic discipline in the early nineteenth century. This was precisely the time when a rigid separation began to be drawn between the 'natural' and the 'human' sciences. This is a divide that few literary critics and cultural theorists have dared to cross, until recently. The compartmentalization of knowledge effected by this divide is central to what Bruno Latour (1993) terms the 'Modern Constitution', which sunders the human from the non-human realm, while defining society's relationship to nature predominantly in terms of mastery and possession ... Thus, to regain a sense of the inextricability of nature and culture, *physia* and *techne*, earth and artefact—consumption and destruction—would be to move beyond both the impasse of modernism and the arrogance of humanism.


From the beginning of modern literary criticism, then, nature has been excluded, and writing has been viewed as though it arose out of the human realm, abstracted, as this critical stance is also abstracted, from the real world. Critics, like John Burroughs and Ralph Waldo Emerson, working outside the academy, did not forget nature in their criticism. David Mazel's book details a long tradition of ecocritical thinking, reaching back also to the 1860s, just after the point at which Rigby locates the schism between text and world in the academy; but nearly all that nature-oriented criticism proceeded outside the universities (Mazel, 2001, pp 1-3). By the close of the twentieth century it has grown late and near impossible to turn one's academic gaze from the world and its crisis. It is that crisis that is emboldening critics like Kate Rigby to bridge the divide between nature and culture, just as the nature writers have been attempting to bridge it for a century and a half.


Nature writing itself burgeoned in the 1980s, also part of the environmental awakening; and interest blossomed, among scholars, in the whole genre of ecological literature. Dissatisfaction with the exclusion of nature writing—poetry and nonfiction, in particular—from the canon of works studied seriously in universities; and with the perfunctory treatment of place and natural history in the study of literature of all kinds, led to the foundation in October 1992, at the annual conference of the Western Literature Association in Nevada, Reno, of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). Scott Slovic was elected its first president. It was ASLE, as Buell observes, that ‘put the term "ecocriticism" into circulation,’ where it has stayed. Indeed, it is suddenly, he adds, acquiring the look of a ‘major critical insurgency’ (Buell, 1999, p. 699).

Ecocriticism began in the 1990s, as Lawrence Buell notes in his introductory essay to an issue, published in 1999, of *New Literary History*, given over to debate about the field (ibid). A glance at the notes to the essays in that collection or the bibliography of any of the major books also confirms how much has been published in the field in the 1990s, and how little before. The movement has spawned schools and chairs of Literature and Environment and a growing body of writing. It is still young, though energetic, and its influence on literary studies and the humanities more broadly lies ahead.

There is an argument that ecocriticism, without the name, has been around much longer. Taking as his definition these words—‘the study of literature as if the environment mattered’—David Mazel traces ecocriticism back as far as 1864 and right the way through to the present ‘distinct critical enterprise,’ that works under that name (Mazel, 2001, p. 1). His book sketches for ecocriticism a longer history than Glotfelty, Buell and others suggest. He discovers a well-established tradition of such thinking about earth and literature, although mostly outside the academy. His book reminds us that consideration of the connection between landscape and language is not entirely new—reflection, for example, upon the ways in which a poet might shape words to ‘produce effects analogous to those produced’ by earth, as Burroughs said of Whitman. Such ecocritical considerations are not new, and they have endured, to be taken forward now by literary scholars, even while the academy steadily ignored such matters, and the earth itself, until the last decade or so of the last century. Buell, too, has recently sought to remind us that ecocriticism its has roots in the serious critical analysis of wilderness and nature literature that has been carried on for over a century (Buell, 1999, p. 699).
Like the literature it studies, ecocriticism defies categorisation, and it lacks, as Buell notes, a ‘field-defining statement’ (ibid, p 700). Still, the kind of questions it asks are becoming clear from the growing number of books that appear in the field, and from the articles that ASLE’s journal ISLE publishes. I have rehearsed many of them in my opening. Cheryll Glotfelter elaborates some of them, including these: ‘How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category’ (Glotfelter and Fromm, 1996, p xix)?

Other questions, which concern the theorists Glen Love and Joseph Carroll, for instance, relate to how we can understand literature as a biological phenomenon, a strategy of human survival—the getting and expressing of wisdom, for instance—in evolution; how literary scholarship might learn from ecology, geography and other earth sciences. SueEllen Campbell and many others, including Love and Carroll, are seeking ways of reconciling deep ecological philosophies and contemporary literary theory. Still others, such as Gary Snyder and David Abram, wonder about the natural history of language itself, how it might be said to come from the land itself, and so be only partially a human artifact or cultural creation.

Back in 1978, Neil Evernden noted that ecology, ‘the subversive science,’ challenged theorists in the humanities to see the artist, to see any human being, not as discrete from, but as ‘intermingled with’ their environment. The aesthetic experience of apprehending and responding to the world, wrote Evernden, would lie, according to ecology ‘in the relationship between the individual and the environment, not simply in the object viewed, not in the mind of the viewer.’ He suggested, drawing further on ecology, that we begin to understand the artist in a place as suffused with and diffused within that place; and consider the aesthetic relationship between writer and place as a process, reciprocal and interrelated, at play between them (Evernden, 1978, pp 97, 99, 101). This is thinking that has led other ecocritics—I am one, I suppose; Paul Carter is another—to think about the ways in which humans, artists in particular, might be said to carry into their aesthetic encounters with the places of the world, with the nonhuman parts of creation, something other than a egocentric or an anthropocentric way of seeing; and carry out something other than a merely personal account. Many scholars have grown increasingly interested in the notion and practice of ecological imagination (something like Evernden’s idea), and of ecological identity—especially, Joanna Macy, in her World as Lover, World as Self (1991) and Freya Matthews in her The Ecological Self (1991).

Scott Slovic has pioneered the application of psychology to environmental writing, exploring in his essay ‘Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology’ (1992b) and in his book Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing (1992a) what he calls ‘the interiority of outdoor experience,’
and suggesting challengingly that nature writing explores not so much nature as the nature of human (environmental) awareness.35

These concerns run off in different directions, sometimes threatening rift; but they all flow, complexly, within the same catchment. They all take nature seriously; they are all concerned with relating literature and the natural world in an era of ecological crisis. At the heart of all ecocriticism's concerns—and touching on many of these other matters—lie two related questions, which concern my inquiry into the nature of nature writing, particularly. First, how does the place influence the text; how does the natural history of a work—the form in which nature is manifest in a place to which the author is attached or to which their work bears witness—shape the writing? If place shapes text then perhaps the writing may be said to express the place, or to 'bear traces' of it, as Buell puts it. Which leads to the second question—what capacity does a work of literature have to articulate place, landscape, the world beyond the purely human? As Lawrence Buell puts it, the question that chiefly concerns him as a literary critic and teacher is 'literature's capacity for articulating the nonhuman environment' (Buell, 1995, p 10).

These are the questions most hotly debated in the 1999 issue of *The New Literary History*, edited by Buell, and dedicated to ecocriticism. And they are central to *Writing the Wild*. They ponder the nature of, and possible reciprocity at play within, the relationship between the solid earth and the terrain of the text that refers to it. Whereas contemporary literary theory has sundered the relationship between the text and the world, ecocritics have sought to restore it.

*The text and the world*

Ecocriticism takes seriously the idea that the environments—places, geographies, nonhuman elements—in which writing occurs shape them, particularly when texts consciously turn to nature for subject matter and schooling in morality and aesthetics. Buell puts it this way: 'Given that human beings are inescapably biohistorical creatures who construct themselves, at least partially, through encounter with physical environments they cannot not inhabit, any artifact of imagination may be expected to bear traces of that' (Buell, 1999, p 699). Ecocriticism contests the idea, dominant in literary theory since the 1970s, that works of literature, as cultural productions made by a person, represent, carry traces only of the psychology, self, and memory of the author; that text and its environment are utterly disjunct. Texts are to be read as comments on, representations

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35 Although mine is not an inquiry into consciousness like Slovic's, perhaps I am, from a set of quite different standpoints (not environmental psychology but phenomenology, linguistic and music theory, and place studies), exploring just the same relationship he was—that between the human mind (and the works it makes) and the nonhuman world, specifically as that relationship is practised in what I am calling a nature writer's witness, their imaginative engagement with place. In a sense, too, my concern is Slovic's turned inside out—the exteriority of the very indoor experience of writing authentic witnesses of place, that is, the ways in which place may be said to touch mind and text and fashion imagination and awareness themselves.
of, the mind of their maker.37 Places and nonhuman elements within them matter only as setting and perhaps metaphor for human thought and action. The place does not speak in the book, since places have no language, certainly not the language the author uses in the book, which is his or her language and speaks only of him or her. Language itself is a human product embodying only human thought. Contemporary literary theory has had no room in recent times for the idea that something of the nature and genius of Walden Pond might express itself in Walden, or that a reading of the book might be deepened by some knowledge or investigation of the place and plants—as well as the person—it depicts (Buell, 1995, p 5).

One of the founders of ecocritical thought, Glen A Love has recently encouraged ecocritics to turn seriously to evolutionary biology for an account of the work humans engage in when they write. We write, he argues, not just as our human selves—out of culture and psychology—but as living beings who have evolved with others amid changing landscapes. We write out of biology, out of nature, out of creaturely habit. All of what has made us what we are, including the places we are grounded in, speaks through what we imagine to be the personal cultural artifacts we make with 'our' words (ibid). Love rest's his argument for a new literary theory on an attack upon conventional, poststructural literary thought. And he turns to another pioneer in ecocriticism, Joseph Carroll, for a strident statement of the limits of the dominant poststructuralist paradigm in literary thought. In his 1995 book, Evolution and Literary Theory, Carroll wrote:

[T]he rich world of experience within reality has been emptied out, and in its place we have been given a thin and hectic play of self-reflexive linguistic functions. This is a dreary and impoverished vision of life and literature; worse, it is a gratuitous and false vision. It depletes the world, and in order to accomplish its depletion, it gives a false account of our experience in the world.

—Carroll, 1995, p 466

Impatience, such as Carroll articulates, with the reductive and emaciating readings contemporary literary theory makes of texts gave birth to ecocriticism and colours many of its statements. In an article he wrote for The New York Times magazine in 1995, Jay Parini, a professor of literature at Middlebury College, celebrated the emergence of a new kind of literary critique in ecocriticism.

'It...signals a dismissal of theory's more solipsistic tendencies,' he wrote. 'From a literal aspect, it marks a re-engagement with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees and rivers that lies behind the wilderness of signs.' (Parini, 1995, p 52, in Phillips, 1999, 578–79).

37 Poststructural theory, as I have outlined in chapter 3, goes further, to the point of reducing every work to a text to be understood only in terms of its own textuality, whose only reliable references are intratextual; and the meaning that counts is that which arises for the reader. This is the product of a worldview that sees all perceived things as culturally constructed, made, in a sense, by the perceiver. SueEllen Campbell summarises 'theory' sympathetically but critically in her essay 'The Land and Language of Desire,' in Glorilely and Fromm's The Ecocriticism Reader, 1996, p 124. I will have more to say in the pages that follow on this more extreme edge of theory, expanding what I began in chapter 3.
Ecocritics often point to a practical matter—the increasing removal of most of us from much direct encounter with the rest of creation—when they advocate an emplaced, nature-literate reading of texts; when they argue that a text might be seen as representing part of the world outside the minds and words of men. Most people reading books have a scant and diminishing acquaintance with the natural world. What Buell calls ‘the loss of a culture of reciprocity with the natural environment’ among readers, teachers and all of us in an urbanising world has attenuated the nature literacy that writer and reader and critic bring to the understanding of a text. Writing and reading on that basis is likely to be poorer and indeed inadequate, the ecocritic argues. Shakespeare’s and Frost’s sense of the living world was clearly profound, for instance; so too Whitman’s, Dickinson’s, Thoreau’s, Hardy’s, Tolkien’s, Wordsworth’s, Hopkins’ and so on. Their experience of nature enriches their texts and gives them meanings that will escape us unless we bother to think about—or happen to be acquainted with—the nature of the species of plant and animal, the climatic events, they mention. Ecocritics, for these reasons, argue for readings of texts that consider—and so, research or perhaps even visit—the geography of a piece of writing.

Beyond this important practical matter, however, lies the theoretical dispute, the philosophical opposition, as SueEllen Campbell refers to it, between ecocritics and other literary theorists concerning the capacity of a text (a work in symbols on screen or paper, the result of an author’s imaginative effort) to ‘represent physical reality,’ with any integrity. ‘In contemporary literary theory,’ writes Buell, ‘... the capacity of literary writers to render a faithful mimesis of the object world is reckoned indifferent at best, and their interest in doing so is thought to be a secondary concern’ (Buell, 1995, p 84). Literary theory has emphasised the fact of a text’s disjunction from the world it depicts, and has tended to imagine that a writer’s motivations for any such rendering of the world beyond himself or beyond the human would have to do with an aesthetic effect he or she wanted to create, the ideological purpose, the political or ‘social allegiance or commitment’ of the author and/or their text (Buell, 1995, p 86). Contemporary literary analysis has emphasised the power of culture over authorial imagination and intention; has largely discredited or ignored the influence of nature; and yet, paradoxically, has seen writers as creators of worlds, not depictors. ‘All major strains of contemporary literary theory,’ Buell goes on, ‘have marginalized literature’s referential dimension by privileging structure, textuality, ideology, or some other matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual “reality”...’ (ibid, p 86).38

These contemporary theoretical ideas about writing have value, as Buell notes. The text is not of course the thing. It is worth asking ourselves what agendas a writer may have. And as SueEllen Campbell notes, nature writers share with theorists the belief that the witness of a place is part

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38 I have noted in ‘The essential prose of things’ how Buell explains the ascendency of this idea in terms of the ascendency of fiction in literary studies, which has given rise to the idea that all writing constructs worlds.
of the place, part of what she witnesses. Our being there counts; the manner of our engagement counts too. But the combination of factors here—the treatment of all literature as fictive and artifactual; the reduction of meaning to textuality and subjectivity; the rejection of all other influences on a work except for the human, the cognitive and the private; the banishment of natural history from literary analysis; and the fact that few of us, especially among literary scholars, have much to do with nature or places anymore—have led to position, as Glotfelty noted in the passage I quoted earlier, where one would not know from literary analysis that there was indeed a world of actual earth beyond the pages of books written, apparently, in utter abstraction. The result is that the body, biology, weather, landform, the actual world disappear from view entirely; and we are left with what is clearly a diminished—if in some sense pure and radical—understanding of writing; and an utterly impoverished comprehension of the world. 'The disjunction of text and world' that has followed, 'seems overblown,' concludes Buell. To suggest such a disjunction is to contribute something to a mature reading of a text, he adds, but the idea has hardened into something like a dogma that helps deepen the effacement of the world—its retreat from the reader's notice both within and without the text (ibid, p 5).

**Toward a natural construction of culture**

Ecocritics have been troubled by the contention—a basic tenet of postmodernism and poststructuralism, according to Dana Phillips—that nature itself is constructed by culture, an idealistic, anthropocentric and overstated idea amounting, says Phillips, to hubris (Phillips, 1999, p 578). The idea draws a reader's attention to the human habit of defining landscapes in terms of culturally, socially acquired notions of what is useful, familiar, pleasing, fashionable. In this respect, the idea has value. I have noted SueEllen Campbell's acknowledgment that ecologists and theorists share some ground here. Both reject the notion of objectivity. Both agree that every 'reading' of a place is 'situated' (Campbell, 1989, p 129). Campbell quotes Barry Lopez, who concedes, in *Arctic Dreams*, that each of us understands the same landscape differently 'according to his cultural predispositions and personality' (Lopez, 1986, pp 243–44, in Campbell, 1989, p 129). But for the ecologist or nature writer, the land in its manifestations, its many places, holds onto an integrity, a reality, that does not depend upon our reading of it; which is larger and older and truer than anything we may make of it, and which, indeed, works its effects upon us, (if we let it, and even if we don't) since we are part of it. Land influences and shapes us, and so, with us, it makes meaning. Poststructural theory may have pushed an interesting, valid idea too far; so that the notion has spread and taken hold with the force of dogma among many cultural critics, students

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39 SueEllen Campbell, 'The Land and Language of Desire,' in Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p 129. The difference, as Campbell notes, is that the nature writer locates agency in meaning-making to nature and to the nature of the relationship, to some degree, we make with land; the theorist locates it in the human mind.
and cultural commentators that human beings have somehow shaped and created all landscapes, and continue to do so just by looking at them.

The ecocritic and the nature writer would argue—though Phillips suggests few have tried hard enough—that whatever use I make of it imaginatively, whatever interpretation I place on it, however I may choose to speak of it, the valley of the Kedumba, for instance, and all the life that comprises it, is not my creation and exists autonomously of me, goes on without me, cares little for what I make of it. It results from billions of years of evolving life—the shift of tectonic plates, the work of erosion, the emergence of organic life, the rise and fall of global temperatures, the coming of men and women, their firing of forests, their stories, their farms and industries. Its life includes mine. Nature runs through culture and its creations, no matter what we do to separate ourselves from it. While I live and breathe, nature lives in me. My words depend upon it.

SueEllen Campbell describes the fundamental disagreement about linguistic and cultural construction of nature between the ecologists (among them nature writers and ecocritics) on the one hand and the theorists on the other as the ‘opposition between idealism and realism’ (Campbell, 1989, p 130). The nature writers and ecocritics insist upon the hard material reality of an earth that contains also our thinking, feeling, languaging bodies; the literary theorist ‘like an idealist thinks the world into being’ (ibid). The ecocritic insists that everything is not in fact a text—that that idea, interesting and useful up to a point, pushes a metaphor to the point of absurdity.

Dana Phillips—an ecocritic but also an internal critic of what he sees as the field’s weakness—shares ecocriticism’s rejection of the nature-as-cultural-construction theory, but he chides ecocritics for their more general dismissal of theory and for the want of intellectual rigour he believes characterises ecocriticism’s own reading of literature and its links to landscape.

‘[T]hey often treat literary theory as if it were a noxious weed that must be suppressed before it overwhelms more native and greener forms of speech. The result is not so much a new kind of blessedly untheoretical discourse as it is a discourse propped up here and there by some distinctly shaky theory’ (Phillips, 1999, p 578 and passim).

The metaphysics of representation

The particular theoretical weakness Phillips points to lies in the account ecocritics attempt to make of how nature, beyond the author’s own nature, gets into literary texts. Against the ‘antimimeticism’ of the prevalent academic account of literature, many ecocritics, like Buell, acknowledge the agency of place on an author’s character and writing, allow that it colours prose and believe that it—nature, that is, landscape, plant and animal life, weather and geology—gets represented in texts, particularly those of nature writers, but, by definition, in all texts, since place informs us all and affects our way of seeing and composing sentences. This tough theoretical
matter is what Buell calls 'the ancient question of the mimetic status of literary texts, the
relation of image to world' (Buell, 1999, p 706). It is the central controversy among ecocritics and
between ecocriticism and other literary theorists. If we accept, as we must, that the image is
not the thing, the text is not the world (even when it speaks mostly of the world), then are we
allowed to assume that anything outside the text enters it in some way? May we read a text as
having any outer mimesis—reference and likeness to anything beyond the mind of the writer and
the text she creates—at all? Can, in a word, text represent place? And if so, what explanation
can we offer of how this happens? Phillips rather disdainfully refers to 'the metaphysics of
representation' that he thinks is required to bridge the gulf between the text (as cultural artifact)
and the world (uninterpreted actuality of things, that is, nature).

Phillips offers a harsh critique of John Elder's approach to that metaphysics in Imagining the Earth.
Elder writes, 'Poetry becomes a manifestation of landscape and climate, just as the ecosystem's
flora and fauna are. A human voice becomes the voice of a place' (Elder, 1996, p 39). This argument
of Elder's goes farther than some ecocritics, such as Buell, are happy to go in the argument for
the agency of places. It has the place, in a sense, writing the text (though Elder very carefully
acknowledges the intermediation of the author). Phillips responds: 'Poetry is not a "manifestation"
of anything, apart from the conscious decisions and unconscious motivations of poets, and the
structural and aesthetic effects of the genres and languages in which they write. To suppose
otherwise is occult.' (Phillips, 1999, p 58) There we have the two poles of debate.

If place gets into the prose and manifests in some way; if the text is a product not just of a man or
woman but of a place (via that man or woman within it); if an author can somehow bridge the
distance between text and living world, how does one explain this process? Elder is saying that
the locality finds expression in many ways, including the species it 'speaks' forth, the vernacular
speech of local people, and the text of an author attentive to, present within, it. He says that the
place—understood as the complex geography, always still evolving, that is itself the product of
long ages of shaping—yields the prose; and that the prose, in that sense contains and speaks the
place. How? To begin to see how this might happen I think you must put aside the dogmas about
the exclusively human origins of language and the understanding of writing as an entirely personal
and purposive activity, which Phillips repeats in his criticism. Indeed, one also needs to imagine
the rest of creation as having a life independent of our human apprehension of it; and the act
of witnessing it as in some way reciprocal—not just the reading of something mute, but an
engagement with lively space, a breathing, articulate community of other subjects. This is where
Phillips, along with many other literary critics, pulls up short. Others are prepared, like Elder, to
locate some responsibility for 'the aesthetic effects,' for the nature of a writer's text outside the
writer's own 'self' and body; to find influences upon a book or poem among all the energetic forces
alive in a place, including the author and all that makes him who he is, all the encounters between
his body and the world that daily, moment by moment, make him up. To support his case, Elder
appeals to the science of evolutionary biology, specifically to Ernst Mayr's notion of 'allopatric speciation,' which refers to the way that 'a given landscape's character has evolutionary influence fully equal to that of intra- or interspecies competition' (Elder, 1996, p 39). The author herself, and therefore also her prose or poetry might evolve under the influence of a particular locale in this way, Elder argues, and so her writing expresses the character of a particular landscape in the same way an endemic tree or animal species does; in the same way a local dialect of human language does.

It follows from Elder's approach to literature that knowing—and better still, experiencing—something about the place the writing is grounded in will enlarge a reader's understanding of the text; for it will take a reader to characteristics one might expect to find expressed in the text. The place will be represented in the writer's work as the kind of trace elements Buell refers to, evident in the structure and diction of the writing. The writing speaks of the place in this way, it embodies and repeats something of its nature, just as it speaks of many other factors that may have shaped the writer's life. And since place may be the largest and most encompassing of these factors, it ought to be not marginal but central to any analysis of a text. Elder argues expressly that knowing something of a work's natural history—and again, even better to go and experience it, if you can, in your body, through your senses—will help a reader understand its texture and meaning (Elder, 1996, passim; Elder, 1999). Even Phillips seems content to allow that a little specific nature-literacy (about the place in which the work was born or written or to which it relates) would improve the reading of a nature poem or essay (Phillips, 1999, p 578).

The point of difference between Elder and Phillips lies, I suppose, in the different connotations of 'manifest.' No one would imagine that a poem reproduces, or produces, the biological substance of the places it writes. A poem or a piece of prose is not composed in a cellular way of the country it grows from; not in the way a tree is, for example. Elder uses the word metaphorically, as Thoreau used the image of a prose covered in soil, as the 'mainstream' theorist uses the metaphor of a text, and the psychologist the metaphors of ego, id and self, to help explain the behaviours that manifest in a person's life; as every theorist, political scientist, Marxist and so on must use metaphor to explain features that manifest in a life or a work of art. Elder is using 'manifest,' I think, as part of an argument that a text might both give evidence of and embody something of the nature of its native place, by having a kindred sound, shape, quality, gesture—a 'gestalt,' as Buell puts it, that might impress the reader in much the same way that the place impressed the writer (Buell, 1995, p 86). Phillips seems to dismiss such a possibility. Text expresses only author and language. If that is the position you start with, it is pretty much the position you'll finish with. Shut the window and forget about the world. Trust only metaphors taken from the social sciences. In his paper, Phillips refers to notions of the speech of places as mystical and 'Heideggerian'—the ultimate insult, since Heidegger, apart from being that unconscionable thing, a phenomenologist, was also a mystic and, it seems, a friend of Fascists (Phillips, 1999, p 586).
Phillips' attack on Elder (and Buell) and upon ecocriticism generally, for its theoretical naïveté does not engage with the work of Joseph Carroll to which Glen Love refers in his essay in the journal that includes Phillips' piece. Love himself has now written a book that attempts to elaborate a theory of literature that takes account of evolution and biology, the long history of the earth, in explaining what men and women are doing when they write; and, with Carroll, he argues that one of the things they are doing is orienting themselves in the world, making sense of it. They represent it to understand and appreciate it, to celebrate the earth, this place here and the lives of men within their environments. Love's book, along with Carroll's, may be the beginnings of a theoretical riposte to poststructural theory; and an explanation of how literature represents the world beyond the text, and how elements of an author's environment find their way into texts.

Carroll argues that 'we should study language as a system of references to a world that is not composed wholly of words but that also contains trees, flesh and bones, hormones, neurological structures, children abandoned at orphanages ...' and so on; and that critics should 'regard texts not merely as an arrangement of elements within a given system of signs, but, rather, as a structure of references to an actual world.' (Carroll, 1995, pp 92, 95). Turning to evolutionary theory, Carroll reminds literary theorists of Darwin's compelling contention that 'the relationship between the organism and its environment' is primary, explaining, as it does, not only the behaviour and evolution of that godlike organism, mankind, but also the workings of the rest of creation. This relationship between human beings and the environment in which they draw breath, make a living, fight for survival and so on, precedes and explains every other concept we use in understanding human life on earth—psychology, culture, social order and 'linguistic representation' (ibid, p 2). Then Carroll argues that human modes of perception, thought, feeling and expression have evolved over the history of the species, suggested, tried and sharpened by the process of natural selection, alongside other organisms, in interaction with the environment. In other words, these human habits, for making ideas and tools and stories, work; they have served to keep us alive, have helped us understand and master our environments, have even underpinned our growing dominion. Literary expression, among those winning habits of the species, has helped us survive and prosper because it has been a means of mapping the actual world in which men and women moved, of articulating it, understanding and explaining it. 'The primary purpose of literature,' argues Carroll, 'is to represent the subjective quality of experience,' the nature of men and women's experience of the actual world. Literature expresses, renews and advances human knowledge about a world that is 'in the first place, spatial and physical' (ibid, pp 2–3).

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Carroll’s long book is a dense and fiercely logical argument for literature as a form of knowledge and literature as a biological phenomenon, whose central task is to represent ‘objects that exist independently of language’ (ibid, pp 1–3). The actual world exists quite independently of mankind’s cognitive and linguistic categories; indeed those capacities for thought and language and affective expression have evolved out of mankind’s engagement with the actual world, mankind’s effort to comprehend it. Language too is biological; it belongs not just to the mind and subjectivity of human beings, but to the world. It is therefore capable of representing that world to the minds of men and women.

Since literature arises out of human being’s interrelationship with their places on earth, and since, according to Carroll, the very ‘internal principles’ of human modes of thinking and expression have evolved out of humankind’s ‘adaptive relations to the environment,’ there may be support in such a theory, though Carroll does not expressly offer it, for Buell’s notion that an individual writer’s work will bear traces of his or her native ground and for the insight of ecocritics such as John Elder that a piece of writing may be said to manifest the ground from which it grows. Perhaps we can apply to the case of the individual’s engagement with his or her place the same logic Carroll applies to the whole species. In other words, one writer’s thought and modes of speech on the page may be understood as expressing the ‘internal principles’ at play in the spatial, physical (and cultural and emotional) environment in which he or she makes her life. Not that a work will express only the organising principles of that place, but that it will very likely give them expression; as indeed, that writer’s life and thought, put into daily encounter with that landscape, may bear traces of its nature—and of the nature of that writer’s ‘subjective experience’ of that piece of the actual world. In this way, for instance, I may make sense of a writer’s claim, such as James Galvin’s (see my chapter ‘The real world’), that a picture of his soul would be a picture of a range of mountains he has held in his gaze all of his life; in this way, for instance, I may make sense of Terry Tempest Williams’ hope to speak in the language of the desert (see ‘The heart of an arid land’); in this way, for instance, I may understand something of what Laurie Kutchins means when she attributes her voice to the Wyoming wind (‘The valley of the Wind’).

Wild writing

Gary Snyder attempts (and practises in his work) an answer to the question of how the country gets into the text, by taking a generous and challenging view of what language and literature are. He expresses it in language that avoids the abstractions and qualifications that veil Carroll’s argument; but without that armament, he lays himself open to rebuke from the theorists. But he does attempt, if not a theory, then a reasoned and careful explanation of how a writer might go about discerning and then articulating the logic, the wildness, that runs through a place on earth. He offers a critique of the anthropocentric view of language upon which the cultural construction argument is premised.
Mainstream thought sees language as essentially and uniquely human. It understands intelligence as ‘framed and developed by language,’ as Snyder puts it (Snyder, 1995, p 178). Humans, in this conception, order and interpret and represent the chaotic, uncivilised, illiterate world with language. These are helpful, but narrow and misleading ideas, as I have argued. Snyder, like Carroll, suggests that language is a matter of biology. ‘[W]e can affirm,’ Snyder writes, ‘that the natural world (which includes human languages) is mannerly, shapely, coherent, and patterned according to its own devices. Each of the four thousand or so languages of the world models reality in its own way, with patterns and syntaxes that were not devised by anyone. Languages were not intellectual inventions of archaic schoolteachers, but are naturally evolved wild systems whose complexity eludes the descriptive attempts of the rational mind’ (Snyder, 1995, p 174).

In many of his essays, Snyder alludes to the plants that a certain place ‘speaks,’ to the voices and behaviours of animals as literatures, along with the texts and utterances of humans, leaving us to presume he means that literary texts ‘utter’ place in just the same way as all the lifeforms and patterns of expression in that place utter it; and also that human language evolves as a skill and as a form of life itself, as a product of the evolution and wild system at work in a particular geography. And writing—at least, a variety he calls wild, which attempts to stay open to the patterns and stories at play at a deeper level in the world than a certain, human-centred grammar allows a writer to go—is a practice of reading and telling what actually is (ibid, p 176). To write wildly, writes Snyder, ‘is to have joined a larger moment with the world’ (ibid, p 179). The writing records that moment and includes scents and intonations of the genius of the place, just as the scat of a moose, the sound of the wind, the run of the water do (ibid, p 170).

Among other things, Snyder is speaking, I think, of the lyric apprehension of the world, to use the language I have used. Language (whole systems, and individual syntax that finds its way into my book) rises out of human encounter with the world, somewhere. And so that language will speak of the place of the ‘wild’ encounter, if its speaker allows it to remain wild, because language is not imposed or invented in abstraction, it is derived; it occurs out of relationship with that which it is not.

For Snyder, intelligence or consciousness is not an exclusively human capacity but inheres in and enlivens all things; and even human intelligence is to be understood as shaped ‘by all kinds of interactions with the world, including human communication, both linguistic and nonlinguistic’ (ibid, p 178). ‘The world (and mind) is orderly in its own fashion, and linguistic order reflects and condenses that order ... We write [wildly] to deeply heard but distant rhythms, out of a fruitful darkness, out of a moment without judgment or object. Language is a part of our body, and woven into the seeing, feeling, touching, and dreaming of the whole mind as much as it comes from some localized “language center”, that is, the author (ibid, p 179).
We write out of the lyric moment, from inside it; and we articulate the rhythm and feel of the space that contained and allowed that moment. The wild language of the writer’s response may, Snyder imagines, converse with, may sing with, may share in the wild language of the place.

Language attuned to its own wildness and to the wildness of the world that gave the language its birth can become a way of seeing the nonhuman purely and directly, just as it is. Wild language—alert to what is present, at one with the relationships and order alive within a place—‘does not impose order on a chaotic universe, but reflects its own wildness back’ (ibid, pp 174–75). Such a language, which becomes a way of apprehending the living world (at least for a few moments here and there), uses ‘the vernacular,’ says Snyder. Abstract expressions—even ones like ‘ecosystem,’ ‘biota,’ ‘bioregion,’ and ‘ecology’—order places according to human categories; they are arrived at and may only be understood by a reader intellectually, abstractly, not concretely, particularly, poetically.

Snyder offers us an altogether larger imagination of what language, place and literature might be and of how they interact. If language is the passage of meaning between two beings, then it is hard to resist the conclusion—once you overcome the idea that only speech is language, and that language and consciousness are exclusively human properties—that places and all their participants speak. ‘Speech’ here is another metaphor attempting to explain an observable reality. It is a metaphor like ‘text.’ A text, attuned to a place, may then speak what it hears the place, or one’s encounter with it, utter. It may converse with a place, listening and hearing, participating in the wild system of interrelationships, of shared messages at work here.

No doubt, to Phillips and others, that all sounds even more ‘occult’ and ‘metaphysical’ than Elder’s offering. Snyder does not use diction from the critical discourse. He writes out of a spiritual and mystical tradition that has a very long human history in many cultures and eras, although it has been pushed to the margins of Western thought.

Snyder, in any event, helps us enlarge our sense of the words ‘manifest’ and ‘represent’ and ‘express.’ He helps us place our consideration of the relationship of text and living world within a larger evolutionary, ecological context. Within a world made manifest only by human-generated language, of course, place remains mute and inert.

The dual accountability of ecological texts

Lawrence Buell writes and thinks, as Joseph Carroll does, from inside the discourse of the literary theory. This makes his offerings more compelling, among ecocritics and other theorists at least, than Gary Snyder’s utterances—and it makes them arcane to the kind of readers, many of them writers, to whom Snyder’s writing speaks. Buell has attempted, in his seminal work The Environmental Imagination, to retheorise nonfiction—nature writing, in particular—and to allow
at least this literary endeavour, engaged expressly as it is in encountering and articulating the nonhuman world, to represent elements of the places it witnesses. In his book and in his essay 'The Ecocritical Insurgency,' Buell attempts to find a middle point between naïve realism, in which the agency of nature and the capacity of texts to speak of them goes without much theoretical explanation, and the complete and irretrievable disjunction of text and world. He speaks of his position as 'a qualified version of literary representation as extratextual mimesis' (Buell, 1999, p 703) and as 'an argument for the importance of a poststructuralist account of environmental mimesis: for a critical practice that operates from a premise of bidirectionality, imagining texts as gesturing outward toward the material world notwithstanding their constitution as linguistic, ideological, cultural artifacts that inevitably filter and even in some respects grotesquify their renditions of the extratextual' (ibid, p 704).

In the third chapter of his book, 'Representing the Environment,' Buell makes out his case for 'textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation' (ibid, p 92). This amounts to an argument that literature is capable of giving to a reader an image, an impression rendered in text, of the world beyond the page, beyond the author's mind and body, that honours the truth of that world and is faithful to its defining qualities, while remaining a product of the author's craft. Indeed, Buell allows us to interpret the manifestations in a text of a writer's literary craft, what he calls 'stylization'—the use they make, for example, of metaphor, hyperbole, selectivity and syntactical rhythm to render their subject matter more memorably—not be merely as part of their suppression of the reality of the subject, nor again merely as part of a representation of the writer's persona. Stylisation, writes Buell, may actually be among the means the author uses to get closer—and take the reader closer—to the heart of the deer, the mountain, the mountain ash (ibid, pp 96–7). It is by means of these most personal and human devices of language that a text may bear witness to the world, may be said to give its truest account of the place beyond the page to which it alludes.

What Buell calls the 'fictionalist reading' of literature, by which he means conventional postmodern, poststructuralist theory (if there is such a thing), 'presupposes that the persona is the main subject, that selectivity is suppression, that represented detail is symbolic, that environmental knowledge (in either author or reader) counts for little' (ibid, p 96). On the other hand, his 'nonfictionalist reading' 'presupposes that the persona's most distinctive trait is environmental proficiency,' that of a kind of local guide 'who seeks to communicate what he or she knows in a shareable form. It presupposes that the persona's chief rhetorical resource is exposition ... that the text's outer mimetic function is as important as its intertextual dimension, and that its selectivity is an instrument for promoting knowledge rather than suppressing it' (ibid, pp 96–7).

Buell contends, citing Ruskin and John Burroughs as his companions in the thought, that the nature writer's calling is not as expert naturalist, but as the craftsperson of texts capable of
'reanimating and redirecting the reader's transactions with nature' (ibid, p 97). Thomas Lyon, we have seen, has made a similar proposition. A stylised, meditative, essayistic piece is more likely to enliven a particular geography in the mind of a reader and to lead them back into a similarly enlivened encounter with the living world than a drab 'objective' rendering of detail. It is more likely to be truthful both to the writer's calling—to evoke love for places—and to the author's particular subject-matter—this place.

Stylisation, poetics, musicality and wildness—in these aspects of a piece of nature writing a place may be most present, an encounter most truthfully expressed. Paradoxically, it is precisely to the extent that a piece of nature writing is not merely representational, not merely a matter of informing, reporting and dwelling upon, that it may represent nature, that it may catch and embody the nature of the place it engages with; and point us out of the text toward the world. Lyric prose, in its own, author-generated wild music, may catch the lyric of a place.

_Adéquation—giving the impression of the place_

At the heart of Buell’s exposition of this nonfictionalist reading of ecological literature is this point: stylisation does not by its nature work against or cancel out the ability of a text to evoke and represent the nonhuman; it may heighten it, depending on the author’s talent and intention. Indeed, it is through those elements of a piece of writing that are more than merely literal—through its sound and shape and play of image, for example—that a text can allow the reader an experience, or something akin to it, of the place that the writer encountered, and of which she speaks in her work. To explain what he means here, Buell takes a word used by the French poet Francis Ponge, _adéquation_, which was first taken up by the ecocritic Sherman Paul in his book _For Love of the World_. Paul defines the notion this way: ‘a literary equivalence that respects the thing and lets it stand forth. _Adéquation_ is not to be confused with _correspondence_. It is not a symbolic mode but an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself’ (Paul, 1992, p 19).

Paul uses the word, as Phillips reminds us in his essay, to capture the quality of texts that attempt to give the gist, the sense, the essence of a landscape, or whatever, without pretending to be the place or even to _show_ it to you exactly. _Adéquation_ then is, as Phillips puts it, ‘a variety of literary impressionism’ (Phillips, 1999, pp 587–88). The idea is that a passage written in this way may feel like the landscape it concerns. Its equivalence will be a matter of the personality, gesture, general character of the prose. A kind of kinship connects the text and the place. The body and form of the text may be compared to the body of the place, and some equivalence will arise for the reader. The effect of the place on the reader might be similar to the effect of the text—because of some qualities they share.

I mentioned in my introduction how John Burroughs spoke of Walt Whitman’s ambition to have his words and phrase work on a reader with the same power and in the same way as nature in her
places does: as a mountain range or a forest affects and makes demands on us, so the poet wanted
his writing to work. Burroughs used the term 'spiritual auricular analogy' for this mode of writing,
from within nature. The poet attempts, in other words, to make his words sound like the spirit of
the place from which he wrote. (Notice, here, the particular emphasis Burroughs places on the
music of the writing and the particular power of words' rhythmic sounds to adeque nature.)
Such a piece of work would give a reader an encounter with words and phrases that would be
analogous in how it felt to a direct encounter with a particular place. Burroughs went on to say
that Whitman hoped (as many poets probably do) to lodge and express his meaning just as nature
does, embodied and encoded in particulars (Burroughs in Mazel, 2001, pp 36–7).

A work may best evoke the place not by describing it accurately, but by capturing in the very
texture, form, sound and rhythm of its lines and words the nature and idiomatic expressiveness
of the landscape, as it struck the artist in their lyric engagement with it.

In conceding the possibility of adeqation, I think Phillips arrives at more or less the same place
as John Elder, whom he parodies. The work bears traces, through and in its stylistic dance, of the
place to which it refers; the work manifests by that means—in those qualities that make it most a
work of art, most separate in a sense from the natural world—something of the nature of the place.
The work is shaped, then, in part by what it attempts to shape for the reader. The result—if the
writer is any good, if her place-influenced stylisations are efficacious—is that the prose shapes the
space, the amplitude, the quality of that particular geography for the reader. It does so to the
extent that the writer makes use of patterns of voice that honour and continue the patterns of the
dynamic space he or she participated in, in that one place on earth. In its very nature, a work can
adequate a place, or, more exactly, one particular engagement with it, so that, reading the work, a
reader experiences, in effect, the place. Text makes a place manifest, in some way, in other
words—the nature of the place is manifest in the nature of the work.

No doubt Phillips and others would quarrel over the degree to which Elder—and Buell and
others—gives credit to the place in shaping the effects in the work that allow the place to have
a second life, as it were, in the imagination of the reader. It is, at the typewriter, the author who
makes the choice of words and phrases; but it was his encounter with the place that made the
patterns he is trying to perpetuate or honour there. So who is doing the writing? Phillips might
privilege exclusively the craft and imagination of the writer. Ponge, Buell and Carter would say
that the writing emerges from a process begun in place and continued in the mind and body of the
writer, a process finally that leads to an utterance in which the place itself, in its essence, carries
to a reader. And they would say it is precisely in its artifice, its voice and particularity, that the
work allows the place to express its nature to the reader. So who is writing whom; who is singing
whom? It is a choir. There is a kind of continuum that runs from place to reader via the text; a
process out of which the place resonates; a process in which place and self interpenetrate, intermingle, co-create and yield the work.

We probably reach, at this point, the impasse between the mystical mind and the purely empirical; between realism and idealism. And although Phillips would regard his own position as coldly logical, we have seen here how theorists like Carroll, thinkers like Snyder and writers like Lopez subject Phillips’ anthropocentric position to a scrutiny that renders it untenable. For Phillips, the text puts down its roots only into the mind of the writer, who gives us, through his skills with language, that human thing, an impression of the place. For Elder, on the other hand, for Buell and for me, to concede to the place some articulateness, some life and agency in the relationship that gives rise to the text is not to silence the writer; it is not to deny the artistry and intelligence of a human witness. The writer’s talent lies in attention, listening, transcription. Between the writer and the place the work arises. Perhaps, in the notion of adéquation, the impasse between the realist and the idealist, the nature writer and the poststructuralist is dissolved, the autonomy of the place is respected and the creative capacity of the artist acknowledged, all at once.

*The musical performance of place*

So, a text may adéquate a place. Adéquation takes us beyond what Paul Carter has called a visualist understanding of the artist’s engagement with the world—an assumption that the work of art always offers us a description, a visual simulacrum of the object; an assumption, says Carter, that dominates Western art practice and theory, and which certainly informs much of the mainstream and the eccentrical theorising of representation. Adéquation takes us beyond representation, with its visualist limitations. Using this word, Ponge and Paul and Buell invite us to imagine the landscape writer’s encounter, and the poem or book that results from it, very differently, in a way that involves more than silent looking and depiction.

In his book *The Lie of the Land*, Paul Carter, as we have seen, expressly encourages just such a renovated understanding of the writer’s encounter with the world. He wants writers to engage with the world metrically—to remember the metrical qualities of places and the poetic engagement with them. Carter makes an argument for places as dynamic spaces, composed of musical intervals and turbulence and moving air; composed of enfolded pasts and presents, of pieces and relationships both seen and unseen, heard and unheard, of curvilinear time. And he argues for a new conception and a new practice of writing as a musical articulation of the complex and turbulent reality of land, an expression of places’ ‘amplitude,’ or perhaps as a performance, in the manner of a dance, of a musical witness to place. It is only the vibration within sounds (made by words and, with more complexity, in phrases and sentences, in the manner of a musical phrase) that can carry and echo the characteristic movements, large and unimaginably small, that actually
compose a place, or at least our experience of it. It is the rhythm and roll of a work; the playing out, within it, of melody; the shaping and dissolving of patterned sounds in syntax; the shifting dance of tone and timbre—it is these musical qualities of a piece of writing, as they unravel in a reader’s reading, that have the power to suggest the dynamic (meaning even the dynamism of erosion and orogeny in mountains, the interplay of atoms within an ancient eucalypt as well as the swift flight of the thornbill) qualities of a landscape. Carter reminds us that landscapes are not just the visible entities we encounter, but also the soundscapes we hear; and they are composed of gathered and invisible (because they did not catch our eye or because they are too small to see, as microscopic organisms are) elements; silent, the deep-buried geologies, old lives fossilised, memories and beliefs enfolded into places, and so on (Carter, 1996, p 331). He reminds us that a landscape is what all these lives and forms together amount to. He reminds us that everything in a landscape is in motion, fast or slow; and that everything is engaged in relationships.

Nature is never still; and what we see is filled vibrantly with what we cannot see—atoms, geological movements, winds, seasons, sap, salt, microbes, thoughts of animals, rotation of leaves. Places are alive with movement and complexity. It is the characteristic interplay of biological and physical forces within place that gives them their identity, transcendent of any reading we might make of that place. We might call this their soul or personality or lifeworld. It is what makes them live for us. Writing without an eye for movement (even if it is the slow erosion of a plain) or an ear for vibration (even the inaudible commotion within the atoms of a grain of a rock or the movement of water through a tree) or a feeling for the play of wind and light and energy or for the form of things will miss a place’s amplitude; will not articulate its pulse or adequately its real nature (Carter, 1996, pp 13–4).

In Carter’s The Lie of the Land, we approach a theory of artistic engagement with land that reconciles ecology and literary theory. If we reimagine place and writing, world and text, landscape and language, in auditory, dynamic, relational, musical terms, as Carter does, I wonder if the whole notion of a disjunction between these realms does not fall away. In a musical conception of place and of landscape art (including writing), reality, including land, is not reduced to silent and motionless forms, symbols and texts awaiting interpretation and depiction; in this renovated poetics, art does not purport to render a representation of an object. It is an act of participation in a particular space. It expresses the nature of a set of relationships at a certain moment; it expresses, in its own sound and symbols, the dynamic, ever-changing ground within a community of subjects, one of whom is the writer. There is in the engagement neither subject nor object. The work is in the middle voice—it speaks of and rises from the ground between a perceiver-participant and a perceived, dynamic, lively space (Carter, 1996, p 331). There is not a stage and a dancer; there is only the dance; and it includes all those forms present. The writer’s work is their dance; and it continues the dance of the place beyond the moment. The writer does not try to
create or represent the place in the work; she participates in it, dances with it, in poetic response. When you read, you join the song the writer sings with the place.

All there is, in this view of landscape, is a set of beings in relationship, and all of them are moving, all of them are in the process of becoming something a little different, in interaction with each other. Sometimes a writer is one of the participants in a dance of relationships we might call a place; sometimes, when his writing is being read, a reader is a participant in that dance, in that place, too. The writer's work continues, if you like, while it is being performed—in its writing, I mean, and in its being read—the nature of the place, first in the body and life and the emerging work of the writer, and then in the ears and imagination, in the life, of the reader. The work's music, the sound of its words and of its ideas unrolling, re-echoes the place, carries on the vibrations that characterise its amplitude. And so the work includes the reader, finally, through its music and form and unfolding, in the world of that bit of land, for a time.

If you move beyond visualist thinking, to auditory, ecological imagining; if you think about how musical expression lives in the moment of its expression, how sound belongs to and knits together its maker and its listener; if you think about how the ecological interplay of beings is like music in this way—then you reimagine the whole business of artistic engagement with place, and you reimagine what a text is. It is not a simulacrum or interpretation of anything else, of whose existence the text itself, as a set of silent signs, would be an unreliable witness. It is a dance with a place, expressive of a larger dynamic entity in which the work participates. It is a dance of words that arises out of and continues the complex dance of energies and lifeforms of which the lively landscape is made. The work, in these senses, is part of the place, singing in tune with its soundscape, moving in time with its rhythmscape; part of its vibrant space, its network of interactive forms and frequencies and actions, each of which expresses part of the pattern of the whole and is connected to every other thing that hears it. The work is an engagement with the place; and it enables the reader to engage with the place.

An ecological understanding of nature writing, such as Carter elaborates, might even allow us to see how a work generates its own ecology—a network of relationships that play between place, work, writer and reader. This ecology, perceived musically rather than materially or visually, holds despite the severance in time and place between reader and place. Music—that running through the place and that made by the work, harmonising with the place—joins them all, belongs to them all at once, and none of them is finished or finite. They are all joined by their participation in the one music.

To understand how this can be, how there can be prose and poetry in which a piece of world can live and echo, notice that one needs to remember music; one needs to reimagine perception and landscape, as Carter puts it, metrically; one needs to reimagine place as dynamic space; and one
needs to recall that written language is not only a system of silent signs, not only a vehicle for thought, but a system of sound, an instrument for music and the generation of spatial quality.

Recalling that language speaks and sways, even sings, as well as merely signifies; imagining, in a way that physics is now discovering, that places are never static, are always becoming, that matter is never really either mute or still; taking the lesson of ecology that a habitat is a set of motile and endlessly changing relationships, with, all the same, a discernible, expressible pattern—it is possible to imagine a literature as lively, and lively in the same manner, as a landscape. The place echoes in the work; the work echoes in the place (once one has read the work); each echoes the other. Each creates a similar amplitude. The kind of relationships at work among the words and phrases, lines and paragraphs of the text, and the amplitude they suggest will feel like the pattern of the relationships at play in the place. Text, in this conception, does not represent, it echoes, place, including all that is very old and unseen about a landscape (its long geology, for instance; its microbes and humidity levels) and what is visible and audible.

If you like, this is adéquation by musical and spatial resonance not by any kind of depiction. It is echoic relationship, in which the place sounds in the work. The relationship of the work to the place, understood this way, is like that which holds, for instance, between the song or dance and the land in the Australian indigenous tradition. It is not a relationship of mimesis, says Carter, but of métême—anti-monumental and performative (ibid, p 301). At its heart it is a musical relationship, dependent on patterns of sound, expressed in rhythm, in movement and interval. It is chant; it is dance; it is performance.

I fear I may be pushing a good idea too far. It seems to happen when one theorises. But I would go this far: it is in its lyric qualities, its music, that writing may capture the nature of places. For neither works of words nor landscapes are the finished, silent, material things they are sometimes taken to be. Both are processes; both are made of relationships and intervals. It is in the soundscape of a work that the landscape it relates to may sound out. The work may give a musical impression of the complex life of the place. And it is in that lyric dimension that a piece of nature writing may move a reader as the place itself might, or as it moved the writer; thus performing the task of reanimating a reader’s relationship with nature, engaging them in the dance of it.

Language, the phenomenologists insist, incarnates both music and meaning (Ihde, 1976, p 160). To speak—and, I think, even to speak on paper in words, silent in themselves there on that sheet, but making music in the mind of the reader—is, said Merleau-Ponty, first of all ‘to sing the world.’ The musical quality of language, often forgotten by theorists, allows it to incarnate and speak of the wild world. For music has a gift for expressing what places express, something more than the human-assigned meanings of words alone articulate. Writing of a certain kind, mindful of its music,
can carry a place to a reader, and it can sing the wild of a place on earth because of this capacity of words on paper to signify in sound and rhythm, their power to awaken in the reader, by that music, a sense of the spatial reality of the place to which the writing refers.

Not just any words will do. Poetic language—or lyric—is what is called for. For ‘the poetic word,’ writes Ihde—and, I would add, the poetic phrase, sentence and paragraph—can contain or at least ‘open towards’ the richness of the unsaid, silent (or not uttered in human tongues) nature of things enfolded into places. It was, after all, say the phenomenologists and many students of language, from places, from the world, that words, as singing, as voiced listenings, as conversation, first emerged among men and women.

We should not forget, then, that writing runs on sound. It sings, and it means. It is in its singing that it is most like landscape; and it is in its singing that it may best suggest the place it sings. I suspect that a large part of the theoretical proposition that a work is incapable of representing the world grows out of imagining both works and worlds too narrowly—specifically out of forgetting the sounds that writing makes, and the nature of places as auditory, dynamic spaces. Following Carter, Ponge, Buell and Elder, taking up others’ thoughts about the lyric project, I have tried to imagine both (work and landscape) more generously, and, I hope, more accurately; I have suggested a fresh way to think about and explore, as I do in this study, the relationship that arises and plays between a text and a landscape.

Text as terrain

Dana Phillips’ critique of ecocriticism includes the assertion that the field’s practitioners do not make the full and thoughtful use of other disciplines that they promise to make—particularly of ecology. The uses that ecocriticism might make of the structures of thought that characterise evolutionary biology are pursued only elliptically by Phillips himself in his essay (Phillips, 1999, p 589). Glen Love offers some more guidance in his essay in the same volume of New Literary History. A literature attempting the construction of a literary theory based upon the ideas of biology and ecology has begun to emerge in the 1990s. Love notes that a number of the essays in The Ecocriticism Reader attempt this, as does Joseph Carroll’s Evolution and Literary Theory (1995), on which Love places much reliance (Love, 1999, p 565). Among the concerns of such a reading would be what a text owes to its geography; how it fits into the other leavings and narratives spoken in the bioregion; how literature serves to promote or hinder the survival of the human species; how language and literature have evolved, and the extent to which language and intelligence belong among humans in some unique form.

William Howarth, a Thoreau scholar and professor of American Studies and Environmental Studies at Princeton, has written persuasively about the value that ecocritics might find in geography. ‘Geography,’ he writes, ‘began in antiquity, spawned most of the earth and social sciences, and
today forms with ecology the core of modern environmental studies. Simply defined, geography surveys earth forms and processes that affect natural and cultural relations ... Because their subject is physical, geographers use methods that are visual, spatial, and textual. They read the surface of the earth to interpret its arrangement and relations; they look for interactions that shape the environment in which all species live. Their principal concern is location, the placement or position of landscapes, species, cultures, and how they interact across space and time' (Howarth, 1999, pp 514–15).

The kind of reading of texts Howarth has in mind would place emphasis on the location in which the text arises, on the pattern of relationships, among species and cultures, at work there, the way the weather unfolds, the nature of the ground, the grammar of its rivers, the aridity or humidity of the air and soil. Studying a text’s natural history, its geography, would help us understand the text in one of the contexts—perhaps the most important, if it is a text that engages specifically that place—in which it has arisen, in which, like any other thing at home there, it sits or moves, depending. From a geographical perspective, no text would be severable from a place, nor explicable merely as the work of one human mind.

Geography emphasises patterns of relationship, not autonomous author-actors. A literary theory drawing more upon it could not privilege authorship and the creative act as exclusively as the dominant paradigm does. It would not labour unduly over explaining the means by which place patterns the cultural artifacts, or habitat types or mammalian forms that emerge from it; nor would it spend too much time trying to boil down the complicated process by which the place informs the author’s nature and the voice of his or her work. But it would pay attention to those connections and correlations—observable between the nature of the place, the nature of the author and the nature of his or her writing—and value them as it values all connections between locations and species within them. A geographical literary analysis, in other words, would read the work as an element of its physical and human geography. It would study that natural and social history in order to make sense of the book. It would be predisposed toward context, specifically place context. It would look for connections and correlations between the nature, or terrain, of the work, and the nature of the place it concerns. It would look to explain the work, to a significant degree, in terms of its location—the structures and forces at play in its geography.

Howarth also encourages readers and scholars to take more careful account of the geographical elements referred to within texts. He argues that there may be value in regarding them as participants in the story, not merely as elements of the setting or as metaphors. He encourages us to attribute to them something like the same importance and integrity as the human characters, and to see what kind of reading that allows (Howarth, 1999, passim).
Perhaps—though he does not elaborate this—Howarth also means to encourage scholars to read texts as geographers read terrains: they might attend more closely to the pattern of connections among its words and sentences, the characteristic sounds and shapes of phrase, the way its ideas and paragraphs flow, the look of its paragraphs' forms, the kind of images that move through it, the kind of the amplitude all its characters articulate, the play of light and shade within the space it gestures; the patterns that define the country of a text, in other words; its own wild order; the laws that seem to hold in its ecosystem. It might be useful for the literary scholar as geographer of text to observe any correlations there may be of this kind between the country of the text and the geography from which it arises. How is their light, their topography, their soundscape, the quality of their amplitude, similar or different?

Ecocritics have begun to read texts geographically. In his *Reading the Mountains of Home*, for example, John Elder reads Robert Frost's poem 'Directive' at length and in the context of the country (Vermont) where it is set, which also happens to be Elder's home. John Tallmadge's *Meeting the Tree of Life* is another fine example of a work of literary criticism grounded in personal explorations of the terrain from which the works it studies emerged. Ian Marshall travels the country from which his chosen nature texts emerged in his fine *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail* (1998).

*A musical geography of nature writing*

*Writing the Wild* also attempts a geographical reading of some works of nature writing. It reads texts as terrains. It takes the geography of these writers and their writing seriously; it looks for ways in which the place might explain the work, in which the work might express the place. It looks for correlations and tests them.

It gives weight to place in reading some works of nature; it presumes that literature, particularly nature writing essays, is capable of representing the real life of actual places, through a process of *adéquation*, chiefly musical. It explores the engagement of these six writers with landscapes and wonders whether we might best understand what they are enacting in their witness and expressing in their writing of those places as a practice of musical apprehension, and therefore of ecological imagination; even a kind of musical performance, attuned to, accompanying and at the same time embodying in text the wild order of things that makes that place what it is.

And for this work, I conclude, the lyric essay serves best. For it informs, it tells, it sings, and it plays. It does more—and I suppose less—than pure music; music without words, I mean. It is human; but it is not merely human. For the lyric essay employs not just tones and melodies, such as one might hear among birds or in the wind; it uses words, those humble blobs of meaning, those signifiers freighted with humanity, to speak of places and their people. Unlike less musical narratives, lyric writing only does more than to think hard about the real world; it also knows that
strings of words can vibrate and sing, and it plucks those strings to play, beneath its meaningful elaborations of the world, the tune it divines of the places of the earth.

Each of the chapters in part three is a lyric essay of a certain kind. What follows is a songline made of six phenomenological tellings: six chapters that chant six places on earth, that sing six authors and their works; six chapters that recall and dance out my own engagement—lyric and ecocritical—with these writers' worlds and their texts, with and within the amplitude of each; six chapters that ponder and sound the intermingling, performed through the vigils of witness kept by these writers, of world and text and witness, of place and prose and poet.
7. The edge of the trees

Barry Lopez
McKenzie River Valley, Oregon

Words are the daughters of earth
—Samuel Johnson

We danced together on the bank. And the songs we danced to were the river songs I remembered from long ago. We danced until I could not understand the words but only the sounds, and the sounds were unmistakably the sound rain makes when it is getting ready to come into a country.

—Barry Lopez, 'Drought'

That one born in the forest, growing up
With canopies, must seek to secure coverings
For all of his theories. He blesses trees ...

And consider the child raised near the sea, impinged
Upon constantly by the surf rising in swells,
Breaking itself to permanent particles of mist
Over the cliffs. Did you really think
The constant commotion of all that fury
Would mean nothing in the formation of the vocabulary
Which he chooses to assign to God?

And we mustn't forget to inquire:
Against what kinds of threats must the psyche
Of the Arctic child protect itself in sleep?
—Pattiann Rogers, 'The Determinations of the Scene'

We have turned off the McKenzie Highway at the town of Blue River. White settlers found gold here once, and for a while this was a mining town. Now Blue River is a logging town, lodged among the tall conifers on the shelf of land where the river, back in another
geological era, used to run. It stands near the place where two rivers meet, where the Blue River comes down now out of the Cascade Range and enters the McKenzie, which flows east over its bed of stones—red chert, grey basalt, cream quartzite, black obsidian—to meet the Willamette forty miles away at Eugene. They used to float the logs of Douglas fir that way. Now their bodies are carried out by truck.

This truck—Barry Lopez’s grey truck, with Barry at the wheel—has carried us already past the Blue River Dam, its water level low after a dry summer and fall, and up, on a gravel road, into the hills above the town. Barry drives slowly and distinguishes carefully among the trees—this Douglas fir, that western hemlock with its trailing leader, that white pine, that redcedar—and understorey—vine maple, dogwood, yew, salmonberry, and chinkapin. The day is mild, its note subdued, its light clear. I begin, under his gentle tutelage, to read the country.

Turning from the road into a clearing among tall trees, we pull up. There is another truck in the lot, a hunter’s vehicle. But no one is about, no one but us. Barry Lopez leads me to a lake that beavers have made, a flooded meadow, encircled by these conifers. We walk down toward the place where beavers have dammed the stream. The water rests with a stillness that feels uneasy—as though contested, resented, unwelcome. It is a holy and haunted place. The beavers have done their work well, for the body of the water, mostly withheld from view by the grey reeds and sedges that grow out of its shallows, spreads wide in this basin, this place where the headwaters of a creek once ran among grasses. Wolf Creek, it is called, though now it belongs to beavers. And it goes on rising here below these waters; it still escapes the beaver’s dam and finds its way to Blue River, but in between, the beavers make its waters wait and slow; and the whole place is stayed too.

Barry leads me to the lake’s edge. The water has withdrawn from its flood tide at the edge of the trees, and the lake’s margin is hard to find among the sedges. A boat lies decaying there, and we rest a boot each against its broken gunwale to look upon the lake. It has a handmade feel, this ruined vessel, now swamped by the water that holds against the dam wall the beavers have made of mud and cut poles. Barry tells me the boat has rested there as long as he remembers. It has become landscape.

He falls silent. His look is earnest, attentive, and there is sadness in it. The quality of his silence, it strikes me, is not unlike that of this still water itself. He listens like water; both of them listen with seriousness, as though their lives depended on it.

He turns after a minute or two, and we walk among wide stumps and standing trees, and he points up to a high grey edifice of basalt: the nose of Wolf Rock raised and frozen, thus, in song. Pink and yellow lichens pattern its surface, Barry tells me, though I can’t make out that fine decoration from here. He knows because he has seen it up close. He climbed it when he was young, and once
he fell. He shows me now the scar of the wound it cut in his wrist. Wolf Rock is a monolith, a volcanic plug, rising six hundred and fifty feet above this terrace of flat ground. The flooded meadow was once called Wolf Prairie for the wolves who favoured its sweet ground when Europeans first came to the mountains. The white men fast trapped the beavers out of the range, and for a while wolves had the run of the meadow, before they too were hunted out. With the wolves gone and the trade in beaver pelts collapsed, the West won, the beavers returned in the twentieth century, and sometime, already long ago, they made it theirs again. The Tsanchifin Kalapuya came here too in the summer months, in the days when they and the wolves still lived in this country. They would have come for salmon and berries, for hunting and ceremony, and to stand, perhaps, as we do, engaged by this resting, dreaming place, awed by the rock that sleeps uneasily above it.

Barry Lopez tells me that he has learned only freshly from a Native American man he met on the coast that this site, to which he has been drawn again and again over the years, used to be known among the Tsanchifin—and all the peoples of the Cascades and farther afield—as a place of particular power, a place as sacred, almost, as the Columbia River Gorge, into which the Willamette runs, further north, before it runs on to the sea. 'I have had animal encounters and witnessed celestial events at this place many, many times,' Barry tells me. 'It has always felt a powerful place to me, though I found out only recently that it has always been regarded in the same light, held in the same respect, by people who knew it. You can feel that power in a place like this, I think, even if you are uninitiated.'

As we drive away, deeper into the forest, I look up through the open sunroof of the truck and see a halo of ice encircling the sun.

Barry Lopez drives with care. He has been silenced by the place. Later he tells me that he saw another halo here once at a turning point in his life. Seeing it again has moved him, moved him to silence. But he is quiet, too, because he is tracking—he is reading the trail left by the tyres of another vehicle, already long gone, on this dirt road. Its syntax is lost on me. My eyes are still trying to tell the conifers apart. 'Those guys were hunting,' he says, concluding this from their slow pace and meander and the way the tracks leave the road near a tree from which some pink flagging trails.

Once I ask him about a brush tree, one of many of its kind crowding a logged slope, its leaves the shape and colour of olive leaves, but without flowers. He cannot name it at once. So he stops the truck and leaves it idling while he goes to study its foliage. 'See what it says about *Ceanothus* in there,' he says to me, pointing to the plant guide in the door beside me. I find it, *Ceanothus integerrimus*, or deer brush, and it seems to fit. 'Strange how you can forget the detail of a native
place;' he says. 'It is a plant I know well. The deer like it. But I can't have looked at it properly for a long time, and its name had slipped.'

There is a story, 'Homecoming,' in Lopez's Field Notes about a man who lives in these very mountains and woods, a botanist, whose narrow specialisation and academic career take him increasingly far from home and these woods, until he finds himself one day humbled when walking with his daughter there—'he'd forgotten the names of half a dozen or more flowers that grew around his home.' This incident in the field with Barry brings to mind the story. In 'Homecoming,' the botanist feels ashamed by how far he has fallen away from his home and family. His wife reminds him how he used to know all the plants in the woods. 'You knew by their shadows, how they dipped in the wind. You were here then. Now, you look around, it's not part of you anymore. Why should they remember you when you can't remember them?' It is a moral tale about intimacy, of course, about grounded attachment to the body and spirit of a place. The moral universe that Barry Lopez wishes our writing and our lives to serve includes the lives of entities not merely human. The locus of morality is not the civic community, the forum or the market; it is the place, the community of biological forms and landforms somewhere. His somewhere is the same as this botanist's or close enough: the foothills of the Cascades in western Oregon. The man takes himself out into the forest dark and gives himself back, his body upon the ground, to the plants—the purslane and wood sorrel, the hellebores and the western trilliums—and the place. So that when he returns to bed, he smells of the woods again, his wife tells him; so that he knows the flowers again and they know him. The story gives poignancy to Barry's own fleeting forgetfulness of this plant. But I know that he is not the man in his story. For all the distractions and causes that call him away, he always comes home; he is always here. It is just that, like the rest of us only not nearly so often, words and names sometimes elude him. But the plants, I can tell, recall him well.43

I follow our way on a contour map. We join the highway again, and he takes me into Belknap Springs. He speaks of the McKenzie boats, named for the river and made to negotiate its rapids and wild currents in the days before the dams. We head up again into the folded and forested ranges again, and I lose my orientation easily among the tall trees and the country's convolutions.

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41 I refer, in chapter four (pp 580), to Lopez's view of nature writing as part of a project that extends mankind's moral universe beyond the merely human. It is a theme he often returns to, most recently in his essay 'The Naturalist.' In that essay, which was written after September 11, and has been republished by Orion in the booklet Patriotism and the American Land (2002), along with essays by Terry Tempest Williams and Richard Nelson, Lopez also argues that the naturalist and nature writer's responsibilities now extend into the national political realm, where it is their task to insist that politics includes biology and ecology.

43 'And here's an embarrassment,' Barry writes in the margins of the first draft of this chapter. 'A friend of mine is writing the definitive book on Camusola, and I have collected the plant here with him.' Which only goes to show how hard intimacy is, how readily places and their plants slip from our acquaintance.
But this is storied, loved and intimately observed country for Lopez—his backwoods. Toward noon we are climbing up a ridge above the Horse Creek drainage, headed for the wilderness.

‘The steep riverine valley I live within,’ Lopez wrote in ‘The Language of Animals,’ ‘on the west slopes of the Cascades in Oregon, has a particular human and natural history. Though I’ve been here for thirty years, I am able to convey almost none of it’ (Lopez, 2003, p 159). He goes on to speak of the occupation of the Tsanchifin Kalapuya people and before them a Penutian-speaking people, who travelled this valley to camps where the McKenzie meets the Willamette near where Eugene lies today. He knows, he says, something of their story and has visited their old campsites with reverence. ‘But I’m drawn more to the woods in which they’re found. These landscapes are occupied, still, by the wild animals who were these people’s companions’ (ibid, p 160). He goes on: ‘When I travel in the McKenzie basin with visiting friends, my frame of mind is not that of the interpreter, of the cognoscente; I amble with an explorer’s temperament. I am alert for the numinous event, for evidence of a world beyond the rational. Though it is presumptuous to say so, I seek a Tsanchifin grasp, the view of the indigene. And what draws me ahead is the possibility of revelation from other indigenes—the testimonies of wild animals’ (ibid, p 162).

I have been with Barry Lopez—a visiting friend—on a journey into the McKenzie basin. His intimacy with this landscape was clear, but I sensed no show of local authority. I was with a man returning to ground he loved. He was there to know it again, and be known, not to show it off or show off his knowledge. There was something shy and humble about his passage into it with me. He was the husband long separated from his wife and now back home; and at times I felt I should look away.

Barry Lopez ran no steady commentary on what we passed by. He noticed everything, and pointed out many things to me—ancient, declining Douglas firs among the old forest; hidden hunters’ camps; many things—but he never once offered an interpretation of our encounters with wild animals, the odd numinous event. He exercised a sometimes frustrating, almost Trappist silence once he had named a tree or an animal, a hill or drainage, reluctant to interpret and emaciate this world. He left space for the inhabitants of his valley to be for me and him what they would. Mostly, he witnessed. And in this way took part in his country. That calls for silence, for which he has a gift. Later, as has happened now for me, some moments of witness will rise up again from wherever his body stores them, and he will write them.

‘When I walk in the woods or along the creeks,’ he writes in ‘The Language of Animals,’ ‘I’m looking for integration, not conversation. I want to be bound more deeply into the place, to be included, even if only as a witness, in events that animate the landscape’ (ibid, p 162).
Barry Lopez lives in a clapboard cottage within that river valley, forty miles upstream of Eugene, Oregon. He has lived in that house in that valley for thirty-two years. He has travelled far from it, and often. He came to Finn Rock in 1970, with one book (of reviews and stories), written while he was a senior at Notre Dame, already published, a year or two of travelling and writing in motel rooms behind him, a year’s working in publishing in New York, fifteen months’ writing in Mishawaka, Indiana, in the home he made there with his young wife, Sandra, and another eighteen months in Eugene, where he began but never finished his MFA. He came, with Sandra, in June 1970. After many years, Sandra has moved on, but Barry Lopez has stayed, and this is where most of his books have been written. He has apprenticed himself to these woods and this river and to all that they hold. ‘I have trained myself to listen to the river,’ says the narrator of his story ‘Drought.’ This is where, in this house in these woods, by this river, he wrote Arctic Dreams; and this is where, he tells me, up until his most recent book of stories, Light Action in the Caribbean, he has written every word of nearly every story and essay he’s published. Many of the stories from his new book he wrote down in New Mexico, and the wide light of that place, its spareness and lack of embellishment, lie in them, as, perhaps this stern place, with its elegant draws; its dignified flows of water and fall of rain; its subdued light; its solemn cedars, hemlocks and firs, decorated austerely in moss, and on the banks of streams towering cottonwoods, big-leaf maples, ash and alder; its mink and black bear and beaver; its river birds and salmon, even the grief it knows from the wounds of unabated forestry—as these too find voice in, and shape, all his other writing.

Beneath the rainforests and rivers, beneath this moist and temperate terrain, the Juan de Fuca plate is moving inland and downward, below the North American plate at just over half an inch a year. This activity deep in the earth stirs the volcanoes and hot springs that live in the Cascade Range. This landscape of almost archetypal stillness is on the move. Within its mild and weathered body, huge and violent forces work, mostly in silence, mostly without expression at the surface, fashioning the future. They are there, inside the calm. I wonder if this volcanic, hephaestian character is not also at work within Barry Lopez’s brooding work, and within himself. You know when you are with him that there is a gatheredness, an imminence living within his restraint, as there is in the country that is his home.

The house sits on a shelf made by the McKenzie in an earlier age, before it found the bed it now runs on, down below the logging road, closer to the other side of this steep valley. Barry stands and points to the water’s older course, and explains how a river behaves through geological time much as, in ‘real time,’ a hose lying on the ground behaves under water pressure: it snakes. And once upon a time the McKenzie snaked up here.
Lopez has written obliquely of his home place in the fables, the elegant myths, of River Notes. He has written about it sparingly in some of his essays—in 'The Language of Animals,' in two essays within Crossing Open Ground, 'Trying the Land' and 'Children in the Woods,' in two of the essays gathered in About this Life, 'The Whaleboat' and 'Effleurage,' at the end of which he comes home and listens to a river stone, a river-rounded basalt rock, turn in the current; in a series of fifty-two small essays of his years spent here, on which he is working now; and in a couple of essays he gives me copies of, 'A Natural Grief' and 'The Near Woods.' There is also a story published in Orion in summer 1996, called 'Jedediah Speaks with the River,' set just here on the McKenzie. So he has written of this country, and is writing of it more and more. But mostly he has written about other landscapes, particularly the Arctic.

He once called himself a writer who travels. In Arctic Dreams he notes that a certain kind of traveller journeys to other places to deepen—by looking on and entering into an unfamiliar place, its different set of living relationships, its unique weathers and geological stories—his 'sense of the worth of his own place, of the esteem in which he wishes to hold the landscape that originally shaped him' (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 279) '... [T]hat originally shaped him.' Landscapes shape us, in Lopez's natural philosophy, elaborated through all his writing, a point to which I will return. He notes too that in an unfamiliar place, you may never know the same intimacy you do in your native place, and you will need a local guide to help you see; but when you do, you will grow deeper in insight and love for your home place.

He has, I think, kept his home country, the cottage and the woods and the river, safe from those who might love it less well. It is a refuge and a sanctuary. It is sacred; it is home. Here is the community of friends and familiar beings among whom he feels, perhaps, most himself. He holds what he treasures close. I see, in the days that follow, how he knows this landscape and how many of its places move him when he meets them, as a meeting with a friend might move another man.

Though he lives among these forests, Barry Holstun Lopez entered the world in January of 1945 'east of the heights of new Rochelle in the watershed of New York's Mamaroneck River' ('A Voice,' About This Life, 1998, p 3). The town of Mamaroneck lies in a bay of Long Island Sound near the southernmost reach of that water. He grew up, until the age of three, with the sea, 'that empty space above its surface,' and the glare of the light. In the spring of 1948, with his mother and a new baby brother, he moved to California, to a house among farms in the San Fernando Valley. 'For a long time,' he writes in 'A Voice,' 'I thought of California as the beginning, the place where my life took a distinctive shape, but something had already begun.' His father had gone on ahead. The marriage ended two years later, but his mother stayed there with her sons. This was the country of his childhood, the light and form in which he remembers being young—the
orchards and chicken ranches of the valley where he rode, the Mojave Desert where his mother drove them, the Santa Monica Mountains where he hiked, Big Bear Lake and many of the beaches where he holidayed with his mother. In the light of this country, arid, transparent, ‘gin-clear,’ he learned to see landscape. He concedes that it may have affected, at the level of emotion, how he has come to see the world (Replacing Memory; About this Life, 1998, p 208). Light flooded the spaces of his childhood.

And something terrible happened in that light, intruded upon that Edenic space. Lopez describes it for the first time in an essay published after my time with him, ‘A Scary Abundance of Water,’ in LA Weekly (January 11–17, 2002). He sends me a copy with this comment: ‘It is the most autobiographical work I’ve ever written, and I think it puts into essay some of what I have been trying to say about landscape and the shaping of personality. And about landscape and healing... This is about the San Fernando Valley in California and what happened to it and me while I was growing up there. You can’t separate the memoir from the landscape.’ What happened to the valley was that irrigation inundated it with people, altered it and began to tame it with suburbs. And yet his experience of water, in the Cascades particularly and at its work on farms, taught Lopez too that the order of things to which water belonged, older even than the Gabrielino, ‘the original inhabitants of the valley,’ ‘could never be lost, never destroyed’ (A Scary Abundance of Water, 2002, p 31). What happened to the boy Barry Lopez was that ‘[a]long with three other boys at the time ..., I had been sodomized repeatedly in the mid-’50s by an older man who ran a dying-out clinic for alcoholics on Riverside Drive in North Hollywood’ (ibid, p 32). And in the throes of his torture it was the light and the land, the knowledge that it went on, that kept him alive. That remembered light, the consolation of water, the perseverance of land have gone on saving him all of his life. How a place can transcend the horrors that occur within and to it is one thing, one critical thing, he learned in that California light, from that valley. That light and that experience and the wisdom that came to him about the endurance of landscapes oriented Barry Lopez not so much away from human society as toward the larger order that contains it.

Barry has kept his silence about this event all of his life. His whole life has harboured and expressed this secret—and many other things—as the flooded meadow contains and articulates the old stream, and the calm Cascades their tectonic secret. He speaks of it, at last, with such restraint and dignity, with courage but without hyperbole. We should not make more of it, nor less, than he does. It is one important event in his life, inseparable from his experience of place; it is not everything, by it, his life and works are not explained. Lodging the revelation of this abuse two-thirds of the way through his essay, a third of the way into a paragraph, Lopez tells us how integral, and yet how connected with everything else, it is. Take away the light and the water, the valley and the birds, the scent of eucalyptus, and the life of the man would not be what it has become. Take away the place and he would not have survived his trauma. The valley transcends its wounds, because life itself, the water tells him, goes on; the boy becomes the man and goes on
living because life—expressed in him and in the valley which is also his life—goes on and includes everything that happens. 'I could address the thing in me that threatened to become a vast and spreading desert. I had only to discover the water to make it happen' ([ibid]). He found the water, of course, at Finn Rock. His story of survival is as much a metaphor for the valley's transcendence of everything done to it, as the valley's story is a metaphor for Lopez's life.

And so, when in 1956 his mother, who had remarried the previous year, took the family and moved back east to an apartment on East Thirty-fifth Street, Manhattan, young Barry felt like a caged animal freed beyond hope; and yet he also 'missed California to the point of grief' ([ibid]). Back east, Barry continued his schooling at a Jesuit prep school. The landscape of his schooling years then was the city; and places on Long Island, New Jersey and Alabama where he holidayed or went on summer camp. In 1962, after a trip to Europe in the summer after school's end, he began college at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, intending to become an aeronautical engineer. Soon he switched to a degree in communication arts, in which he later graduated. While he studied, he travelled America widely by car in his holidays, visiting nearly every state, working often on a friend's Wyoming ranch and spending time with a West Virginia farmer, Odey Cassell, whose storytelling gifts and sense of local geography helped school the writer in Lopez. (He writes of Cassell, along with two other elders of the land who influenced him in these and later days, Bill Daniels and Dave Wallace, in his essay 'Grown Men' in Crossing Open Ground.)

He thought of entering the priesthood for a time and travelled down to the Gethsemani seminary in Kentucky, drawn there by the presence of Thomas Merton and the intimation of a calling. But soon Lopez decided teaching would suit him better. He returned to Notre Dame to enrol in a Masters program to that end. He married in 1967, and moved with his wife Sandra to Oregon, where he enrolled in an MFA in creative writing. He had been writing stories and reviews since his undergraduate days, and he decided, before finishing this second Masters, to try his hand at writing fulltime—a vocation he has been living out ever since.

The first book for which he is known, Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven, was published in 1976. It is a collection of short stories set in the Alvord Desert in Southeast Oregon. Giving Birth to Thunder, transcriptions of Native American stories, followed in 1977. River Notes: The Dance of Herons (1979) was the second book of a trilogy of stories begun in Desert Notes and finished in Field Notes: The Grace Notes of the Canyon Wren (1994). In these books, these cycles of stories, Lopez allows the world beyond the human to come alive in a remarkable way, so that the human lives that participate in the places are enchanted too. They draw, these stories, and they draw upon, the landscapes of the McKenzie River Valley and the deserts of eastern Oregon, the deserts of Australia, the streets of Manhattan—places he knows. Of Wolves and Men, a natural history of wolves based on his own travels and experiences and his wide reading in science, literature and native wisdom, came out in 1978, became a bestseller, and won for Lopez the John Burroughs
Medal. The literary scholar Sherman Paul has said that that book, though composed with the care you would expect of Lopez, is the work of the apprentice where *Arctic Dreams* (1986) is the work of the master. In that book, his second major work of nature writing in nonfiction, Lopez’s reflections on light and space, imagination and desire, landscape and its wisdom, his personal experiences of travelling widely, often with Native peoples, in the land—the Arctic—and his wide research among, his deep reflections also upon, the literatures of science, exploration, art and anthropology—all this is wrought by the alchemy of his imagination, his memory and his reason into a work of astonishing lyricism and power. This book won for him the National Book Award and wide acclaim.

A selection of essays, *Crossing Open Ground*, appeared in 1988 and another, *About This Life*, in 1998. Since *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez’s published work has mostly taken the shape of essays, a genre that suits his intimate, restrained voice, his gift for research and his talent for story. It is a good form for a man so committed to telling the truth as he sees it; to speaking of where he goes and giving a fair account of what he learns there. In 1990, he published a novella-length fable, *Crow and Weasel*, a book that practises the disciplines of the storyteller, of which he writes in many places, especially in ‘Landscape & Narrative’ (1984); and in it he embodies many of his enduring concerns: friendship, community, quest for wisdom, care with language, attentiveness, the intelligence of places.

Among the nature writers, Lopez is unusual in his range of genres—short story, essay, fable, extended journalistic nonfiction, the more lyrical booklength nonfiction of *Arctic Dreams*. He acknowledges the special responsibilities that fall on a nonfiction writer—the obligation to honour your sources, to hold to what actually happened, to allow the reader to stand in your shoes and feel what you felt. He distinguishes the things—matters of responsibility, of voice and the expectations of readers—that set nonfiction apart from fiction. But in both categories, he pursues the work of the storyteller, for story belongs in both. It is a way of structuring a telling. And storytelling is essentially moral for Lopez. Its work is to heal by fashioning the space within which wisdom, which lies embodied in the whole living world, may arise. Questions of genre, for him, come a long second to this universal notion of what writing is and what it is for. And in all this storytelling, landscape matters very much, not merely as setting, but as the source of what is lasting and true, as subject and as metaphor, as the source of wonder, and as the measure against

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43 He did so in conversation with me and, notably, on air in a radio interview, in which I also took part, with Phillip Adams on Australia’s Radio National in 1999—a segment on the essay. When you sit down to write, he said, you know, and must know, whether it is an essay or a story you are composing. Your readers need to know what you are telling them, and in what sense they should regard it as true.
which a work of language should be set and gauged as good or bad, as true or false, 'cheap or ephemeral' or lasting.44

'My passion is landscape and language, and those two are inseparable for me,' Barry Lopez said in 1989 in a conversation with E O Wilson, facilitated by Ed Leuders before an audience and published in Leuders' book *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors* (1989). 'That is where the focus of my life is' (Leuders, 1989, p 23)—in landscape and language and the ways they meet and serve each other.

Nature writing, the literature of nature, he has emphasised often, matters because it allows a writer to turn to a world beyond the self—the writer's own, the merely human, the social—to the whole of creation. It is not for him, finally, a literature about animals and plants; although very clearly Lopez writes the landscape because, as he confesses, he loves its forms and ways, and was bound to find a way to write about it. Nature writing is about more than those things in themselves, though—it is about the wisdom inherent in the world, the logics and patterns, the order of things, which is more visible in life forms and landforms that are other than our own, and that we may, therefore, see freshly. 'It's about the fundamental issues of life,' he said in conversation with Wilson. Nature writing lets a writer such as himself, for whom land matters as much as language itself, merge both into a vocation; and nature writing invites writers to return to what Lopez regards as their traditional role—as midwives of wisdom, as singers of earth's songs, about living rightly and justly in the world.

'Each of us,' he said to Wilson (and meaning the writers of literary natural history) 'is making a contribution to something that all of us believe in, which is enlightenment, bringing light into this dark forest' *(ibid, p 33).*

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This is a house of attachments, of light and enlightenment, at the edge of the dark trees. It is ornamented by nothing that does not link him to the hands of the person who has made it, the hands of a friend, or to a place he knows and loves. On its wooden walls hang paintings and drawings, tapestries made by friends or by a people he has travelled among. He tells me the story of their making, this rug, that print, that pot or pipe. Its telling enlivens the object. Everything has a history; everything expresses his connections. There are pots made by Richard Roland (he is 'Jack' in 'Effleurage'), masks made by Lillian Pitt (a Wasco woman); paintings by Rick Bartow (a Yurok man); paintings by Robin Eschner (a friend); paintings also by Alan Magee (one of which was

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44 Lopez reflects on this, uses the words I have quoted, in his essay 'Searching for Ancestors' in *Crossing Open Ground*, 1988, pp 75–76.
the cover illustration for *Crossing Open Ground*; photographs by Robert Adams; sculpture by Tom Joyce; carvings made by an Ainu elder; furniture crafted by Kevin Sherwood; glasswork shaped by John Rose; pottery also by the hand of Alyce Flitcraft. These are friends; these are objects with biographies. On the walls too are maps and charts of places he has been, photographs. We eat at a table made by a friend from a tree Barry felled, a slab he cut. He lives among authentic things, made by hand with love, things whose histories he knows, which twine around his own. He lives among stories, among gestures of love, embodiments of loved places. He lives in a place of light amid the dark forest.

On my second night with him, he builds the fire in the stove to warm the room we sit in, and, with cloud gathering after a clear day spent driving and walking up in the woods, along the ridges, down in the watercourses of his native ground, with rain building now against the flanks of the Cascades, he invites me to begin what he had been referring to during the day as the formal part of my time with him. It is hard to begin. What is it I want to know? How can I sit here and form that into words? I feel suddenly the emptiness, the impertinence, the abstraction, of my questions. Let me take a step back before I start, then.

The night before, over dinner, and then sitting as we sit now—Barry Lopez in a rocking chair moored by the woodstove, I on the couch, its back to the windows that look down toward the river—he had said to me:

“This literature concerns itself, finally, with the nature of reality, life as we live it. I am a writer who is deeply concerned with landscape, this one, others I know and by extension all landscapes and our place within them, our relationships with them. People, interviewers and others, have wanted to call me a philosopher, a naturalist, an environmentalist, a theologian even. But I am none of those things. They are other people’s ideas, too narrow ideas, of what I am. I am a writer.

He makes many remarks that suggest he has grown impatient with the limits the ‘nature writing’ tag implies—its narrowness. Writing is what he does, and land is at the heart of his concerns not only because he loves it, not only because he finds consolation and hope in it, but because that is where everything comes from and returns, in the end. We will learn what we want to know, we will find meaning and pattern and guidance there—things a storyteller must find and sing. So, he is a writer then. ‘Nature writing,’ he thinks focuses people’s mind too much on the literal subject matter—animals, rivers, mountains, trees—and not enough on the reason he and others have turned to the natural world. He has said elsewhere that natural history, geography and anthropology are his ways of understanding the world. ‘These disciplines are my metaphors,’ he told *Bloomsbury Review* in 1990. They let him approach, taking his readers with him, the questions that concern him, concern us all—how to live right together on earth. Many other things than the natural order interest him, influence him and find their ways into his work: music (‘some of it
is sacred?), poetry, theatre, crafts. ‘But, among the community of people working in those many ways toward the same ends,’ he says, ‘we [writers] are the only ones working with the literal.’

He tells me that he feels he is writing in a tradition that is very old, much older say than the novel or the ecological narratives of our time, much older than Thoreau or Gilbert White or what is called nature writing these days. He says no more now to define the tradition he means. He means, I think, that it continues that ancient discourse about living honourably, ethically, justly, joyfully on this earth with all its beings, but particularly among ourselves. He means, the storytelling tradition, with its moral dimension. All the wisdom the earth’s first peoples possess on these matters arose out of their intercourse with the land, their seeking a ‘congruent relationship with it,’ their wanting to ‘fit well into it,’ he writes in Arctic Dreams (p 297). This is the ancient tradition in which he thinks he writes, and land is inseparable from it. The first peoples’ dreams of a ‘transcendent congruency’ with the earth—this is the aspiration his writing shares, in his mind, with all the storytellers since the beginning of time; a congruency or ‘reverberation’ not just for himself, of course, not even chiefly, but for all his readers, in part through his tale; for everyone. For this is a time when most people stand perhaps more out of harmony with the places of the earth than ever before—out of intimacy with the land, which has been the source of the wisdom of all the ages (ibid, p 297).

This same night, my first night with him, in his front room, sitting by the fire, tending it, Barry Lopez says to me, ‘the aboriginal lifeway is the manifest form of that intercourse with landscape. In it you see embodied immediate awareness of the lore of the place, as it touches people and all things, and you find a practice of ritual that celebrates, remembers, articulates those truths.’ The literature he attempts is an art, which others, musicians and poets and painters, for instance, also attempt, to seek and elaborate such congruence, to discover such wisdom, as those peoples knew.

He adds this: ‘It [nature writing] is a literature that is about humility and a movement beyond the self. It stands as something discrete from the solipsistic kind of novel, the mainstream of literature.’

But tonight, this second night, after a day in a landscape he loves and knows intimately, I want to take him back to this place and how he knows it, how he writes it. I have my research questions to consider. I want him to tell me what goes on out there; what he is doing when he is addressing a landscape as a writer of the kind he has described. I want him to talk about how he enters into this and other landscapes, how he knows them, how they reveal themselves to him, how he writes them, what they teach him. So, after he has glanced at my own thoughts on nature writing and put that paper aside, remarking ‘There is a lot of work there,’ I ask him what he thinks is the defining practice of nature writing—or whatever this literature is to be called that he pursues. I
wonder aloud if he has ever thought of it as phenomenological endeavour—and immediately wish I had thought of a better way to begin.

It strikes me now, on reflection, that my gathered thoughts on nature writing, my attempt to take its measure, my exploration of the preoccupations of its literary scholars may have given off the odour to him that night, after our day in his home country, of the tedious equations gathered into notebooks and delivered to the narrator of his early story 'The Bend.' The document I gave him and the question I opened with were just like those arid formulations—abstractions from whose cold grip the life of what it is Barry does flee; from whose fingers his own soul, like the soul of the river in his story, slipped as water always will slip, or took, as mergansers will when alarmed, to the air.

Curtly, impatiently, he responds to me: 'I don't care what nature writing is. It is a term, often followed by some narrow definition, applied to a group of writers and their craft from the outside. It implies a rubric, where there is none.'

He has, he says, always been deeply attached to the idea and the practice of intimacy. 'I've looked for it, in the woods and everywhere.' He explains that as a man and as a writer he has wanted deep engagement, understanding, immediacy, truthfulness with people and things. 'And language,' he adds, 'is a petition for intimacy with a reader.' All writing, good writing, seeks that, not just nature writing.

He didn't, he tells me, particularly desire a kind of deep communion with nature. He didn't set out to be a nature writer. He didn't even begin as a nature-lover. 'I was drawn,' he says, 'to people and fields of study engaged with the world beyond the self. So I was drawn to ethology, nature observation, geography, archaeology, anthropology; and to other arts: music, painting, woodcarving.'

His own writing grew out of what he began to learn from such people, from his own reading in those fields of work, his field work and thinking; his wondering and reflection. A search for intimate awareness of truth, of patterns that hold, in lives beyond his own, led him toward land.

Part of that orientation toward landscape was, as he has now shown in his essay 'A Scary Abundance of Water,' the consolation offered by and written into orders of light and geology, the patient histories of water and of those other nations, the animals. And he had, always, an explorer's instinct that who you are and what you believe—that a human life means and how it might be elegant—will occur to you once you leave the shelter of the familiar: this instinct led him in his reading and travelling.

In the autobiographical essay that opens his 1998 collection of essays About this Life, Lopez speaks a little more of the things that shaped him as a writer, among them the western light, the desert air, the orchards and creeks of his Californian childhood. In his junior years at the University of Notre Dame, as a sense of a writer's calling grew on him, a wonder at the lives of wild animals, the
draw of landscape were among the forces that worked on him. This was 'regarded as peculiar territory by other nascent writers at the university.' 'I understood the urge to write,' he says, 'as a desire to describe what happened, what I saw, when I went outside' ('A Voice,' About this Life, 1998, p. 10). His models for such writing, for weird and sometimes exquisitely beautiful storytelling of this kind, for evocations of life, mostly among the poets and novelists—Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Faulkner, Willa Cather, Herman Melville (ibid).

He writes in 'A Voice' of a teacher, Barre Toelken, whom he encountered at the University of Oregon, who steered him toward anthropological studies. There he found other cultures that 'approached questions of natural history and geography' in the way that was native to himself, but not to the culture he found himself inside. 'They did not,' he goes on, 'separate humanity and nature. They recognized the immanence of the divine in both. And they regarded landscape as a component as integral to the development of personality and social order as we take the Oedipus complex and codified law to be' (ibid, p. 12). Through teachers like Toelken and later through indigenous guides, the young writer was led to other, indigenous, non-western cultures, which held true something like his own intuition—that places (place here understood to include, not to stand apart from, the humans who people it) make us, school us, offer us guidance we need for private and community lives.

This night, in the fall of 2000, moving on from my inept opening question, which has, nonetheless yielded a rich conversation, Barry tells me he has always been stirred by questions of spatial volume. He is finding words, I think, for a passion that lies deep in him and is hard to speak of abstractly. He leans with wonder toward the nature of the spaces we live in, how we shape them, how they shape us, how we stand in relation to them, how we imagine them, make them home, how we want to possess them, what we learn about metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, justice, right relations from the spaces we come to know. He tells me that once he had a letter from an architect who commented how Lopez makes spatial volumes with his words; how he as an architect could see how Lopez's words did the work he, the architect, performed with lines on paper and with metal and steel, articulating and enclosing and characterising space.

I nod that I understand. I have come to think, over the last few years, that the real work of the writer is the creation of spaces, gestured into life in the mind of the reader by the line and form and sound patterns, the suggestions of sentences. Into those spaces, which she or he patterns and animates with images, with tones, the writer draws the reader. This is the space in which the story occurs, learning or revelation arises. I don't recall until I sit, almost a year later, with my notes of my conversation with him, that, in a review of his About This Life, in August 1998, I wrote 'something like faith infuses the spaces he makes with words.' This is a thought, apparently, that
was on me earlier than I realised, and it is interesting that it arose for me about, and out of, the writing of Lopez himself.

'It was my love of the interplay of orders of space and volume that led me to the Arctic and the Sonoran desert and such places where space abounds,' he commented that night in his front room. In his chapter 'Migration' in *Arctic Dreams*, he writes of a night he woke and slept and woke and slept again beneath the migration of snow geese: 'I felt a calmness birds can bring to people; and, quieted, I sensed here the outlines of the oldest mysteries: the nature and extent of space, the fall of light from the heavens, the pooling of time in the present, as if it were water' (*Arctic Dreams*, 1986, p 154). The space he lay in there was articulated by the wings and cries, the ancient rhythms of flight through sky, of birds. He writes of a dynamic, auditory space; of a moment animated, quick with the rush of time toward it. These are, I think, his abiding themes—space, time, consolation, mystery, intimacy with the life of the land.

Back home now, in my own cottage, sheltered from a stiff cold wind in from the south, I have been rereading Lopez's writing, thinking hard about the stress he placed on space, on form. I sense now, how important this notion has always been for him. Space outside in the world has always moved him, called to him and implied order, answers to deep human questions. I see how his passion for the world's forms, its spaces and shapes, their play and mystery, is the river that runs through all his writing. He knows that space, each place on earth, is a dynamic order, and he listens hard, he participates in it bodily, in order to sense something of its logic, its musical structure, knowing that in that music he will find what he needs to know. In the introduction to his first collection of fables, *Desert Notes*, published back in 1976, I find his narrator saying this:

> When I first came into the desert I was arrested by the space first, especially what hung in a layer just above the dust of the desert floor. The longer I regarded it the clearer it became that its proportion had limits, that it had an identity, like the air around a stone. I suspected that everything I’d come to find out was hidden inside that sheet of space.

---*Desert Notes*, 1976, pp 8–9

Lopez seems to have intuited long ago that truths—the things one seeks most deeply in order to shape a life, to know the world, to offer it love and stories, to find faith—have physical form, occupy space, lie in the ground, in the relationships that compose a landscape, in the body of the ocean, the ocean of the sky.

Since my return to Australia, I have read right through *River Notes*, his marvellous second book of stories—enchanted, strange, utterly selfless inventions, emanations of a palpable intimacy that grows between a man and a place, the river that runs down the valley he has lived in now for thirty years and some. There, he, Lopez's narrator, speaks less of space than of form—the shape
that things take in the realm of space, not in the realm of the mind. Space and form—these are his concerns. Truths lie like sediments in a river stone; wisdom is hidden in a sheet of space; knowledge is articulated by the way a river bends around a promontory and reads 'the surface of the earth over which it flows' (Drought, River Notes, p 133). I read these as metaphors for the same notion: what we need to know has a body. Desert Notes is a book of space and light; River Notes is a book of form and water. And these are stories, not disquisitions, that Lopez writes. They make a space within which realisations occur, truths are embodied and discovered by readers. Meaning for each of us, some insight, is meant to arise from, the space they make—as it does for their narrator from the shape of water, the form of stone, the space above a desert, the flow of song, the play of light, the voice of canyon wren, the odour of cottonwood buds carried downstream.

In Arctic Dreams, Lopez offers us a word from the Eskimos, *isumtaq*: a person who can create the atmosphere in which wisdom shows itself (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 298). Such a person is the storyteller. The wisdom he allows his readers, his listeners, to divine—as a landscape may allow it to arise too in the heart and body of a man or woman approaching it with patience and respect—does not belong to the teller (or the river). And it occurs within a space, dynamic and animate. The wisdom he seeks and hopes, perhaps, to allow to rise from his sentences is timeless, enduring. 'It is understanding how to live a decent life, how to behave properly toward other people and toward the land' (ibid).

In the lovely story 'Upriver,' his narrator speaks of 'moments of complete vulnerability in each of us to form,' he comments that the ground above the falls is 'in some ways the most dangerous country, reverberating with hope;' he studies a book he finds, 'written in a language I do not know... as though sensing a promise in the very form of the words and sentences and the feel of the chapter breaks of imminent revelation' (Upriver, River Notes, 1979, p 132).

Revelation always lies near for Lopez. And revelation is always immanent. We will not find it in the abstract. We will find it in the shape and body of things in the world—in the trillium, the halo, the valley’s light, the forgotten *Ceanothus integrifolius*—or we will find it nowhere. We will find it in the ground. The ground, the place is wisdom. Truth inhabits a shape; it has form. It is there, though it speaks in a language we may never decipher, that we have the only hope of finding what we need to know, ‘a larger vision’ (ibid, p 130). We will only find it by engaging with the world, bodily and respectfully, by walking and listening in it, by moving with its rhythms. Intimacy with the mysteries patterned into things is what he seeks, what we really, deep down, fall toward in each other, in places we love.

It is hard to say exactly what it is that Lopez listens for, learns to apprehend, in the spaces and places of the world—what any of us yearns for. No word will do: wisdom, he sometimes writes, mystery, truth, hope, promise, augury, recognition, forgiveness, song. The song inside the word.
Perhaps it is a music in which the pattern for a true way of living is phrased; a music not heard, not uttered, but embodied somehow, and therefore needing to be reached for in imagination and love. All that we can have of knowledge is metaphoric, Lopez has written. The immaculate pattern, the inscrutable but essential wisdom is told in the stories people, *isunataq*, tell, the stories that landscapes tell, the 'forgotten language,' to use W S Merwin's lovely phrase, of the earth—its love, and ours for it. It lies in landscape and, sometimes, in poetry and well-made sentences. I recall Lopez's saying that to me as we rounded the bend on the path at the escarpment's lip here in my country, above the valley of the Kedumba, back in September 1998.

This night, here in his home in Oregon, he gives me an image of one of the things he means when he speaks of the life of space. It is an image, I believe, at the heart of the thinking he is turning into his next large book. Its idea is that context, the shape of the whole, the nature of a space, give rise, if you stay present in a certain way, to truths worth having. 'I have pictured Charles Darwin,' he says, 'at sea all that time on the Beagle, far from land, set in all that vast, round, black void, reading at the same time Lyle, cramped on a small vessel, on a massive sea, walking under the vault of the stars at night, unable to discern an edge of things. And it occurs to me that his experience in that space—travelling, walking at night on deck, thinking the thoughts that arose in his mind from his reading—gave rise to the idea that man has no special significance, looked at with the kind of detachment that's possible, the sense of proportion manifest in that vastness; that man is just one of the many parts of the whole.' This devastating and revolutionary idea is the thought of the space, he suggests. It occurred to Darwin out of that space, because of his relationship to it, its effect upon him, the way he walked and thought within it. It is born of that space, made place by Darwin's attention to it, his sense of his own place inside and in relation to that vast sphere.

'There are symmetries in the world, harmonies and proportions in the disposition of things in space. Today,' he reminds me, 'when we came across the ridge between the watershed of Horse Creek and the East Fork of the South Fork of the McKenzie, you and I talked about the lie of that land, the symmetry and body of that country. I can't say just why, but that draws me, that moves me. And I have always felt I needed to write about it, its dignity, its suggestions for how to conduct a good life.'

Lopez moves on from space to the moral obligations and the craft of writing. 'So, I suppose I think about a lot of things,' he says; 'and I go out and encounter the world, and I write about what arises for me when I do that. I feel an obligation as a writer, if I get to go somewhere, to pay attention and come home with some kind of story that helps to clarify my sense of the dignity of the world.
Apart from that, when I sit down at the typewriter, I do not have the remotest sense that I have to fulfill at that machine some particular mission, a piece of nature writing, say, or whatever else.‘

He does not write, he says, within the bounds of a definition. Any definition of his, or any writer’s, work should simply attempt to characterise, to take the measure of, the work he or she does—to articulate its nature, not limit it, narrow it.

Later he says that he thinks literature—and all art—ought to contribute to the making of a society in which people might live rewarding, meaningful, joyful lives. ‘What makes a good life is the degree to which one can imagine love: for the people and the things, the places, among which one lives, the things right here now, not the things one might aspire to own or build. I am not one of those who believes we can build a better life. Heaven is right here in front of us.’

While I am with him these days, Barry Lopez touches again and again on the moral dimension, specifically the human element, of nature writing—the social justice purpose it really serves. His writing has always been—and he wants me to understand this, I think—deeply moral; grounded in a humanist tradition. We humans must remember our duties to the land, the local places we inhabit, to earth as a whole; we need to return to natural history to take some lessons in proportion, restraint, order, modesty and beauty; but we are not in the woods or the tundra or the sea ice for the wonder of the outdoors experience alone, for our personal redemption. We are there to find out what justice means and how we might promote it among our fellow men and women—though not only among them, but also among all forms of life in ‘the reticulated miracle called the ecosystem’ (‘The Naturalist,’ Patriotism and the American Land, 2002, p 33) in which we live. That above all is the lesson we need to learn from the lore of the land; and, as writers, we must try to pass it on—to tell stories in which the patterns of landscapes, the virtues of certain spaces on earth, run clear and authentic, and may perhaps teach us, those remade spaces, what it is we need to know to live well.

I am thinking about Joseph Carroll’s idea that literature is a biological act, one of the things men and women have learned to do to survive. For Lopez, as for Carroll, literature is an engagement with the world in which they live, and it is a way of making sense of mankind’s environment; it is a seeking out of patterns in the larger world that may be useful for men and women to know about in order to live long and well.⁴⁵

Peter Fritzell, in Nature Writing and America, notes that two quite different approaches to the natural world and mankind’s role within it have shaped the literature of nature writing: Aristotle’s Historia Animalium and Saint Augustine’s Confessions. From Aristotle, nature writing takes the discipline of detached observation of the natural world; from Augustine, a personal mode of writing concerning itself, through autobiographical reflection, with metaphysics, spirituality and ethics (Cooley, 1994, p 6). This observation is helpful, if limited. It notes the spiritual and the scientific projects, the marrying of two modes of writing, in this literature. And it touches on something important in the makeup of Barry Lopez and his writing.

Both these traditions run strong in Lopez’s thought, but compared with many nature writers, and despite his dedication to the close observation of the world, the articulation of its forms, he is very much the Augustinian. He is concerned with the sacred, with finding the face of God in the world, with discovering how to lead a life that is in some sense exemplary, with how to shape a just and beautiful society. And he has learned to work through a reflective, confessional first person, sometimes austere, always unstintingly honest. This is a voice and a mode he discovered between the journalistic Of Wolves and Men and the writing of Arctic Dreams, whose defining structural approach, as Sherman Paul and Scott Slovic have noted, is to frame every chapter (and each essay) within an episode, expanding discontinuously, into a meditative journey, of personal encounter in the landscape (Paul, 1992, pp 100 ff; Slovic, 1992a, pp 155 ff). Lopez models in his way of being present in a landscape the very kind of humilitas (gentle, inquiring incorporation within the sacred space of country) that he advocates—and which, for all its toughness, is priestly, monkish, Augustinian. Though it is the land each of us must witness and serve and converse with, each of us must put ourselves inside a place in order for that witness to occur. And what we seek is not just a mastery of the names of things, but some metaphysical insight that will allow each of us to make a worthier human life and to shape, perhaps, a worthier human culture. He goes as a seeker, not an expert; he goes to find. And he would have each of us go, indeed, live that way.

Lopez is much more apparently a humanist—much gentler toward his fellow men and women, I mean—than, say Ed Abbey. He is adamant that whatever it is we humans have to learn and practise we will learn and must apply in society, in community: forgiveness, honesty, storytelling, metaphoric wisdom, stewardship, farsightedness. We may find patterns for all these things in the land—in its dignity, where it holds, in the beauty of its long and shifting patterns, its elegance—but we must practise and share them with each other. Our humanity is enlarged by leaving our mere humanity aside to recover our place in the land. But we must return to human society, to family and wife and community and get on with knowing each other well. He concludes in “The Language of Animals,” I believe I have come to whatever I understand by listening to companions and by trying to erase the lines that establish hierarchies of knowledge among them. My sense is that the divine knowledge we yearn for is social; it is not in the province of a genius
any more than it is in the province of a particular culture. It lies within our definition of community (ibid, p 166).

We are standing high above the Horse Creek drainage, looking out, inland over the Three Sisters wilderness area. The spine of the Cascade range, running north and south rises in three places before us. The mountains are sleeping volcanoes, ten thousand feet tall. They are called Faith, Hope and Charity—three embodied virtues. Beyond them, north, Barry Lopez points out Mount Washington, another old volcano, which rises seven thousand feet. All of these peaks stand, this mid-October day, under snow to their forested shoulders.

Barry Lopez holds himself some twenty feet apart from me. Both of us have moved from the car. We stand on a gravel road, built for logging, and the mountain falls from our feet to the river, rises like a wall at our backs. We breathe and say nothing for a time inside a calm air, the soft light of midday on us and all that we can see. The mood of the place, mine within it, is of autumn as it nears its end. We hold our ground on a slope logged bare a generation ago.

The forest about us is young and spare yet. It contains a few large old trees left by the cutters because they were not straight enough for good lumber, and some returning conifers—Douglas fir and western hemlock—and some understory plants—salal, huckleberry, bracken ferns, red alder. Below us, reaching to the mountains and beyond, the country has never been logged. So it stands as it shaped itself from this volcanic ground. From above, my unaccustomed eye can pick out nothing but a dense canopy of fir. It gives off an air of infinite patience. Some of the trees down there may be five or six centuries old. And within their canopies, depending on the soil and light, the slope of the ground, its orientation to the sun, will grow many of the nations of plants Barry has pointed out as we drove along the Blue River and Deer Creek drainages, up near the headwaters of the McKenzie, on an intricate journey along logging roads and forest trails among the trees, sometimes old growth stands like these I look on now.

There will be Oregon white oak, sugar pines, big leaf maple and red alder, Pacific yew and lowland hemlock, thriving in the shade; along the rivers and creeks, black cottonwood, vine maple and red cedar; and there will be the berries and heath plants of the middle storey—rhododendrons, salal, huckleberries, snowberries, dogwoods, and madrones, where it is drier; and below everything, sword and bracken ferns. Among the tall trees will rise some firs now silver with death but not fallen, some ancient trees, losing their form like salmon coming home to spawn and die, and on the floor of the woods, the bodies of dead trees, claimed by moss and giving birth to young trees out of their decaying bodies. Barry has pointed to all these things as we made our way along the trails this day. Once we stopped before a washed-out culvert because his eye had picked out a roughskin newt bathing in the afternoon light on the road. In season, elk and deer will step among the ferns,
black bear will graze the berries and the bear grass down on Quaking Aspen Swamp; bobcat, coyote and mountain lion will hunt among the smaller mammals, marmot, raccoon, red squirrel and marten—beaver, if the cats can find him in his water fastness; rufous hummingbird will plumb spring flowers; blue heron will preside the shallows; chinook will return to the headwaters of creeks where they were born. Today it is mostly birds we see and hear: the helmeted and sky-blue Stellar's jay, the riversong of varied thrush, the flash of winter wren.

'It saddens me to think that we are looking here at the last tattered flags of the primeval world,' Barry says, given over to the elegiac note the country strikes—one of many it strikes. There is faith here, generosity, but little hope. A little may be enough. I sense in this man, again, a great depth of sorrow, of anguish at what has been done to the earth, to its people, by its people. His countenance and posture are made, right now, in the manner of the narrator of his story 'Upriver': in 'dismay and acceptance.' I read grief and complete surrender in his stance, his open awareness of this place. He is searching for hope, for something to heal what seems the despair, the woundedness, that is native to him and this besieged forest, this remnant of the wild.

At this moment, a single raven flies over us, silently, wide black wings extended, the feathers at the tips splayed like fingers. She comes down out of the second growth woods, passes high between us, and carries on in a stately trajectory over the ancient forest. As she goes, she lets out a soft cry. I look at him and say, 'Raven.' He nods, moved.

In 'Upriver,' Lopez's narrator explains that at the headwaters of the rivers, 'ravens are meditating, and it is from them that the river actually flows, for at night they break down and weep the universal anguish of creatures, the wailing in desolation, the wrenching anger of betrayals—this seize them and pass out of them and in that weeping the river takes its shape... Any act of kindness of which they hear, no matter how filled with trepidation, brings up a single tear, and it, too, runs down the black bills, splashes on small stones and is absorbed in the trickle.' ('Upriver,' River Nato, 1979, p 129).

That story comes to me now, thinking of that bird's passage over us that October afternoon. That night it rained. I woke to its soft fall on the roof of the house and on the pine needles that lie on the drive outside the room where I lay among books. Grief, forgiveness, elegy—the work of raven? The weeping of the earth that sustains this country of rivers, its nations of trees and birds and fish and mammals? Moist air rolling in off the Pacific and lodging, as it does against the flanks of the Cascades? Any of these metaphors would be a way of observing, poetically or more plainly, one of the other characteristic gestures of this place: its rain, its moisture, and everything that condition gives rise to, in a man, in his work, in the quality of his walking witness.
If you read Barry Lopez's writing, you will find the deepest sorrow. You will find expressions of grief, rarely of anger, often of forgiveness. The order he discerns and elaborates so calmly, so elegantly, in the places where he goes; the images of hope he always finds, even on a beach strewn with dying whales: these counterpoint his sorrow, the grief that sounds, all of our grief, within his prose.

There is always light suspended in his tall forests. It is sombre and still, that light, subdued and indirect, except in a clearing here or there. His paragraphs look forbidding, dense, at first. Some of the trees are ancient and the shadows pool darkly around them. Inside, you discover that you can move easily, that the space is generous and suffused with kindness. You can hear the silence between each river note, between each footfall and cry of bird. The light in his paragraphs is as archetypal as a dream. It holds densest to the feet of the trees and the line of the streams. It feels timeless, eternal, like memory.

His sentences themselves are nearly weightless, though the images they carry, the thoughts suspended in them, weigh heavily with us. He composes woods hung with gentle air, haunted by the kind of dense wisdom that conceals in old standing timber.

I stood for a long time at the tip of Saint Lawrence Island, regarding the ice, the distant dark leads of water. In the twilight and wind and the damp cold, memories of the day were like an aura around me, unresolved, a continuous perplexity pierced here and there by sharp rays of light—other memories, coherence. I thought of the layers of it—the dying walrus moving through the chill green water, through the individual minds of the hunters, the mind of an observer. Of the very idea of the walrus living on, even as I ate its flesh. Lines in books about the walrus; walrus-hide lines tied to harpoons, dragging walrus-skin boats over the sea. The curve and weight of a task in my mind, from a head as dense with bone as a boulder. Walrus-meat stew is waiting back at the house, hot now, while I stand in this cold, thickening wind. At the foot of Seruokuk, Lapland longspurs build their nests in the walrus's abandoned crania.

Glaucous gulls fly over. In the shore lead are phalaropes, with their twiglike legs. In the distance I can see flocks of oldsquaw against the sky, and a few cormorants. A patch of shadow that could be several thousand crested auklets—too far away to know. Out there are whales—I have seen six or eight gray whales as I walked this evening. And the ice, pale as the dove-coloured sky. The wind raises the surface of the water. Wake of a seal in the shore lead, gone now. I bowed. I bowed to what knows no deliberating legislature or parliament, no religion, no competing theories of economics, an expression of allegiance with the mystery of life.
I looked out over the Bering Sea and brought my hands folded to the breast of my parka and bowed from the waist deeply toward the north, that great strait filled with life, the ice and the water. I held the bow to the pale sulphur sky at the northern rim of the earth. I held the bow until my back ached, and my mind was emptied of its categories and designs, its plans and speculations. I bowed before the simple evidence of the moment in my life in a tangible place on the earth that was beautiful.

—Arctic Dreams, 1989, pp 413-14

These paragraphs teem with the life of images, some lovely ('the ice, pale as the dove-coloured sky', 'wake of a seal in a shore lead,' the stew brewing nearby); some mournful ('the dying walrus moving through the chill green water'); some hideous ('the walrus living on, even as I ate its flesh'); some marrying the pretty with the ugly, the hopeful with the grim ('Lapland longspurs build their nests in the walrus's abandoned crania,' 'a head as dense with bone as a boulder'). All these scenes and thoughts Lopez draws delicately and starkly, simply. And among these images, these sounds and odours, of stunning immediacy, he places some equally delicate abstractions. The sounds these abstractions make are angular, sharp, stark and stern like trees or rays of light: memories holding like an aura, 'a continuous perplexity pierced here and there by sharp rays of light,' 'no deliberating legislature or parliament, no religion, no competing theories of economics, an expression of allegiance with the mysteries of life.' It may be these consonant-rich words and their thoughts are the floor and walls of the storied spaces he makes and fills with the rounder sound, the smaller forms, of one place on earth. Those sounds and shapes move within the infrastructure of his ideas, beneath its canopies, among the limbs of elegant thoughts, tall as trees.

This passage looks with equanimity, though not without love, on life and death. This passage of writing, like any place on earth where life is lived, includes beginnings and endings, tones of grief and notes of happiness, happenings and images both pleasing and distressing, simplicity and complexity, mystery and contradiction.

In the country of this passage, as in many passages of Lopez's writing, I feel that I am led outside time, into archetypal time. I can't explain fully why this is so, just as I cannot when it happens in certain physical places: it is the work of the light and sound, shape and history, the way the terrain is limned, the way it draws me in. I notice how, in these paragraphs, and elsewhere in his work, he moves without our noticing between the present and the past tenses, suggesting the eternal truth of a moment, slowing time to the order of geologic or deep time. He shifts from the near at hand to the distant in his focus; from the particular to the universal; the tangible to the abstract, and back. I am certain these are not the devices of an author anxious to have us feel the effect he intends. They are qualities of a moment and a place he allows to live in his mind, to coax thoughts there, marry with them and take shape as text through the keys of his typewriter in an upstairs room in a riverine valley.
Lopez's prose is washed with sorrow in the same manner the forests about his home are visited with rain. It is the weeping of the raven, which rises out of grief and forgiveness and thanks, which comes in off the ocean to the land as it always has, and without which the place would not be what it is and would house no hope at all. He apprehends the world through his sorrow. Lopez like raven sees it in a sombre light. That is the light of the place of trees and rivers where he has grounded his affections all these years. He has no prejudice against darkness: the place is like that. He moves at ease deep into what might seem to others gloomy territory. He makes his way toward high ground where there is prospect, to the very headwaters, the source of the streams, to open ground. He persists toward the light.

The land he has chosen as home contours his writing: why should it surprise us that the land itself patterns his thoughts and moods and the language with which he frames his stories there? Particularly a man so given to land, so eager to put himself into his country, so moved and filled by spaces.

One night, Lopez asks me, 'What is it about a landscape that makes it hopeful?' 'I am struck by the way a landscape can hold and give rise to hope,' he says. This for him is a quality it has, embedded and expressed in its natural history, its evolution and persistence, the relationships at play within it, the continuance of life against all sorts of odds; it is eloquent in the dignity of untrammelled places. It is the moral of the story of the salmon, their return home to spawn and die and give rise to new life; the survival of the low trees, the hibernating bears of the unforgiving Arctic; it is the meaning of the lives of Indigenous people. Hope, like beauty and dignity, is immanent in land, understood as the pattern of relationships within a place, where human agency has not severed those connections and diminished land—and perhaps even there. 'I believe hope is substantial,' is what he said. 'It is not an affect. It is integral.'

Where dignity holds, unbroken, and celebrated, within a landscape, where it retains the form it intended for itself, where its is authentic: then it gives rise to hope. Where its dignity has been taken, no hope arises, and no healing can come of it to us, who have broken it, until we attempt its restoration. Where hope still lies, we may begin to fathom it, to loose it for our understanding by giving ourselves to that landscape with vulnerability and discernment; and we may give the gift of that place to others best by turning what we find into a story, and telling it plainly and in keeping with the order that holds in that hopeful terrain.

People—critics and commentators—usually misunderstand writing altogether, Lopez thinks. 'I have had interviews on radio and television where the anchor—and this is the same with some
critics and academics—asks questions about what I intended to do, to say, to achieve in my writing, as though the writing is intentional or purposive. They think that you sit down to write down what it is that you think about something. Writing does not work like this at all. I sit and write, and in the writing I am simply present—with the thought, the place, the idea. It arrives.’

He tells me how it was he wrote Arctic Dreams. ’I spent time in the Arctic until I felt suffused in it. Then I came and read and read, and piled up notes and books. I had the scheme of Arctic Dreams in my head eighteen months before I wrote it. I typed notes from my journals and from books and left them in ordered piles with flags marking passages I thought I would use. Then I sat and wrote the book over nine months, working in a three-week cycle. One week planning and rereading; the second week making piles of notes ready; the third week writing; the fourth week working in the woods or whatever, not touching the book.’ In his understanding of writing, the writer’s discipline lies in steeping oneself in landscape and subject; and then in making oneself present enough for the story to rise in him. The writing, for him at least, happens out of that immersion—the first immersion in the place, and the final immersion in the complex space in which memory and research, thought imagination and recollection are all enfolded. And the writing is a kind of engagement of mind and body with the original place, gathered, held and ordered in the country of the writer’s mind, as a heard music is ordered on paper by its composer’s choice of key, tempos and so on; made perhaps simpler but also more meaningful, by the play of thought and memory with the actualities of place and of the experience of place. The writing is a reflection on a place and thoughts that rise from it; it is also relationship enacted with, even within, that space, the performance of a dance with it

In Arctic Dreams, and in an essay, ‘Landscape & Narrative’ he wrote (in 1984) while Arctic Dreams was shaping in his mind and on the tables of his upstairs study, Barry Lopez fashioned something approaching a credo, a theory of storytelling in which he articulates how it is that landscape moulds human mind and character, and how story serves land, speaks for places and heals disembodied human lives. Characteristically, Lopez draws his thinking about this from his time among Indigenous people, the Navajo and the Eskimo particularly. In Indigenous cultures in many places, he observes, ‘the land is thought to exhibit a sacred order ... Each individual ... undertakes to order his interior landscape according to the exterior landscape. To succeed in this means to achieve a balanced state of mental health’ (Landscape & Narrative,’ Crossing Open Ground, 1988, p 67) For the Navajo, one’s individual nature was always prone to disarray. Story and ceremony helped one reorder his or her life according to the ’obvious (scientific) and ineffable (artistic) orders of the local landscape’ (ibid, p 67). Lopez himself holds that ’[t]he exterior landscape is organized according to principles or laws or tendencies beyond human control. It is understood to contain an integrity that is beyond human analysis and unimpeachable’ (ibid, p 66).
Ritual—performed in ceremony, dance, art, architecture, and story—within Indigenous cultures serves to invoke, and is itself ‘derived from the perceived natural order of the universe;’ and the purpose of the invocation is to ‘make the individual again a reflection of the myriad enduring relationships of the landscape,’ and hence, whole (ibid, p 67). The purpose of storytelling, then, for Lopez, is similar: ‘A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape’ of the listener or reader. ‘The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all the elements of story—syntax, mood, figures of speech—in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual’s interior’ (ibid, p 68). The purpose of story is, for Lopez, to reproduce the harmony of the land, through rhythm and word and image, in the mind, in the soul, the body, the life of the listener. ‘Inherent in story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call “the land”’ (ibid).

Any story that is true will then contain elements of land, of a known country. What orders that country orders the telling; or, at least, the telling reproduces the order of relations alive in a place, in the life of the reader. The place’s harmonies do not enter the story without the discipline of the storytelling, the necessary humility and attention, the necessary loss of self, the awareness, the listening. The story reveals and recreates the power inherent in the land. So, for Lopez, the role of the storyteller, that person’s dedication to truthfully describing ‘the order before him,’ emphasising certain relationships is seminal; and his or her humanity, specifically the gift for narrative, is indispensable to the process by which landscapes can become known to, can heal and tutor, listeners and readers.

Even in ‘Landscape & Narrative,’ an abstract piece, Lopez holds true to the storyteller’s art, beginning in a place, the Brooks Range, Alaska, in a setting where stories of wolverine and other grounded stories are being told. He is a man present in landscape, observing the order of things on the ground. Look at all his work, from his fables, his children’s book Crow and Weasel, essays such as ‘The Whaleboat,’ ‘Trying the Land,’ ‘The Language of Animals,’ ‘The Passing Wisdom of Birds’—indeed any of his writing—and you will find the ideas set out in ‘Landscape & Story’ embodied. They are full of the weather, the hydrology, the flight of birds, the eloquent tracks of animals, the work and words of men and women, the anguish of birds, the grief of streams, the sound of shifting basalt river stones—and they seem to be sound and also elusive, as places are, as the land is. From these elegantly limned relationships in the land he allows ideas to rise like fish to the surface of his mind; and he allows an intuited poetic order of place to tincture and illuminate the spaces made by the tender forms of his sentences, just like dawn on the land.

We need story, then, to reconcile us with land in order to make ourselves and our societies authentic and enduring, as the land is. And we—all of us—need to come into intimacy with land, for there lies the lore of right relations, of beauty and justice. ‘The land is like poetry,’ he writes
in *Arctic Dreams* (*ibid*, p 274); and we cannot do without a literature that attends to it, seeking its inexplicable coherence, its embodied wisdom, that and mediates between the land and us, its people, that sings its poetry for the rest of us. The writing discerns and reenacts the essential relationships that make a place what it is. One thing we need desperately is a language in which to begin to acknowledge, to explore and express our local places, attentive to and therefore patterned by the local order of things, to the divining of whose nature the writer gives his or her attention, after which they send their imaginations. It falls to writers, and to other artists, to fashion and model and articulate such a language—to express the order of places and to allow audiences to feel the power of land, a power to order and heal.

López's emphasis on the almost sacerdotal role of the storyteller, his or her necessary mediation between the land and its people, raises in me, I notice, a momentary concern. It may seem to follow that the land (and the wisdom within it, its immanent truths, its poem) must remain a closed book to people who do not have the gift for apprehension of the storyteller or the help of the *ismamatu*q. But, while he emphasises the importance of the storyteller, of the ritual, the sacrificial force of story, and while he accepts that burden for himself and practises it with deep humility, his body of work tells us over and again that the earth is open to all of us, directly. The necessary work of the storyteller, of a literature of place, does not stop the rest of us practising ecological imagination all on our own. We may not all return with stories, but we may return to the land—and it to us. What counts is not who you are—priest or parishioner—but how you approach the rest of creation, the quality of the relationship you essay with the living world—whether you come as a pilgrim or an improver, to learn or to manipulate, to surrender or to possess.

López holds that our minds and characters, no matter what we may be told and no matter who we are, are shaped by places. In 'Landscape & Narrative,' López writes,

> the shape and character of these relationships in a person's thinking, I believe, are deeply influenced by where on this earth one goes, what one touches, the patterns one observes in nature—the intricate history of one's life in the land, even a life in the city, where wind, the chirp of birds, the line of a falling leaf, are known. These thoughts are arranged, further, according to the thread of one's moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual is affected by land as it is by genes.

—'Landscape and Narrative,' *Crossing Open Ground*, 1988, p 65

So, as Lawrence Buell glosses this, '[t]he contours of human subjectivity, as he [López] sees it, are molded by the configurations of the landscapes with which a person has been deeply associated. Subjectivity is not a mere function of landscape; but it is regulated somewhat by landscape, and as far as López is concerned landscape is the most interesting variable' (Buell, 1995, p 94).
So, it is clear from Barry Lopez's life's work, his way of being present in land, as well as from these elegantly argued paragraphs of his, that he understands how a man or a woman's life and work can be made sense of, may be seen as arising from, his or her natural history—not just that, of course, for cultural belief, genetic disposition, education and other things count. But natural history—which might even be understood to include such matters—gives rise to character and to the art, the stories, the kind of sentences, the characteristic syntax, a man or woman may make. Merely having a natural history will not be enough, however, to open the genius of the place to each of us. An act of attention, of imagination, of spiritual engagement, of what Scott Slovic calls (following Lopez himself) awareness, is required of each of us: the kind of surrender to land that Lopez depicts in the stories of River Notes and practises himself in Arctic Dreams.

I have seen this man give himself to a place with deep attention and vulnerability, respectfully and patiently. What seems to count is how we choose to be present with it, in the land, how deeply and subtly we look. There is a practice of place, of ecological imagination, that each of us who wants to learn the land, will need to work at, to live out.

In Arctic Dreams Lopez draws on the writing of the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan and concludes that 'it is precisely what is invisible in the land ... that makes what is merely empty space to one person a place to another' (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 278). Tuan is speaking of the way we find meaning in places through stories and memories of our own and our people's attachment to places; he is emphasising the capacity of culture to bring meaning to space and make it 'place.' Lopez attributes more power than Yi-Fu Tuan to the land itself, one feels, than to memory and culture—how it, land, enters dreams and stories; and how then those dreams recalled and stories shared, allow the place itself, in its authenticity, not as some cultural production, to arise for others local to the place. In other words, Tuan seems by 'invisible' really to mean stories notionally embedded in places and retold in song and ceremony; whereas Lopez understands by 'invisible' that coherent, ineffable identity expressed in the particularities and recalled in memories of places. While acknowledging the way that places to which peoples are attached are rich with cultural association, Lopez, in Arctic Dreams at this point, in 'Landscape and Narrative and elsewhere) emphasises the meaning-making power of landscape itself, of the invisible orders at work within a place, reproduced in ceremony, rather than imposed upon those places. His storytellers discern the invisible order and enact it in narrative. What is called for to discern this invisible landscape is intimacy, imagination, a kind of sloughing off of thick layers of self-reference and concern so that the being of the place enters one, and one enters the being, the poem, the divinity, of the place.

Lopez knows this practice will elude most of us, particularly in these times when 'no one remembers how to live anymore,' as Blue Heron says in 'Drought,' in secular days when the very idea of deep engagement with place, poetic engagement is disparaged, marginalised, fetishised in advertising and nostalgic romances. But some of us have the gift, Blue Heron observes, and perhaps others may learn from them. 'For some people,' Lopez writes in *Arctic Dreams*, 'what they are is not finished at the skin, but continues with the reach of the senses out into the land' (*ibid*, p 279).

This is true, I think, of Barry Lopez.

None of us is finished at the skin, according to ecology and to Neal Evernden, in particular. Place and person intergrade, interpenetrate. Evernden, in his essay 'Beyond Ecology,' quotes Paul Shepard's writing that the epidermis of the skin is 'ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soil, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration' (Evernden, 1978, p 93). The skin of the perceiving self is like that too. The intermingling of person and place is to be understood, writes Evernden in that influential ecocritical essay, as an aesthetic process, whereby place influences perceiving self, and perceiving self helps compose place. Place and self are not distinct, not disjunct. Nothing in an ecology is discrete or entire—nothing except the place they compose. The writer who reaches out through sense and imagination to the place opens the pores of the skin of their self that much wider to the place they witness, Lopez is suggesting.

Land affects us all, more than it is conventional to acknowledge. But land affects some people more than others—those like Lopez who give themselves to it out of love, out of an instinct that it is the land itself that holds, embodied in particular places, the answers. He reaches out to it with every sense; he is not complete at his boot-toes and fingers, and you will not have met him, seen his edges, until you have ranged with him up the rivers and ridges and into the trees, where he has set his life down.

In his essay 'The American Geographies,' published in *About This Life*, Barry Lopez speaks of 'local geniuses' of the American landscape, ordinary men and women steeped in their home places, 'in whom geography thrives,' 'for whom the land is alive.' What distinguishes these locals is not so much the impeccability of their knowledge of the names and details, but 'the respect they bear these places they love.' 'Their knowledge is intimate rather than encyclopedic, human but not necessarily scholarly,' he writes ('The American Geographies,' *About this Life*, 1998, pp 134, 138, 139–40). America, he says, 'teems with such people.' As Australia does. The problem is that the commercial and political cultures of the places purvey faux national geographies, for reasons to do with markets, constituencies and economic agendas, and the local geographies get missed; in fact, says, Lopez, the very enterprise of 'discovering where one lives is finally disdained' (*ibid*, p 137).
If this is so, then, despite the proliferation of local lovers of place, we need a literature that celebrates that enterprise of place intimacy, that finds and talks with these local geniuses, that lets the country and its wisdoms speak out to all of us, that models a way of living close to land. Without it, the process of alienation from land is doomed to continue, and even those people—and perhaps that is all of us—in whom the ancient hunger of the mind for ‘concordance with that mysterious entity, the earth’ (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 278) persists, will not recall the ways and words in which that journey of belonging is accomplished. We need stories that reenact geographies; and we need locals in whom geography lives, people not finished at the skin.

While I am with him—I think it is the first night—Barry Lopez plays some music on the compact disk player that sits on the floor. He has spoken of music a lot. He favours a spare and elegiac music, nothing lush, hard of edge, yet melodic: plainsong, sacred music, Bach’s cello suites, Keith Jarrett’s jazz piano, Jan Gabarek’s baleful saxophone, Arvo Pärt’s suites of despair and wonder. The music that moves him, I notice, comes clear and clean out of silence. It makes no compromise; it disdains fashion. It is superficially simple and repetitive, yet it contains complex chords, seems to carry an uncompromising light. It suggests intense thought and expresses the deepest feeling—often in a form like prayer, like worship.

He tells me, while Pärt’s ‘Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten’ plays, how Pärt, the Estonian composer, and his wife once came to Oregon. He, Lopez, went to meet them at the house they had rented on the coast. ‘Pärt’s English is limited,’ he says, ‘so his wife had to translate for us. I told them how once I had returned to Ellesmere Island—where Greely’s party founded in 1884, where the young Edward Israel died, where now an archaeological dig was, to good end, dismantling an old Eskimo village. I told them how I had stood and grown overwhelmed at the hopelessness of ever finding words to speak of everything that had been lost in that place—those men’s hopes, the way of life of the Indigenous people who came before them. Sometime later I heard that piece of Pärt’s for the first time, and I sat and wept. This piece of music says everything I felt in that place, but could not find words for. This is what I told Arvo Pärt.’

How is it we know, listening to music, the mood it carries? How is it a pattern of notes, a chord, a single note from a chord, a certain beat suggest a particular interior (human) and exterior (physical) landscape? Anyone, listening to Pärt’s cantus will feel the grief, sense a wide, still landscape, I think. And listening to Lopez tell me this story, I was reminded that, though writing works with words and therefore carries images and information through the form of its letters to a reader, each of the letters and words and phrases and sentences makes a sound in a reader’s mind in delivering its cargo. Writing, like music, sounds—although, unless we hear it read aloud, its sound happens imaginatively. To read, we must hear the writing’s music and interpret it. And as we are
moved by music, understanding the implication of its tone, so we are moved by the music made by written words: their tone and its implications, the psychological and physical places that, in our experience, have such a music.

I know that I, as a writer, have said, hearing a piece of music: That is how I want my writing to sound. One of the things I think I mean is that I would like to leave a reader feeling, having read my book, the way I feel now, having heard this piece of music. Even more powerfully, directly, than writing, music shapes spaces, touches them with a certain mood, and places a listener within them, to flesh out the experience of being in that place according to her own life’s experience.

Still, the space, in some sense, will be the same for everyone. Though writing is not music, I think to myself, most of a text’s power to do the same thing rests in its sonics too—in the pattern of its sounds, in its poetics; in the kind of space that pattern suggests, and in the way it leaves us feeling. How well it approximates those same qualities in a particular geography or psychic landscape we know is one of the ways in which we weigh the truthfulness of a piece of prose.

What we might call the music of a place, its aesthetic, or its invisible order—not only its sounds, but the defining quality of its pattern of relationships between rock and tree and river, bird and animal and insect, soil and weather and human history there—may be just what a nature writer is trying to divine, or what finds its way into his or her prose, out of the silence, as Pärt has put it (speaking of the process of composing music) when the writing seems to echo the place, embody it, emanate from and continue it.

I mean something literal here as well as something metaphoric by ‘music’ in relation both to land and text. Places make sounds, have characteristic cacophonies, perhaps amounting, though unintended, to music. Writing works musically—it makes sounds and orders words rhythmically. So land and language both make music. There is a defining note expressed by a stretch of land and a piece of language that we might also call its music (Lopez has called this its harmonies)—the ineffable or artistic order that makes each what it is. The genius of a place is its invisible, ineffable order—we could call it the music of the place. In the same way the essence of a piece of writing, its character and nature is its music—the pattern of its sounds and the way they leave us feeling. Lopez, as we have seen speaks of the way a storyteller reproduces the harmonies at work in a place on earth. The harmonies of a place are its characteristic set of relationships, dynamic and myriad though they are. The harmonies of the text, in which the place repeats, are the relationships among its words, particularly the sound patterns made by its syntax and the timbre of its diction.

The music of a piece of writing—its lyric, its poetry, its tone and rhythm—is, given the way writing works on our minds through our ears, one of its most important, fundamental, and least contemplated, qualities. Most criticism goes to the intellectual content, the ideas, the action, the
images communicated by texts; it regards them as made things, silent artifacts, not sounding things, songs. We disregard sound, the musicality of a work of words, and yet it strikes me that what matters and what stirs us most is less what a piece of writing says than how it sounds to us, how it sounds out its stories or notions. These thoughts arise from my time with Lopez, from the music he played, the way he responded to it, his story of Arvo Pärt, and the way he speaks in his own work of the congruence that narratives may have, and should aspire to, in their form and effect, with the harmonies of land. I say more about them in chapters that follow, later on my journey—particularly in my chapter “The real world”—and in my conclusion. For now, I would say this: that Lopez betrays in his person, his conversation, his prose, and his characteristic way of engaging with country, a profoundly musical sensibility; and it is clear that he is as alert for the way a place might articulate the nature of its spaces to him through its rhythms, sounds and musical order as he is alert for how his own words might somehow resonate that order for his readers. It is not a thing he says to me, but it is clear in what he said to Pärt. We say in the music of our sentences and narratives far more than we can hope to say in their meanings, just as a place says far more to us in its felt rhythms and forms than it does in the details it shares with us of its life.

Although I mean more than sound when I speak of the music of a piece of prose, perhaps sound—notes and patterns of notes—has special importance in the way prose shapes physical spaces in our mind. Sound has a way of implying the nature of a space—its volume, its depth and reach, its nearness and distance, even something of the shape of its terrain. Sound travels differently over a plain, through a forest, in a valley. Once, I stood with Barry Lopez above the Kedumba Valley near my home, and the sound of bellbirds and sulphur-crested cockatoos came to us out of the trees five hundred metres or so below, down where the Kedumba Creek runs. The fact and the character of those different notes—the one a sweet piping, the other a frantic scream—gave the valley scale for us, it sounded its depth and shaped its expanse. I recall Barry Lopez’s saying to me then that he had grown fascinated with the way sound elaborates spatial volume.

In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez challenges what may still remain the conventional idea—among anthropologists, literary theorists, scholars of linguistics and postmodern theorists—that language grows from culture and from human minds, not from land itself; that it is a cultural creation, and a device we humans use to order the land, give meaning to reality. Here is Lopez’s response to that orthodoxy:

I think there are possibly two things wrong with this thought. First, the landscape is not inert; and it is precisely because it is alive that it eventually contradicts the imposition of a reality that does not derive
from it. Second, language is not something man imposes on the land. It evolves in his conversation with the land—in testing the sea ice with the toe of a kamik, in the eating of a wild berry, in repairing a sled by the light of a seal-oil lamp. A long-lived inquiry produces a discriminating language. The very order of the language, the ecology of its sounds and thoughts, derives from the mind's intercourse with the landscape.

—Arctic Dreams, 1986, pp 277–78

Lopez is speaking here of Indigenous languages, which have evolved out of people's long relationship with a country. David Abram explores this theory in great depth, compellingly, in The Spell of the Sensuous. It seems clear that words, whole language systems, evolved out of particular places and peoples' engagement with them; suggested themselves to people intimate with the ways of places by landform, weather pattern, wind and river sound. Sound out Indigenous languages like that of the Gundungurra where I live, the Wardandi of the Margaret River, the Hopi of America's southwest, and you hear patterns of sound, cadences, that differ as the places differ; and you will hear the pitch and meter of those places in the words. Indigenous languages then arise out of intimacy between a people and a place. Words among them are still—as Johnson thought was the case even for English in 1755—the daughters of earth; sentences are still the children of rivers; paragraphs and stories the offspring of entire catchments. Humankind learned language, it seems, from the run of rivers and the voice of wind, learned grammar from the logic of the land and the seasons. Though we write now in text abstracted from the living earth, still our words sound, and perhaps they still sound, if we let them, with what the wind and plateau have to say.

I wonder if we can extend the idea (that place shapes prose) from the context of the phonetic language systems of first peoples to the text of an individual writer, these days, a man or woman working with, say, English, the colonising tongue, in country to which that tongue is not indigenous. Is it possible that a writer's relationship with a place, such as Barry Lopez describes in this passage, may order his language, shape the music of his text, influence 'the ecology of its sounds,' the nature of his syntax and the structure and form of his work, so that we might find the work expressive of or akin to the country? The opposite is certainly true: a language that is heedless to the real order at work in a place, that does not listen to it first, will give rise to no sense of that place. It will give no sense of it; it will ring untrue; the country will not live in it. I spoke in the introduction about how I feel this is often the case in Australian literature of place, with its pastoralising project. Paul Carter, I think, would agree. So it is possible then to write without an ear for place and express next to nothing of it. But is it, as I ask here, possible to listen and then somehow articulate country in one's syntax? I believe Barry Lopez, at least sometimes, manages this.

Indeed, it would seem to me unlikely that a writer such as Lopez, loving language and landscape as he does, practising such deep association with place, feeling for the invisible landscape within the
country he moves in, wishing ‘the order of my life to be arranged in the same way I find the light, the slight movement of the wind’ (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 405), would not find his words touched, his thoughts shaped, his prose patterned by the places he loves. By other things too, of course—his character, his mood, the politics of the day, his reading, his genes—but also by the relationships and music alive in the land and felt my him, as he moves through it. It would be strange and inadequate, I think, to offer an explanation of the prose of a writer like Lopez, who places such weight on the land itself, who lays himself open to it, to offer an explanation of his prose that did not look for the origins of its resonances in his natural history, that did not at least look for correlations of his language’s aesthetic in the land. It would be odd to find none, and indeed there are many.

I find in Lopez’s prose the timbre of two places: the Arctic, the place he has written about most, and the McKenzie Valley, the place in which he has shaped most of his sentences. Like the Arctic, his best prose has an austere yet tender form, like reaches of shifting sea-ice singing, hauntingly, with yearning and grief, as the dark sea moves beneath it; like the endless tundra decorated sparsely with ground-hugging, windswept trees; like the ‘blue-black vault of the winter sky, a cold beauty alive with scintillating stars.’ He makes spaces with his sentences, sounds and patterns them around you, and those spaces are stark, stern but not arid; and he places a delicately observed gesture of stream, voice of bird, expression of seal, howl of wolf, tatter of human conversation, image of cruelty or forgiveness within that space and so gives it life.

And then, like the valley he lives in, the order of his language is dense and dark, temperate, elusive, washed by grief, draped with mist like a benediction, a gesture of forgiveness; it is angular, well rooted in good soil, so that it stands true; it reaches high to heaven like a Douglas fir; it is stern, a little unbending, simple in form, from the outside, like a forest, but with a complex interior landscape; like a forest, it is clustered and intertwined, sustained by sturdy structures (image and thought), harbouring under a dark canopy soft and delicate forms (the hanging moss, the flowers and vines of the forest floor, the berries and the bears that eat them, the owls); it holds caves in which are hidden ‘certain mysteries;’ it grabs at your passing feet, your racing mind, like vine maple and insists you slow to a more contemplative pace; it houses ‘[t]hat river monk, blue heron, meditating behind the lightning strike of his beak in a downstream pool’ (‘Trying the Land,’ Crossing Open Ground, 1988, p 60); it runs with the rivers he has learned to listen to, on the beds of which he notices a rock loosen, turn and settle again—rivers that have their source in the tears of raven, rivers whose running ‘is the weeping of the earth for what is lost’ (River Notes, 1979, p 66).

Notes of river, notes of desert (of ice, of tundra, of sand, of sea), notes of the forest’s edge—these sound in his prose’s song. They sound also in his speaking voice, in his stillness and animation, his sternness and vulnerability, his kindness.
He is wolverine, its resilience and fierce intensity; he is crow, its lofty and ancient wisdom, its restless curiosity; he is blue heron, its meditative posture; he is McKenzie River, its lean and languid passage; he is beach, its conversation of shifting tide and steadfast shore; he is Douglas fir, its rootedness in earth, its reach and talent for standing still. Imagine yourself standing, among animals, in a sudden clearing in a forest, into which light falls, through which perhaps a shallow stream runs; imagine Wolf Prairie—to read a Lopez paragraph is to be in such a place:

On the far side of the Thomsen other herds of muskoxen graze below a range of hills in clusters of three or four. In groups of ten and twelve. I sketch the arrangements in my notebook. Most remarkable to me, and clear even at a distance of two or three miles because of the contrast between their spirited, bucking gambols and the placid ambling of the others, is the number of calves. Among forty-nine animals, I count twelve calves. The mind doesn't easily register the sustenance of the sedge meadows, not against the broad testimony of the barren hills and eroded plateaus. It balks at the evidence of fecundity, and romping calves. The muskoxen on the far side of the river graze, nevertheless, on sweet coltsfoot, on mountain sorrel, lousewort, and pendant grass, on water sedge. The sun gleams on them.

On the melt ponds. The indifferent sky towers. There is something of the original creation here.

—Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 44

The formal note of 'The mind doesn't easily register' sounds beside the personal note of 'I count' and 'I sketch.' Diction and syntax combine conversation ('in groups of ten or twelve,' 'Among forty-nine animals, I count twelve calves'), science ('The mind doesn't easily register the sustenance of the sedge meadows ...') and sermon ('broad testimony of the barren hills,' 'There is something of the original creation here'). Some of these words are plain and familiar others are antique or almost fussy in their precision ('gambols,' 'fecundity,' 'creation,' 'testimony,' 'pendant,' 'sustenance,'). There is that decorative quality I was referring to, like the most-draped trees, in the two long, complex sentences here ('Most remarkable ... the number of calves' with its long and drawn-out parenthetic description between the opening phrase and the verb 'is' and subject complement; and 'The mind ... eroded plateaus'), in which a simple observation is elaborated and made ornate by the attachment of a precise description of the calves' movements and by the biblical reference to the hills and plateaus. The author's care for sound is betrayed by the syntax of the sentence that begins 'The muskoxen on the far side': no straight list of plants; instead a carefully phrased list—two 'on's, two plants without that preposition, and then its repetition, to round out the sentence and sustain its rhythm. The dense and angular music of those three long sentences, none of which is as long as it seems, is given snap and irregular beat, the smoothness is unravelling, by the short sentences and sentence fragments strewn among them: 'In groups of ten or twelve,' 'The sun gleams on them. On the melt ponds. The indifferent sky towers.' Sometimes the movement is limpid and gentle; sometimes we are jolted. In these ways, the writing employs blocks of patterned sound of differing lengths; it creates long musical phrases and short ones; sometimes it sustains a
rhythm, sometimes subverts it. And what is their effect? All of this stopping and starting; this slow, easy flow of surprising words and references, and then its dislocation (the parenthetical clauses, the punctuation, the sentence fragments); this admixture of familiar short words with less familiar longer ones, this blending of different tempi and tone; this combination of dense, complex structures and short, sunny, simple clauses, resembles a landscape of dense forest and river and meadow. And it slows one down—slows time itself. The tempo of the writing is very slow, a largo. It stills you, seeming to put you, as I have observed elsewhere, inside mythic time. But there is lightness here too, set against a dense backdrop made by the diction and the syntax, and there is a delicacy of tone in the writing. We are at the edge of the trees, out of the stern woods, standing in a sudden ecstatic moment.

If we are, it is the work of the storyteller’s choice of sentence shape, colour of word and phrase, rhythm, diction and reference (to bible, to field guide, to here). It is the work of his music, which creates a feeling of space you might encounter, as I did, in the woods of his riverine valley. As Lopez was in those places, so those places are in his writing, and we, his readers, are then in those places too.

Lopez’s writing at its best achieves a congruence of a musical nature with the place it concerns. But to analyse it as I have is to conceive of it as a composition, a musical rendering of a place, transposed to manuscript paper, as it were, remote from that place, by a man sitting on a chair in his study. And so, to some extent, it is, arising as it does from his exacting writing disciplines. But Lopez’s writing is more than a static artifact, a construct. It is itself a dance, a kind of enacted engagement with country, albeit made, in real time, just as I have described, in quietness and detachment. To see it this way, it is necessary to imagine a continuity running between his encounter (with the muskox, for example, his being there on the ridge with binoculars and notebook and that light and air), and his writing it up, in the manner he described to me. After the observation, the writer carries the animated country—as a memory, a resonance of a particularly textured, vivid spatial volume—in his mind, engaging with it there, exploring its complexity; and when he writes it, though he may be far from the actual geography, he is still present and it is present in him as music remains with us and we can sing it long after the original encounter with it is done; and his writing may be imagined as a rhythmic reenactment of his embodied experience of the country. As a performance of the place.

Lopez’s writing becomes on occasion, then, a dance with the place it considers, and it moves to rhythms we sense pattern that place. His writing has a way, now and then, of getting places moving; and his words and thoughts seem to me to be at play within the rhythms he observes in the land and articulates in his prose. Notably this is so in the frozen landscapes of Arctic Dreams, where Lopez manages to write the landscape into life, to render its dynamic space real, and then to dance with it. The book we read shapes itself between his own syntactical gestures of sacred
dance and the world he animates around him. This happens in his early fiction, too, as Paul has noted (Paul, 1992, p 82), set in deserts and rivers of his close acquaintance; it happens in many of the essays gathered in Crossing Open Ground and About this Life; and it happens, as I have mentioned, in sections of Arctic Dreams. Lopez's early stories, wrote Paul, are 'essentially oral and performative. Their slow dance ... is as much a sacred gesture as the dance of the herons in which the narrator participates' (Paul, 1992, p 82). It is as though, in this writing, Lopez is of a piece with the landscape he considers, congruent or concordant with it, to use his words, so that his words become a dance with it, made in time and step and tune with the place.

In Arctic Dreams, thought Paul, Lopez returned in nonfiction to that earlier performative writing: 'in surging prose, Lopez gives us an entire eco in motion over geologic time, an intricate dance to the rhythms of life in all the spaces of the Arctic world...' (ibid, p 105). Each chapter of that book takes its readers with him into the landscape—into the sky migrations of birds, into the cold deeps with whale and narwhal, across the tundra, over the ice-pack with polar bear—and immerses us in those worlds, recreated in the movement of his words. This is nature writing as a performance of, and with, a place; it is the kind of ecological apprehension and musical engagement with landscape that Paul Carter had in mind. It is adequation in a dance of words.

Dance? Well, if not always a dance, Lopez's writing is at least always a stroll in the company of country. He moves in places; and because he moves, the places seem to move about him. I have noted earlier how Lopez developed a characteristic technique in the essays that are collected in Crossing Open Ground, and he perfects it in Arctic Dreams—the technique of moving his narrator (that is, himself in that mode of careful contemplation) through a landscape, on foot mostly or by truck, raft, boat or aircraft, and elaborating places out of that mobile observation. His landscapes seem alive and shifting, as any landscape is to an observer who does not stand still in it, but walks or drives or rides or swims through it. Such a relationship with a place brings to light the truth that places are indeed never still; they are composed of sets of constantly shifting relationships, including that between the moving witness and the landforms and lifeforms in that terrain. They are dynamic, places, right down to the level of geology and atoms—everything is on the move, and those many movements, or vibrations, make a kind of complex rhythm of energies, a set of lifeforms at dance with each other, in dissonant and consonant patterns. Lopez's writing makes his places feel alive because he keeps his point of engagement with them mobile. This is one way in which he manages to set the eco in motion, as Paul puts it. It is an example of the kind of artistic

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47 See p 153 above.
relationship with places that Paul Carter advocates, in which the artist's work elaborates his or her dynamic relationships with a dynamic space, moving through it, not looking at it.\textsuperscript{48}

'This is an old business,' writes Lopez near the start of his circumambulatory\textsuperscript{49} chapter 'The Country of the Mind' in *Arctic Dreams*, 'walking slowly over the land with an appreciation of its immediacy to the senses and in anticipation of what lies hidden in it' (*Arctic Dreams*, 1989, p 254). And how do the rhythms of his body in that walk, of the country experienced in motion about, and with, him—how do they find their way into his syntax? Partly, I suspect, through the body's memory, the cells' recollection, of the syntax, as it were, of the occasion, his being-then-in-that-place. Perhaps in the writing, which engages, not the feet but the fingers, in a walk across keys, stepping and dancing to make words and patterns of sounds, the body might be imagined as rehearsing the rhythm of the first encounter, or one of many possible variations upon it.

Take that passage from *Arctic Dreams* again and see if it does not feel in its patterns of sound, in its rhythms, a little like (even though Lopez in that case is sitting still) the pattern of engaged rambling—that old business' Lopez speaks of. Feel its amble and stop; its excursion and return, its animation and excitement and its slower pulse of rumination. Feel how that set of irregular rhythms, of manifold and shifting patterns of sound, such as nature anywhere will always manifest, seems to suggest a piece of country caught in the act of its own self-expression.

'I wonder what you might say the place of fiction is in all this?' Barry Lopez asks me. In the work I attribute to nature writing, the literature of place, he means. He asks, I suppose, because we have already spoken of the special role that falls to nonfiction, to the essayist; because in this house, by this water, he fashioned his early works of fiction and has fashioned many stories since; because he believes that storytelling, narrative performs the central work of knowledge-making and healing in our world (regardless of whether we may call it fiction or nonfiction\textsuperscript{50}); because he has been moved and shaped, I am sure he would say, by some works of fiction (Charles Frazier's

\textsuperscript{48} Lopez writes each chapter of *Arctic Dreams* in this circumambulatory fashion. He moves in the country that gave rise to his meditations, and we move in the country of his mind. Perhaps 'The Country of the Mind' is the best and most sustained example. The words I quote above from Paul refer particularly to the chapter 'Migration,' another wonderful exemplar. It is also on show powerfully in 'Searching for Ancestors,' *Crossing Open Ground*, which begins 'I am lying on my back in northern Arizona' and ends, 'I lie there recalling the land as if the Anasazi were something that had once bloomed in it' (1988, p 180).

\textsuperscript{49} I take this word from Sherman Paul, who borrows it from Charles Olson and uses it to describe Lopez's technique in *Arctic Dreams*. See Paul, 1992, p 102.

\textsuperscript{50} In 'Landscape and Narrative' Lopez writes 'I am convinced, however, that these observations [about the capacity of narrative to achieve harmony between inner and outer landscapes] can be applied to the kind of prose we call nonfiction as well as to traditional narrative forms such as the novel and the short story, and to some poems' (*Crossing Open Ground*, 1988, p 68).
Cold Mountain, Cormac McCarthy’s Border trilogy, Melville’s Moby-Dick, the stories of Borges, for instance); and because, I guess, he has spent the last year or so at work on a collection of stories, a copy of which he has just put in my hands. I sense he feels I am overlooking the possibilities of fiction.

On the eve of the publication of a new set of stories, the thought that fiction may not be able to do the work of enlivening places and speaking of our human reciprocity with them is one he finds alarming. I suppose I answered that fiction by its nature seems to me to make more difficult the project of intimacy (between author and land, and author and reader) he has spoken of; but that in the right hands it may transcend that problem. After I had read his new book, and found in it such wonderful parables as ‘The Letters of Heaven,’ ‘The Mappist,’ ‘Emory Bear Hands’ Birds,’ I told him I had begun to soften my thesis about fiction. In most hands it lends itself to solipsism; it is by tradition an anthropocentric genre, but it need not be.

Back home, I have read again most of his stories. Most of those in his first two books stand, I now see, as exercises in emplacement, as grounded fables; they are practices of astonishing ecological imagination. They stand, though, almost alone in Western literature in that way—they are things of their own kind, myths really, prayers to places; studies in the kind of humane and spiritual geography he discovered in his early anthropological studies. In River Notes, Lopez writes a book about the endeavour to enter into the being of a place—the river, its bend, its life and history. It is a better answer than any he gave me in conversation, perhaps, to the question ‘what is the nature of the lifeworld of the nature writer?’ This is a book of fictions, short myths of his own tender making, allegories, dreams: beautiful things, innocent as dreams, and as oracular in their storied way as fables.

In ‘The Bend,’ his narrator wishes to understand the life of the river at one of its bends, to know the heart and body, the gathered wisdom of that place. At first he engages science, hiring hydrologists and others to observe and measure it. But he gains nothing but loneliness and illness from that interrogation. The detached, determined, secular inquirer grows sick from his attempts to plumb the place with equations. His obsession with the place holds fast though, and he sickens, takes to his bed, grows depressed. In time, all his notebooks turn to stone, grown with moss.

Water starts to fall from them in the corner of his room and he wakes to the sound of mergansers exploding into flight from them. After that, he rises and goes to the river and surrenders to it, sits by it and wonders and listens. In that posture of regard, that attitude of respectful observance, the place makes itself known to him; he and it become one. He takes the measure of the water, finally, by abandoning measurement and engaging with it imaginatively.

The more he knows the place that way, its wildness, the more of himself slips away. ‘For myself,’ he writes, ‘each day more of me slips away. Absorbed in seeing how the water comes through the
bend, just so, I am myself, sliding off' (‘The Bend,’ River Notes, 1979, p 88). The story ends with his imagining that now, sitting thus with the river, he must look to a hawk in the air inseparably a part of that place, 'like salmon or a flower' (ibid, p 90). Reading this story I feel the arrogance, the lack of suppleness of my opinions about the limits of fiction. The problem lies less, perhaps, with its form than its modern and postmodern practice, the way it has grown out of touch with the wider world. I think, too, how far his stories are, not only in the amount of place that gets into them but in his instinct and talent for ecological imagination, from the fiction of the mainstream. He writes fiction as though land mattered. And so, in his fiction, it does. He writes myths; his concerns are metaphysical (as Annie Dillard would put it).

I recall, reading this story now, how, after a day's driving and walking and standing in the Cascades with Barry Lopez, I went to the river down from his house and sat at a seat he has made on the bank among red cedar and cottonwood and maple. I watched the river and took notes of the day; and as I sat, a bird I didn't know came skimming into the water, stayed a while on the moving stream, turning bottom stones with its bill, and later left. Back at the house, telling Lopez of this, I described the bird and asked after its name. ‘That was merganser,’ he said.

He told me once, when I spoke to him and admired the story, that he wrote it when he was twenty-seven, just down in front of his house. I sense that I entered briefly into that story and into its narrator's effort to lose himself in, and to, a place. I learned from sitting by a river and noticing a merganser's coming and going, and then from going away and reading a story of Lopez's what it means to give yourself to a place as a storyteller must, in his conception. This experience was a more eloquent response to my inquiry about the nature of the writer's being-in-the-land than anything my questions evoked from him. The writer must not measure a place, but surrender to its rhythms, its river songs, sung in merganser and current and turning stone and drifting leaf and salmon. And that, I think, is just how he would want it to be, how he would want me and all of us to learn: from sitting by a moving river, by simply being there and by sharing with others, our friends and family, the stories of what we noticed.

Months, not the many years that coursed by in the story, have passed. I look at my notes. They have not grown moss yet. These thoughts arise from somewhere among them like the merganser from the water, and the pattern of that experience, some meaning it held now, only now, comes clear. 'I hope your notes come together well,' Lopez wrote to me on my return home. Well, they come together chaotically, wildly, and yet they find a certain order, not altogether out of keeping with the order of my time with him, as though I have no part in ordering them at all.

Barry Lopez comes from a childhood of clear light and spare ground; he lives now in a place of subdued light and densely forested slopes. Light is fractioned by trees, here. Between his past and
his continuing present lie the reaches of the Arctic desert. His mind and his prose I think are touched by all of them, by the landscape he walks and writes in and by remembered lands and light where his life took shape. His writing, you would say, is austere and clear—it is a lighted forest. It is dense: it draws you in and holds you; it offers you more and more the more you stay and look. Like a forest, there is great delicacy, as of lichen and moss and berry, within an apparently simple, sombre form. The landscapes of his life play in his prose. In the lands he has loved as in his prose lie similar paradoxes.

Lopez is a man of sorrows seeking hope, believing in it and finding it despite everything. He finds light in the dark forest. He is a man with a gift for solitude and silence who feels deeply the virtue of community and intimacy. Each tree in a forest stands apart, full of its long unique history and its own intricate interior landscape; but a forest is defined by interconnection, by the touching and collaboration of trees and understorey, of bird and fruit.

Lopez is a man apart, a man given to deep quietness, close and dignified. But he is also a man of fluid eloquence. There is in him the quality of the tall, standing trees, the low light—and also of the running streams, shaped, coloured, filtered by the trees through which they run, these chords that bind the country, as he has called them.

He is a scholarly man, mistrustful of scholarly abstractions; a storyteller of deep and careful learning. 'Unlike the scholars,' he says to me, 'I am not interested in proving my theory; I trust the words and the sound of the thoughts on the paper. I am interested in the shapeliness of the ideas. '

His is not an arid scholarship, but a grounded wisdom. It grows—it grows strong and tall, anchored by deep roots—from ferment and shadow on a forest floor, reaching for light.

These paradoxes within him and his prose are the paradoxes of the forest too. And they are the tensions between the landscapes he has lived within, travelled in and loved: desert, Arctic, temperate coastal forest. Others things too—such as his Jesuit education, his love of aeroplanes, his wide reading, his relationships—but most importantly in this man of porous skin, it is these places.

The space he has chosen, for now, for many long years, to live and write within is a space densely filled, elaborately articulated, richly inhabited, crowded with a dignified and gracious wildness. The invisible landscape articulated in these ways by the woods he walks within is immanent within his thought and writing. The countries of his memory, of his home here, of his mind and of his prose share some patterns and lore.
Sitting on Barry's couch, my back to the window and the river, I read from a book of Pattiann Rogers' poems, which Barry has pulled down from his shelf and offered to me while he cooked. I come across this:

By the twist of leaves
In a forest of poplars, I understand how light is fractioned
And born again in the aspects of your words.
I listen like an eddy in deep water turning easily
From one existence to another.

—Pattiann Rogers, 'Seduced by Ear Alone,' Firekeeper, 1994, p 24

Why do I read it first in the space of his house, this poem that says what I have been trying to fathom?

'And then, of course, there is the great John Fowles,' Barry Lopez says to me. And in this way, after dinner on a Wednesday evening in October, he introduced me, in a tidy cottage among wild trees, to a small book that, among other things, helps me grasp Lopez's elusive nature, the protectiveness he shows toward his art, toward his perambulatory practice of attention, toward his husbandry of the wild everywhere.

In 1979 Fowles, an English novelist known for books such as The French Lieutenant's Woman and The Magus, wrote a book-length essay, The Tree. 'The first trees I knew well were the apples and pears in the garden of my childhood home,' that book begins (Fowles, 1979, p 3). It grows into a tough meditation on the nature of wilderness, on the need for a poetic engagement with the rest of creation, the need for a transcendence of scientific method in our dealings with nature, and the need to rediscover in ourselves the green man or woman at the heart of ordinary experience, without whom we cannot know and belong within nature. Though his father cultivated orchard trees and espaliers in a London's outer suburbs, Fowles writes 'I must confess that my own love is far more of trees, more exactly of the complex internal landscapes they form when left to themselves' (ibid, p 23). He means that he loves best the wild woods and the rich communities of other plants and animals, getting on with the business of being and creating in mutual dependence within the wild woods, all without our interference.

The wild woods embody an untamed, elusive, constantly creating, essentially purposeless, utterly immediate quality that lives in us too, but which we have learned to distrust, writes Fowles. Just as ordinary experience is complex and wild and cannot be captured by sociologists, psychologists and biologists, so all of nature—including the forest—is wild. Only when we learn to trust the wild in ourselves can we know the wild in the rest of creation, in the woods or any place. 'Our fallacy,' writes Fowles, 'lies in supposing that the limiting nature of scientific method corresponds to the
nature of ordinary experience. Ordinary experience, from waking second to second, is in fact highly synthetic (in the sense of combinative or constructive), and made up of a complexity of strands, past memories and present perceptions, times and places, private and public history, hopelessly beyond science’s powers to analyse. It is quintessentially "wild", in the sense my father disliked so much: unphilosophical, irrational, uncontrollable, incalculable. In fact it corresponds very closely... with wild nature’ (ibid, pp 36–7).

We might understand our capacity—increasingly deeply buried and mistrusted these days, says Fowles—for complex and immediate apprehension of the world, and of each other, as the wild or green man (or woman) within us, of which many mythologies speak—the man in the trees (ibid, p 38). But to know nature, to live poetically, to know oneself deeply, Fowles discovered, is not to forego completely some intellectual engagement with it. ‘Achieving a relationship with nature,’ Fowles writes, ‘is both a science and an art, beyond mere knowledge or mere feeling alone’ (ibid, p 39). It does not lie in meditation, escape or the quest for self-improvement. It seems to lie in a knowing, discerning, yet unmanipulative presentness. That state of being, writes Fowles, is the state of nature and the state of artistic creativity in men and women.

But we must not imagine that we will ever render such a state of presence, of immediate apprehension, of wildness, in words, Fowles continues (ibid, p 32). To attempt to capture nature in a book is to try to ‘capture the uncaptrable,’ he writes (ibid, p 33). He makes these remarks in the context of a critique of the way systematic, analytical scientific method has become the dominant way of knowing, and indeed of writing about nature, and before he has elaborated his idea that there is also an artistic, wild way of knowing, the way of the artist. A certain way—that reductive way—of approaching and reporting the experience of nature will, it is true, fail to express the nature of nature itself, and the true nature of a wild engagement with it. The experience of momentary presence in a place exists only in that moment, and is gone when we sit to write of it—this also is true. And equally it is true that the piece of work that responds to a place is not itself the place, is different from it, is its own thing.

But Fowles’ own work, and that of Lopez and others, contradict him on this point: the wild may be written, if not ‘captured.’ It is not beyond words or art, though it is beyond science and Linnaean systems. What counts is the degree to which the creation of the words—and the experience of the place that comes before it—happens in that state of being Fowles calls wild. It is possible—as Lopez’s writing shows—that a wild encounter rendered wildly may produce a work of art in which the way the artist felt, and the way the place felt, are truthfully contained, are alive. Sometimes a reader may encounter a piece of writing in much the same way the artist encountered the wood, and it may affect him or her in a way at least analogous to the way the place affected the writer. Though the way in which that happens may not be fully understood—it is necessarily mysterious, like all artistic and natural processes, writes Fowles—it may happen;
it has happened for me, I believe, many times, reading Lopez and many of the other writers here. I am moved by a piece of place writing as I am moved by a place, perhaps as they were moved in that place.

What Fowles may be warning us against is the temptation, as writers, to attempt anything other than a truthful expression of what we are moved to write of a place—of anything, for that matter—when the time for that comes. Just be present in the woods; then just be present in the prose, in other words. Wild writing, true art, must never be purposive: it must intend nothing other than the truthfulness of its own process of creation; it must happen without intent, just as the wild green chaos within the trees happens.

Often, in person, often too as the narrator of *Arctic Dreams*, and strikingly in the 'I' of *River Notes*, Lopez is the man in the trees, the green man, the wild wisdom of the earth embodied. In *River Notes* his narrator is strange, does odd things, or so they seem unless you imagine him as the green man. He is in nature, utterly; he is part of it, sinking into sand, dreaming he is salmon. His 'I' is like Whitman's 'I' in *Leaves of Grass*: not just all men (and women), but that part of all men and women that remembers the earth from which we all rose. He is writing and speaking, on many occasions, from inside the *eco*; he is nature, writing. What is strange and unmanageable in his writing is, I think, the wild itself. For the aesthetic of Lopez's writing is not conventional, its order is not merely human. It will not be known and named. It includes chaos, for without that nothing new is made, life itself may not proceed.

At the point of creativity, I suspect, when he is most the green man, the man in the woods, it is those woods, the land, its genius and proportions that shape his art, because the disjunction between him and them is bridged. His writing, if you like, is the ground between the interior and exterior landscapes he lives in; it is a dream he shares with the place; it is the song of their reconciliation.

When I read Fowles' book a month after my visit with Lopez—in the Library of Congress, and then (the last twenty photocopied pages) on an aeroplane flying west from Washington to Denver—I discovered the same prickly resistance to academic inquiry about his writing and his relationship with nature that I met in Lopez. For both of them, literary analysis of their work is mostly part of that conventional, reductive, classifying enterprise of scientific method (*ibid.*, pp 31-2). I have a sense now that both men, Lopez and Fowles, are at pains to shield a mystery—the act of creativity, the nature of nature, the encounter with the wild—from an inquiry framed too narrowly, that interrogates in arid and inadequate language, that is premised upon the idea that everything can be understood best only when it is seen in isolation from its context. Fowles reminds us that the man in the trees 'possesses the characteristic of elusiveness, a power of
"melting" into the trees' (ibid, p 38). You may come to know me and my works only in the wildness and chaos of the woods (physical and psychological) where we and they live, these two men seem to be saying. You may not abstract the wild green man from his trees and still know his nature. It seems to me, that like the green man, Lopez retreated that night, faced with my inquiry and its academic sound, from the edge of the woods, where we were in his house, to their dark green, obscure heart. Where I found him most truly was within the trees themselves, within the birthplace of his words.

It strikes me now, too, that a forest, such as the one Lopez lives on the edges of, keeps the wild—the ferment at its feet, the complex web of biotic relationships within it, its secret life, its hidden landscape—canopied and walled off from all but the initiated, the well-guided searcher. The mystery and darkness and danger of the forest deters and defeats the inquirer not prepared to set down his premises, his or her literary and scientific presumptions. This quality of the woods was also a characteristic of the words, some of them, with which he met my direct interrogation of his art. His prose, too, is like a forest, in this way—a guarded, stern (if also elegant and courteous), indirect and elaborate articulation of the thoughts, the deep, deep thoughts and emotions, it holds.

Fowles' rich, small book takes me to another secret at the heart of Lopez's thought. We go to the woods and wild places, we cultivate reciprocity with them, we practise love and humility in those parts of the world men have not made or manipulated, not only for the sake of those places and their integrity, but for our own human sake. The wilderness is as necessary to our spiritual health as a species as dreams are to mental health. How we treat the forests is how we treat ourselves and all our fellow men and women. 'There is a spiritual corollary to the way we are currently deforesting and denaturing our planet,' writes Fowles. 'In the end what we must most defoliate and deprive is ourselves (ibid, pp 78–9).

Lopez writes, in a similar vein, that what we learn when we 'pay attention to what occurs in a land not touched by human schemes, where an original order prevails,' is what integrity looks like (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 405). Untrammeled places hold their dignity: all the relationships at work there are innately dignified, not always good or beautiful, but ordered authentically. For this reason we need them, and we need to respect them. We need then to cultivate such integrity in our own lives; to make relationships with our fellow men and women marked by the same 'impeccable integrity;' and to extend that lore of dignity to all living things (Arctic Dreams, 1986, p 405).

All writing and all living, in Barry Lopez's natural philosophy, as in Fowles', should pursue this 'oldest dream of mankind,' a just and dignified order among men and women and all living things on earth.
As we drive in Lopez’s truck—I am recalling now the day of my arrival—up the McKenzie River valley out of Eugene toward home, we pass field after field of neat orchards beside the road, south, by the river. It is afternoon in early winter, and the light is thinning. In my memory, the orchards run in dark, orderly geometries, away from the road. The ground at the tree’s feet is trim with grass, grey with the onset of evening, and most of the leaves have fallen. Some of the trees I have never seen before. They are filberts, he tells me, when I ask. They grow them for the nuts. He says no more.

Later, at his house, he hands me a copy of his book of stories, one of the advances sent to him by the publishers. The book will not be out for another two weeks, but he wants me to have a copy. I am touched by this gesture of friendship. That night, while he prepares a meal for us, I sit on the lounge, my back to the road and the river, and I read the book’s first story, ‘Remembering Orchards.’ It is the story of a man, a printer, who lives up a river valley in western Oregon, and passes filbert orchards each day on his passage to and from the town. Just lately he has experienced two moments of mundane epiphany as he drives past them, and those moments, in which he apprehended the wildness, the chaos, the beauty of these herded trees for the first time, in a certain light, have led him to a belated understanding of his stepfather, a man who tended orchards in California.

The narrator confesses that, as a boy, he viewed his father’s orchards as ‘penal colonies,’ and could only see in his stepfather’s work an obsession with order. He understands suddenly, and long after his stepfather has died, that he missed altogether the meaning of his father’s work and his relationship with, his affection for, the trees. ‘What I saw as productive order he saw as a vivid surface of exquisite tension’ (‘Remembering Orchards,’ Light Action in the Caribbean, p 4). What his father had responded to most deeply was not the system but the chaos beneath. ‘The trees were like sparrows frozen in flight, their single identities overshadowed by the insistent precision of the whole. Internal heresy—errant limbs, minor inconsistencies in spacing or height—was masked by stillness’ (ibid, p 5).

The coincidence of my noticing the orchards and my sitting here and reading this story struck me only afterward. No one intended that I notice and remark upon the orchards. I am sure Barry Lopez intended nothing so obvious as that I should be careful not to miss—or misinterpret—the passion within his steady craft, the chaos and wildness within the order of his courteous lines. But life sometimes delivers small events, mundane in themselves, in a meaningful cluster, which weighs with us and seems to hold significance, which asks us to stop and discern a story embedded in it. And I have come to regard these small events in that way: my dwelling on the orchards and his giving me the book, my reading it there while his hands carefully prepared dinner. I feel the weight of significance even more because this story quotes Robinson Jeffers, cautioning us not to miss the depths that make a life beautiful because of its apparent calm now; and because its
narrator has, when he has his first epiphany, just been typesetting the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson. The poetic project of both of these men, Jeffers and Olson, has been compared with Lopez's own (for instance by Sherman Paul, in For Love of the Earth, 1992, p 101). That shared project is this: to show that ego will not lead us to the truth, which lies deep in native ground, and the things that grow from it. It strikes me too, that 'Remembering Orchards' is an oblique homage by Lopez to John Fowles' The Tree, an essay on the love of wildness that grew, for Fowles, from his father's backyard orchard.

Thinking, months later, about my sitting there, reading that story under those circumstances, I am led to reflect that the story that runs through a man's life, his work, may not surrender itself easily and quickly; that appearances can deceive; that the world itself—a play of light among trees, the landing of merganser—can, now and then, offer up the answer to our questions, unbidden, in an image; an answer more useful and meaningful than one given in words in response to a question. And so, on reflection, I think I see in these small events a storyline that speaks a caution against simple-minded inquiry; against subjecting something so elusive as the nature of a man's art to narrow intellection. If he was anxious that I might grasp too narrowly, using conventional terms of analysis, that I might abstract and diminish the craft of men and women like himself who enter into the living world and bring forth words—he was, perhaps, rightly anxious. Many have done that. Each of us is given to haste. But his place and his stories of it tell me that all the work of his hands is not an ordering of the wild but an act of love for it, an affectionate partnership, a respectful carriage of the mysteries we live among. If there is an art that practises selflessness and ecological imagination, that reawakens in us—and us to it—the life of landscapes, that shows us how we might, through love and attention, restore ourselves, in imagination, to the dignified, unmanipulated order of life into which we were born, it is the art of Lopez's prose. As the wild lives among the filbert orchards, as the McKenzie Valley runs through the limbs of those trees, so the wild lives and breathes in the words of Barry Lopez, and moves in the rigour and beauty of his life.

My time with Barry Lopez unsettled me. It led me to question how much my concern with the aesthetics of this writing really mattered; to wonder if I would find the words, if it did, to talk about it with others. It upset my neatly composed concerns about the enterprise of this literature. So what if the academics are arguing over the eloquence of places and their capacity to enter texts, I began to ask. A writer works best, a pilgrim proceeds best, when he or she gives in to the mystery and rigours of the task itself and concentrates on where it leads, why it matters.

What I learned of the enterprise of engaging with and writing the wild, I learned largely by being with Barry Lopez in his native places, observing and reflecting upon his way of being present—and
from rereading his own works later. In discussion, he seemed impatient with my concern for the processes of nature writing. He steered me onto the work and role of nature writing, of all good art—the carrying on of an ancient and eternal conversation about how to live justly, beautifully, with dignity on earth, as human beings in a wide, sentient universe. Like the nature of nature itself; the creative process involved in writing—writing of places, or any kind of writing or art—escapes our attempts to define and capture it, though not completely.

I sense that, in a way, he was challenging me as I set out—at least, I felt challenged by his engagement with me, full of personal kindness and gentleness though it was—to listen and watch, to open my self completely, to the world of the craftspeople of this literature. What matters in that work, he seemed to be saying, how it is done, will arise from a humble quest, from listening and reflecting. Remember why the work matters, and let what it is occur to you on the way, he seemed to suggest. To know a landscape and let it come to you, you must enter it—with a map, yes, but without preconception. ‘The physical landscape,’ he writes in *Arctic Dreams,* ‘is an unstructured abode of space and time and it is not entirely fathomable; but this does not necessarily put us at a disadvantage in seeking to know it’ (*Arctic Dreams,* 1986, p 257). It is the same, he seemed to want me to know, with the kind of writing he and the others attempt. Believing the landscape of that writing to be as elusive, as wild, as any physical place, a ‘mysterious aggregation,’ it becomes, he was perhaps noting, not harder, but easier to approach it. Treat it not as a puzzle, but as a mystery. Approach it with respect, travel as one who knows nothing. Respect its dignity and it may disclose itself to you. Surrender your expectations and bright ideas, leave them here, at the edge of the woods. Be disarmed, lose yourself on the way, and you may find what the terrain has to tell you.
8. The pond

Henry David Thoreau

Walden Pond, Massachusetts

What should be man's morning work in this world?
—Henry David Thoreau, Walden

rem tene, verba sequuntur

[Grasp the thing, the words will follow]
—Cato, De Agri Cultura

A week after leaving those grave western woods, I am walking the shore of an eastern water. It is a pond near Concord, and its slate grey water is sleeping in a circle of trees. Some of the trees are yellowing with the season; some of them, conifers, are as green as ever. Fresh out of the west and flanked on one side by Barry Lopez and on the other by Larry Buell, a man of Harvard, a scholar of Thoreau, I walk this morning the sand edge of another wood—of pine and hickory, white oak, gray oak and sumac, beech and alder—on the other, the Atlantic, side of the continent. Talking as we go about the place about us, the sound of a train in the near distance, the voice of a late songbird in the midst of the morning’s stillness, we approach the site of the cottage, long gone back to earth, where Walden began. This is the nineteenth day of October, and fall is in the woods. The day is mild. The water of Walden Pond stretches out like glass within its ring of dense if not lofty woods. No wind troubles its surface, and the sky over us is low, encumbered with cloud.

I have come to this pond and its woods because the literature that I feel called to write, the whole tradition of nature writing, sprang from here. I have traced it to its source. I am not here as an acolyte. Thoreau was not here as a saint. And there is no shrine here. I confess, I have not been devoted to him or his writing particularly, as others have. I knew about him, of course. I came upon him in my education as a writer of place, and I saw how his enterprise here and in the book that arose from this pond, in the Journals and essays that grew from this part of America’s east, have shaped the literature of North American places and the tradition of nature writing—by reason of the depth and challenge of Thoreau’s critical thought, the intelligence of his artistry, the power and singularity of his voice, the prescience of his intuition about the severance of society from nature, and the lesson he and his works offer in attention to both world and word. I
feel a little sad this morning that his work has not touched me more than it has. But there you are. Perhaps I have not been ready for it. I have felt that he and his prose belongs too much to other readers, fans and scholars, to have much left to say to me. I am sure he would not want piety or pretence, but he and this site have a right to my respect. So I come as a student of what has grown from this place, in thanks for what began here, humbled by the thought of how much wisdom and combative lyricism have their roots here, and curious to see what this ground, so generous to so gifted a listener as Henry Thoreau, might have to say to me.

This is a excursion to the place where it all began. It is just a morning walk. So much has been said about Thoreau and this place, I am afraid to offer more. These are just some thoughts that arose from a morning’s visit to the source. They are my morning’s work. They are my coming awake to Thoreau, and they arise from my stepping out around a pond.

And, as you see, I am not on this excursion alone. I have come here with two dozen literary descendants of Thoreau. Strung out ahead of me and behind, as I make for the northeast reach where it all began, is an impious but dignified band of nature writers. We are spending the second day of a symposium, ‘The Ecological Imagination,’ here at Walden. Yesterday we were at Harvard, and we will return there tonight for the rest of the gathering, which is a forum called to reflect on the sources—spiritual, natural, political, artistic—of the work of these men and women, and the uses and relevance, if any, of their craft in a time of ecological dismay. We could not talk about all this for four days without coming here, to the place that was for two years the home of the student of Emerson, the author of ‘Civil Disobedience,’ of ‘Walking’ (‘in wildness is the preservation of the world’), of Walden and the Journals. So, we are here, in the middle of that conversation, to share it with him. That is why, with these others, I have come to these woods, and I will leave for as good a reason as I have come: to continue the search off the beaten path for ways of understanding how words might express nature.

‘The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale,’ wrote Thoreau in Walden, ‘and though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore’ (The Ponds, Walden, 1854, p. 140). And it looks a modest, restrained and Georgic place to me all these years later, a lake and a shore and the trees about and the sky above. The lake covers sixty-five acres. It is a mile and three-quarters around. It is deep and clear and

51 Thoreau’s Morning Work is the title of H. Daniel Peck’s book on memory and perception in Thoreau’s writing. He takes the phrase from Walden, where Thoreau, as Peck notes, uses it to speak of deliberateness and wakefulness. Peck uses the term to speak of what he calls Thoreau’s work of memory and perception, ‘the key to Thoreau’s literary enterprise, the twinned ‘activities of consciousness’ that lie at the heart of his engagement with nature (Peck, 1990, p. xi). This chapter, then, is my morning work, in the sense that it arises from my perceptions and my memories of one morning at the pond, and my subsequent reflections upon them.
surrounded by forest. It is plain and unremarkable, but quietly engaging. Thoreau loved this body of water though. ‘A lake,’ he wrote, inspired by this pond of his long acquaintance, ‘is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth’s eye...’ (Walden, 1854, p 148).

The woods that were the lashes, he writes, of this eye, are thicker, now that Thoreau’s book has made the place its celebrates sacred, than they were when he lived in his cottage among these woods on and off from March 1845 to September 1847.

Like much of the country he walked in around the town of Concord, the primitive forest of pine and oak that once grew dark and deep about the steep shores of Walden had fallen to the axes of woodmen when Thoreau was here, and more fell after he was gone: taken for fuel, or cleared for pasture. In ‘The Ponds,’ he remembers that old forest fringe, where I now walk: ‘When I first paddled a boat at Walden, it was completely surrounded by thick and lofty pine and oak woods,’ and he recalls how he used to float on its surface pushed about by the summer breeze, lost in reverie and the fastness of the trees. And then he stops his remembrance short: ‘But since I left those shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste, and now for many a year there will be no more rambling through the aisles of the wood, with occasional vistas through which you see the water. My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down?’ (ibid, p 153).

The woods have returned, and some of the birds, and the views through the trees to the pond are fretted with trees—body and limb—a hundred years old, with saplings and understorey plants. Wildness endures; it has been preserved, and Thoreau would be pleased—about that, anyway. Thoreau took his retreat in a place even then altered by the work of men. He knew he contemplated nature in a landscape disturbed by human beings, as it had been disturbed and fashioned before by fire and geomorphology; and he knew that the nature he contemplated included the works of men, the culture he carried about with him and inside which he wrote of things he found. This, I think, is the meaning of his chapter ‘Sounds’ in Walden, the point at which that book—which is the record of the experiment in solitude and close outdoor observation he conducted here over two years in the mid 1840s, but which he worked over, reworked and fashioned through many drafts for the next seven years as his own ecological awareness deepened—turns, Buell suggests, from introspection to extrospection; from a narrative of an enterprise in self-discovery to a study of a place, of the relationships at play close at hand, and of one man’s capacity to know them (Buell, 1995, p 122).

‘Sounds’ records the language of the place, from screech owl, to leaf fall, to train rattle, to Concord’s church bells. Every sound that comes to him here, he writes, whether whippoorwill

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52 I rely on Robert Richardson’s biography, Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind, 1986, p 148 for these details of the pond.
or hooting owl, train or church bell or cow, carried to him from beyond, 'is partly the voice of
the wood' having been strained by the air, having 'conversed with every leaf and needle' (Sounds,' ibid, p 97). The woods' voice is a conversation between civilisation and wildness. The pond includes
the world of men. Nature includes prayer and commerce—and writing. For, in the same chapter,
he moves his writing table outside—a small parable of his emerging writer's method, of his
deepening intimacy with the world beyond the merely human. 'They seemed glad,' he writes,
meaning all his pieces of furniture, particularly his writing desk, 'to get out themselves, and as
if unwilling to be brought in ... It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and
hear the free wind blow on them...' (ibid, p 90). The things of men—tables and chairs, books and
bedsteads, habits of speech and writing—look suddenly more interesting seen, as he suddenly sees
them, grounded again amid the natural history of which they are both product and part.

A railway ran near the shores of Walden, as it still does, and brought sounds of commerce,
reminders of the proximity of Concord and Boston and the rest of America. Thoreau took himself
to the edge of town, but not to the wilderness. But he lived, nevertheless, in wildness, wildly, his
days patterned by the weather and the season, and he 'grew in those seasons like the corn in the
night.' He put himself back, at Walden—watching and sitting, fishing and hoeing beans—within
a way of living whose language is that 'which all things and events speak without metaphor' (ibid, p
88). He went there to live, and to write, if possible, within nature.

On December 29, 1856 Thoreau wrote in his Journals: 'We must go out and re-ally ourselves to
nature every day. We must take root, send out some little fiber at least, even every winter day.
I am sensible that I am imbibing health when I open my mouth to the wind. Staying in the house
breeds a sort of insanity always.'

Thoreau teaches me, as a writer and as a man, that if I am to know the world I must put myself out
in it and front it directly. I won't be able to learn the ways of the world—I may learn of them, but
not from them, not know them—sitting inside, reading books (or trawling the net). I have come
with these other writers and scholars to honour that discipline of his.

In this chapter I want to speak of what arose for me from that day at the pond; and what I intuited
of Thoreau's method and ideas from being a while by his pond. I have brought, as it were, my
books, my pens and study out into the plain air, to unsettle them in the free wind and sun, in the
falling leaves, as Thoreau brought his three-legged table, its books and ink and pens still upon it,
ono perhaps this very ground, where he took some of the pond's water and the shore's sand inside
to restore his dwelling to the freshness that held outside in the morning. His chapter, his whole
life, stands as a parable for his method as a naturalist and writer: to learn directly from his brute
neighbours, from the weather and the sounds of the place; from the language of all things; to
transcribe that language into words and to write into those words a few local rumours of nature's universal personality that the place had spoken to him.  

This was Thoreau's great gift to American literature: this lesson in taking the place for what it is; letting it be the thing we witness; letting it speak. At Walden and in the years that followed, during which he composed his book of the place from his journals, Thoreau learned to look at the world less as a body of encoded comments on the ways of men, less as a trove of spiritual lessons for the life of men to be discerned and told in words, and more as a thing in itself, a wild form eloquent of itself and of the wilderness at work also in men and women. As the book proceeds, the materiality of the trees, the pond, the weather, the ground, the loon, the man, and the owl grows more significant—and sufficient—to him and powerful to us (Buell, 1995, p 123). Walden becomes a person he would know, an other to be fathomed, if never fully understood, and Thoreau's search for himself becomes a search for himself-in-this-place, for the place-in-himself, and for the wilderness they share, self and place. In his chapter 'Brute Neighbors,' Thoreau pursues a loon across the pond, hunting it, performing a kind of dance with it, a dance that attempts relationship with and knowledge of a neighbour. Thoreau is elliptical on the matter in the text of the chapter, as he often is, but he seems to realise—in the sentence 'While he [the loon] was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine' (ibid, p 186; my emphasis)—that to know the bird is to discover the wilderness he shares with it, 'to divine his thought in mine' (Peck, 1990, p 122). We make our world come alive when we dance with it, when we interact bodily and imaginatively with it, as Thoreau does with the loon (Peck, 1990, p 123). Walden and the Journals demonstrate how active, how physical, the art of attending to the natural world can be; and Thoreau's prose, in which his dance of attention is expressed, in which it goes on, sounds out something of the wilderness, the life, and also the mysteriousness that characterise such a place like this, that attend a deep kind of participation in it, such as he attempted here.

We walk to the place where his cottage had stood and sit nearby in a clearing among these regrowth trees, through which we look down to the waters of the pond. Carolyn Servid, a writer from Sitka, Alaska, a woman who has written and fought to save forests from falling, who has built a community of voices to raise hope and spirit in the lives of her neighbours, of all of us, stands to read a passage from Thoreau's journal. As she finds her place and breathes in the Walden air, composing herself, I notice that leaves are falling without a sound, a calligraphy as silent and suggestive as letters forming in grey ink on a white page. Terry Tempest Williams catches a leaf,

53 I am indebted to Frank Stewart's A Natural History of Nature Writing, 1995, for this notion of Thoreau's work at Walden as a parable about 'the method of his enterprise' there (p 3). Thoreau valued highly and modelled for all writers who followed, the enterprise of 'firsthand witness' in nature. See Stewart, 1995, pp 3-4.
yellow-brown, the length of her hand, and closes it into the leaves of her notebook. The leaf belongs to one of the shagbark hickories that dominate just here. I know this because Larry Buell identified another such stalkless, elliptical leaf for me earlier, showing me its delicately serrated edges and sheathing it home to one of these pale grey trees, their bark soft and unkempt like the coat of a sheep dog. The leaves of several kinds of trees carpet the clearing. Buell does his best to name them for me, since most of them are new and unfamiliar to me. I recognise most of their names from Thoreau, who knew them all, though there were fewer of them.

Carolyn reads a passage from the *Journals*, penned by Thoreau on the second last day of 1851, a year in which he was heavily reworking *Walden* in the spirit of his deepening ecological sensibility. It betrays his growing compassion for lifeforms outside the human, a feeling for their grace and genius and lifeworld, more explicit, perhaps, than anything he offers us in *Walden* itself.

This afternoon, being on Fair Haven Hill, I heard the sound of a saw, and soon after from the Cliff saw two men sawing down a noble pine beneath, about forty rods off. I resolved to watch it till it fell, the last of a dozen or more which were left when the forest was cut and for fifteen years have waved in solitary majesty over the sproutland. I saw them like beavers or insects gnawing at the trunk of this noble tree, the diminutive manikins with their cross-cut saw which could scarcely span it. It towered up a hundred feet as I afterward found by measurement, one of the tallest probably in the township and straight as an arrow, but slanting a little toward the hillside, its top seen against the frozen river and the hills of Conantum. I watch closely to see when it begins to move. Now the sawers stop, and with an axe open it a little on the side toward which it leans, that it may break the faster. And now their saw goes again. Now surely it is going; it is inclined one quarter of the quadrant, and, breathless, I expect its crashing fall. But no, I was mistaken; it has not moved an inch; it stands at the same angle as at first. It is fifteen minutes yet to its fall. Still its branches wave in the wind, as if it were destined to stand for a century, and the wind soughs through its needles as of yore; it is still a forest tree, the most majestic tree that waves over Musketaquid. The silvery sheen of the sunlight is reflected from its needles; it still affords an inaccessible crotch for the squirrel's nest; not a lichen has forsaken its mast-like stem, its raking mast—the hill is the hulk. Now, now's the moment! The manikins at its base are fleeing from their crime. They have dropped the guilty saw and axe. How slowly and majestically it starts! as if it were only swayed by a summer breeze, and would return without a sigh to its location in the air. And now it fans the hillside with its fall, and it lies down to its bed in the valley, from which it is never to rise, as softly as a feather, folding its green mantle about it like a warrior, as if, tired of standing, it embraced the earth with silent joy, returning its elements to the dust again. But hark! there you only saw, but did not hear. There now comes up a deafening crash to these rocks, advertising you that even trees do not die without a groan. It rushes to embrace the earth, and mingle its elements with the dust. And now all is still once more and forever, both to eye and ear.
I went down and measured it. It was about four feet in diameter where it was sawed, about one hundred feet long. Before I had reached it the axemen had already half divested it of its branches. Its gracefully spreading top was a perfect wreck on the hillside as if it had been made of glass, and the tender cones of one year’s growth upon its summit appealed in vain and too late to the mercy of the chopper. Already he has measured it with his axe, and marked off the mill-logs it will make. And the space it occupied in upper air is vacant for the next two centuries. It is lumber. He has laid waste the air. When the fish hawk in the spring revisits the banks of the Muskeraquid, he will circle in vain to find his accustomed perch, and the hen-hawk will mourn for the pines lofty enough to protect her brood. A plant, which it has taken two centuries to perfect, rising by slow stages into the heavens, has this afternoon ceased to exist. Its sapling top had expanded to this January thaw as the forerunner of summers to come. Why does not the village bell sound a knell? I hear no knell tolled. I see no procession of mourners in the streets, or the woodland aisles. The squirrel has leaped to another tree; the hawk has circled further off, and has now settled upon a new eyrie; but the woodman is preparing [to] lay his axe at the root of that also.

—Shepard, 1927, pp 69–70

There are many (chief among them Sharon Cameron in Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journals, 1985) who argue that the Journals contains the best and truest of Thoreau and of his nature writing—because he did not shape it in the way he so assiduously crafted Walden, as a literary and rhetorical production; and because, as he seemed to realise, the form of loosely structured reflections and observations arising immediately from his experiences in the world works better as a way of scribing nature than the more writerly essays that came to compose Walden. 'Perhaps I can never find so good a setting for my thoughts as I shall thus have taken them out of. The crystal never sparkles more brightly than in the cavern,' he writes on January 28, 1852. These journal entries seem 'allied to life' he had put it, the day before, January 27. He went on there, 'I do not know but thoughts written down thus in a journal might be printed in the same form with greater advantage than if the related ones were brought together into separate essays.' This may be—though Walden itself rambles naturalistically enough to make out its case for its own close alliance to place, life and wildness.

Buell concedes in his book that Walden does not contain any statements quite so environmentalist as this one Carolyn reads from the Journals; nor does it contain his best and closest nature observation. Most of its passages of field observation, writes Buell, 'are allegorized more aggressively than is typical of Thoreau’s later Journals (ibid, p 125). But Buell argues that Walden is Thoreau’s greatest book precisely because it reflects so faithfully Thoreau’s journey toward the full ecological awakening that came to him only in his final years (and can be read in his essay 'Walking,' 1862); because it embodies his faltering and imperfect movement from anthropocentric to ecocentric imagination, complete only in his last days on earth.
'Respecting *Walden* particularly,' writes Buell, 'I believe that its very "failures" enhance its representativeness both as a document of the environmental imagination and as a microcosm of Thoreau's achievement, for he was never able to get beyond an inchoate, fragmentary sketch of his grand effort to comprehend the Concord environment in its multidimensional totality' (*Ibid*, p 126). Buell goes on, 'Walden reflects Thoreau's commitment to not one but a cluster of distinct approaches to nature, none of which was wholly original or unique to him and thus all of which may be found widely pursued throughout American environmental prose, though reinforced by his example' (*Ibid*, p 126). Buell's appendix lists the projects (including 'natural history writing,' 'literary bioregionalism,' 'homiletic naturism' and 'literary almanacs') he says Thoreau carried on at the pond and wrote in *Walden*. One senses all those books in *Walden*, and one sees how each of those approaches to his project at the pond gave rise to a stream of nature writing in the years that followed. *Walden*, like all great books, is irreducible, multiple, genre-defying and category-transcendent. Everything is not resolved and cohesive in it. But nearly everything began in it.

Let's hold with the journals for a moment, though, those simpler, less artful responses to one place's life. Let's stay with Carolyn's reading by the pond. I will return soon to *Walden*, that great, flawed prose poem of place, in which not only those multiple artistic projects play but also the multiple and unreconciled personalities of this pond.

In this passage, read to us by Carolyn out under the still trees surrendering their leaves, I hear a note of compassion, of grief, for these woods. This entry amounts to an elegy for falling trees, for the ecological upset that extends like ripples from the death of a pine. Thoreau challenges himself, his society, us, his readers, to extend our love, our brotherhood, and our mourning to this pine and these homeless hawks. What I hear in this passage is Thoreau's growing realisation of the personhood of place. Looked at ecologically, a place is a community of interconnected lives—among them the axemen, the pine, the fish hawks, the river, and Thoreau the witness. Looked at this way, there should be bells tolled for the death of a pine—as for the death of a village axeman. In any event, there should be poems raised in memory of where the pine falls, and prose such as Thoreau's, reaching out to speak of and for its life and the lives that attend it.

Here is another plain, sad note about dying trees from his *Journals* on December 3, 1855:

*Every larger tree which I knew and admired is being gradually culled out and carried to mill. I see one or two more large oaks in E. Hubbard's wood lying high on stumps, waiting for snow to be removed. I miss them as surely and with the same feeling that I do the old inhabitants out of the village street.*

—Shepard, 1947, p 148

There is nothing showy or sentimental about this reflection. It rings true, I think, to his feelings. All nature had come by then to be Thoreau's bride. To feel, as he came to, for the lives of plants
and animals is to know a ceaseless grief as well as many moments of deep joy. For grief is the price we pay for love.  

And in the moment of hearing his words read by a woman who has herself wept for falling forests and written lovingly of them, I feel the place itself mourn, as Thoreau mourned, for the losses that shape life itself on earth, and particularly haunt the places where human culture meets the rest of nature without compromise—as in the clearfelling of Concord, the thinning of the woods about this lake. To know nature up close is to know death and disturbance—and persistence too. It is to learn compassion. It is to learn to mourn.

Around the time he wrote the passage on the pine, Thoreau’s mind was turning over and over the idea not only that places live, and we live within them, but that, because that is so, the truest writing would grow from places, articulate them, sing them. This idea reaches its most forceful expression in ‘Walking’ ten years later. But it is there, in embryo, from early on. Buell refers to Thoreau’s grand project of comprehending Concord. On September 4, 1841, the twenty-three-year-old Thoreau wrote this in his journal:

I think I could write a poem to be called ‘Concord.’ For argument I should have the River, the Woods, the Ponds, the Hills, the Fields, the Swamps and Meadows, the Streets and Buildings, and the Villagers. Then Morning, Noon, and Evening, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, Night, Indian Summer, and the Mountains in the Horizon.

—Shepard, 1927, pp 27–28

Finding this entry, as I do a year later, back home among my trees and valleys, I am struck deeply. Partly because just such a scheme for my book The Blue Plateau has occurred to me since returning from my American journey, out of a sense, like Thoreau’s I think, that a book does more honour to a place when it allows itself to be structured by the geography—physical and human—of a place, rather than by an author’s abstract notions arising from it. I want to write a book made as this place of mine is made—my chapters ‘Escarpment,’ ‘Valley,’ ‘Timber,’ ‘Fire,’ ‘Swamp’ and so on. But I am struck also by this early expression by Thoreau (it dates from 1841) of ecological imagination. Thoreau has imagined, well before coming to Walden, a piece of writing that would grow from the ground as much as any tree; that would speak the place as directly almost as the place speaks itself. He has imagined the relationship between a text and its locale as you might imagine the link between plant and ground, corn and soil, soil and corn.

— These words, or words like them, were spoken by the Queen of England at service in New York for the victims of September 11. Thoreau’s love was for all things, including the trees, and so his grief was also for all things. 
This, really, is a lifelong theme in Thoreau's thought. It matures in his writing until it finds this expression in 'Walking':

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots, whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half-smothered between two musty leaves in a library,—ay, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.


In his *Journals*, around the time he was editing *Walden* and writing of the death of the pine, Thoreau developed the same thought about the possibility of a grounded, place-based writing this way:

Antaeus-like, be not long absent from the ground. Those sentences are good and well discharged which are like so many little resiliences from the spring floor of our life—a distinct fruit and kernel itself, springing from terrafirma. Let there be as many distinct plants as the soil and light can sustain...

Sentences uttered with your back to the wall.

—November 12, 1851, in Shepard, 1927, p 65

After Carolyn has sat down and the sounds of wind and wood and water have played a while and more leaves have fallen to earth, Richard Nelson stands and reads some passages from his world-weary paperback copy of selected entries from the *Journals*. Torn papers sprout from its pages as though it has indeed set flowers and borne fruit—as perhaps it has in the life and work of Richard Nelson. They mark entries that have stirred and sustained a life's calling in the Alaskan writer. He starts with this one, from February 18, 1852, which Thoreau wrote six weeks after his elegy for the pine. It is, he tells me, his favourite passage in all Thoreau:

I have a commonplace-book for facts and another for poetry, but I find it difficult always to preserve the vague distinction which I had in my mind, for the most interesting and beautiful facts are so much the more poetry and that is their success. They are translated from earth to heaven. I see that if my facts were sufficiently vital and significant—perhaps transmuted more into the substance of the human mind—I should need but one book of poetry to contain them all.

—Shepard, 1927, p 80
Thoreau’s genius, in the Journals, was to write immediately, to deliver enduring aphorisms out of the material, lively facts before him. He strives, as he himself puts it in Walden, ‘to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment.’ In other words he stood and bore witness. This is the idea he plays with in the entry Nels has read: a vital reporting of beautiful and significant facts could be, like the facts themselves, the best kind of poetry; better by far than the ‘sublimo-slipshod’ poetry of most of his contemporaries, according to Thoreau. In most of what passed for poetry, Thoreau thought, there was much too much of fashion and artifice, of airiness and abstraction, and far too little of the wildness and poetry of the world itself (Journals, November 15, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p 67). At his best, usually in the Journals, Thoreau stands present and reports images and ideas that find him in that unholdable, immediate ground. This immediacy—the poetry of the facts themselves—is a quality compromised in Walden (and his other books) by virtue of the elaborate, ornate, artifice of their construction.

In many journal entries, though, Thoreau often shapes vibrant, elusive thoughts such as these in sentences that suggest far more than they say. What, for instance, am I to make of the passage, Nels has just read in his expressive, intelligent voice here at Walden Pond? This, I think: that poetry is not something we give to natural facts by our art; it is something that runs through every material fact. The writer’s job is to discern it—the thing itself—to find a way to let it sing to him or her. ‘We are here to witness,’ Annie Dillard wrote later, in the spirit of Thoreau’s thought (Dillard, 1982, p 90). The poetry of a writer’s work, then, will lie in how well he or she has discerned the (usually silent) song of the moment, of the tree or its fall, and how well he or she finds words for the moment’s eternal truthfulness and has ‘transmuted it into the substance of the human mind.’ What might that last phrase mean? Perhaps Thoreau’s thought was that a writer—he uses the term poet, I think, for the true writer—alchemises the material world into an equally lively reality within the mind of a reader. For the word is not the world; but the world the writer witnesses is sounded out and imaged forth by words that cleave to the vital and significant life of things reached out to by the writer, who stands utterly present at that point where eternities meet.

How, I sit and wonder, is the writer to loose and sound on paper the poetry of the material world?

Then Nelson reads again, and I hear Thoreau’s answer:

We cannot write well or truly but what we write with gusto. The body, the senses, must conspire with the mind. Expression is the act of the whole man, that our speech may be vascular. The intellect is powerless to express thought without the aid of the heart and liver and of every member. Often I feel that my head stands out too dry, when it should be immersed. A writer, a man writing, is the scribe of
all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing. It is always essential that we love to do what we are doing, do it with heart.

—Shepard, 1927, pp 56–7

Thoreau wrote this passage, too, in that fertile year 1851—on September 2, to be exact. The writer as witness of the world must stand present and then go away and put words down with their whole person, bodily not just mentally. What patterns the lives of wild plants and animals must pattern also the twinned disciplines of witnessing and bearing witness. Blood must run through our thoughts and words on the page, as life floods the flesh and mind of all living things. We must write as we looked or walked in that world—breathing it in, hearing it, sharing life with it. To write of the world, of the nature of all things, we must be in it, we must know it with all our senses; and we must grow intimate with its forms as we do, body to body, with a lover. We must love the world and the business of knowing it or our knowledge of it will be thin and partial, our writing will not be vivid, 'vascular.' If we do not engage with the living world in this full-bodied way, its own life will be lost to us—and to our words, which will be the words of our head only, abstract, groundless, without vigour. Witness—in place and on the page—is a thing of flesh and blood, of love and motion, of wilderness, for Thoreau.

This is why Thoreau came to Walden—to put himself about, body and mind, among its seasons and citizens, its ducks and hickories. To allow the place to find him, to open itself to him in all its personhood, and fashion itself, transmute its material form into words on his pages that might sound to a reader just like the place itself speaking, singing. He sensed that he must give himself to a place so that through his body, his hand and heart and head, the place might write its names and nature on his pages.

Thoreau fathomed at the pond, and in his reflections upon it later, that the kind of laws men and women needed most to attend to if they were to come fully alive were to be found in that order that predated, gave rise to and transcended society, that surrounds and subsumes it still: 'this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard,' as he puts it in 'Walking,' as essay delivered in 1862, published after Thoreau's death, but worked up in these years 1851–52. He saw how most of his peers were 'so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man,' ('Walking,' 1862, in Atkinson, 1992, p 655); and so he stood apart from most of his contemporaries, as the nature writer still stands apart, understanding that we will make most sense of life, find the answers we need for social problems, in the logic of that order that gave life to men and women and their ways in the first place. In wilderness.

But Thoreau knew that we would not find the answers just lying about in the wild. We would have to do more than merely look. Thoreau was not interested in mere phenomena—in nature's data
untouched by the relationship they had to himself as a man, and to all human kind. He writes this in his journals in April 1854 (Richardson, 1986, p 309; Stewart, 1995, p 29). Distinguishing his own enterprise from that of Gilbert White in A Natural History of Selborne, a work that Thoreau read and admired, Thoreau wrote on May 6, 1854, "There is no such thing as pure objective observation. Your observation, to be interesting, ie to be significant, must be subjective. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience, whether he be poet or philosopher or man of science. The man of science is the most alive, whose life is the greatest event. Senses that take cognizance of outward things merely are of no avail. It matters not where or how far you travel, the further commonly the worse,—but how much alive you are" (Richardson, 1986, p 310).

It strikes me for a moment, reading this, that Thoreau speaks against himself. He aspires, so he writes in 'Walking,' to leave society behind and listen to the wild world beyond the human, to become the voice of the atmosphere and the grasses, and yet he says all a writer may ever report is a human experience. 'What is nature,' he writes on November 2, 1853, 'unless there is an eventful human life passing within her?' In part, such comments represent Thoreau's shying from the ecocentrism he aspires to more fully on other occasions; in part, they represent a firm assertion of his sense that mankind is uniquely gifted within the natural order. Perhaps he is also reminding himself that nature is only a category for us humans because we can stand outside it in our minds, and imagine ourselves, sometimes, immune from or superior to the rest of creation. In fact—and this is what Thoreau is chiefly saying in his Journals, May 6, 1854 and November 2 the preceding year—we live in nature and it in us, all the time, so that to write of nature with no human element present in the writing, no presence of author's spirit, is to falsify. He is, I think, also acknowledging the limits of his ambition (to write the corn, to become transparent in the act of writing nature), and the great beauty of those limits themselves—‘we may know nothing that is not got from a human relationship with what is not human; we may tell nothing that is not the story of what passed between a human witness and the phenomenon so witnessed; we can only write in language and, since sentences are human things and freighted with the human mind and voice, when we write we also always express our human nature.

The phenomenon that concerns Thoreau, then, is what passes between the world's body and his own—or yours or mine. And the writing he attempts and admires seeks to embody the character, the texture, the pulse and poem of that encounter. It will be human; it will be wild.

He goes on, in this entry of May 6, 1854, to speak of love: 'All that a man has to do or say that can possibly concern mankind,' he writes, sweepingly, challengingly, as ever, 'is in some shape or other

55 I explore the beauty of the limits of language, its essential humanity, its vulgar music, in my chapter ‘The real world.’
to tell the story of his love—to sing.' And to sing any living thing and one's encounter with it, to write with and of one's love, to write as a place elaborates itself in the creatures and sounds that compose it, demands a humane diction, he writes—simple and familiar, grounded words. Technical and disembodied prose kills the thing one loves, stills the poetry of the fact and loses the reader. In some sense, for Thoreau, writing that is not both fresh and plain, writing that is mere note-taking, that is coldly scientific, is not even truthful, since it attempts something—dispassion, objectivity—that is an illusion.

To love and to sing—this was the nature of witness, according to Thoreau. Love and song demand vernacular diction and rhythmic expression. 'Rigid as iron, clean as the atmosphere, hardy as virtue, innocent and sweet as a maiden is the shrub oak,' he writes on December 1, 1856. 'In proportion as I know and love it, I am natural and sound as a partridge. I felt a positive yearning toward one bush this afternoon. There was a match found for me at last. I fell in love with a shrub oak.' He becomes natural, sound as a bird, the more he lets himself know this tree, one of his neighbours, as one knows a woman one loves—that is, intimately and not as an object.

'Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature?' Thoreau asks in 'Walking' and was asking really all his life. It lies in such a personal, passionate and yet disciplined, observant prose, based on work in the field. It arises out of, and speaks of, intimacy with the world, love for it. It lies in impressions and revelations you allow to dawn on you out walking in the world, and for which, later, you find expression in prose that sings a song of love. Such writing, the writing that gives expression to nature—not merely to one writer's ideas of self and other, written from a false assumption that one stands severed from the objects of one's attention—gives us both the world and its witness; gives us the nature of their relationship. For the act of witness makes the world, the real world, that each of us knows. It sings the ground that reaches between the observer and the observed. All any of us can ever know is that which we experience in the flesh, to which we extend our love, a love we enact in the song we express by the nature of our engagement with that tree or pond or place, and in our poetic expression of these 'facts' later.

'[W]ords are "made,"' writes H Daniel Peck in Thoreau's Morning Work, 1990, 'by the interaction—the "dance"—of the creative self and the world. This is the same answer that the Journal, through its continuous play of association, gives over and over again ...' (Peck, 1990, p 123). Dancing with one's bit of the world, singing with it in the patterned sounds, the articulated thoughts, of one's writing, is an idea I touched upon in the introduction, drawing on the writing of Paul Carter. Thoreau, in his Journals, seems to approach a similar understanding of the nature of our places and the kind of relationship we may essay with them in words; indeed, according to

56 I pursue the idea of musical witness, and of 'the real world;' further in my chapter, 'The real world.'
Daniel Peck, Thoreau enacts such a relationship—a dance, a ‘worlding,’ a lyric engagement, a ‘play of association’—through the pages of the Journals and also in Walden (ibid, pp 123–25). According to Peck, Thoreau’s engagement (in prose) with the pond—and other places in his world—is both contemplative and creative (ibid, p 124). Those are two ‘modes of apprehension’ of the world, the first characterised by mindfulness and the second by drama or wildness, and sometimes he engages in them both at once (ibid). I would say that both are aspects of lyric engagement, of lyric apprehension of place; both are aspects of song. One is a standing still and listening; the other is the dance of words, which is the body-and-mind’s play with the world. They are both necessary to an ‘enactment’ of the world in words (ibid, p 125). Thoreau went to the pond, says Peck, to ‘recover his world,’ that is, to ground his life in an older, truer, tougher order of reality. And ‘Walden may be considered the “poem” he wrote toward his recovery’ (ibid). The world of this pond lives for us through Thoreau’s singing of it, as it came to life for Thoreau in the flesh, because he is there on the page, as he was there by the pond and in the wild, listening to it, talking with it, dancing with it, singing it, loving it.

How to write such a literature—how to allow nature to write through him—troubled and enticed Thoreau, as I say, all his life. In the years after his stay at the pond, he dedicated himself to a discipline of closer and closer observation and recording—botanical in particular—of the natural history of Concord; but as he did so, he worried in his Journals that his words left the life, the poetry, of Concord out. As Frank Stewart puts it, Thoreau’s eternal project was to seek truth in nature ‘and a way to render it that would betray neither nature nor language’ (Stewart, 1995, p 11). And in his struggles with both ends of that project—with coming to know the nature of nature and learning to express that in language fit for its articulation, in words that sing the wonder and integrity of earth while never reducing it to a mere object of appreciation—Thoreau pioneered a literature that became known as nature writing (ibid, p 13).

Witnessing and then bearing witness demand proximity and distance—the microscope and the memory. It was and remains a problem of scale: how to keep hold, in both seeing and writing, of the essence or meaning, the poem, perhaps, of an encounter with the world, while attending minutely to the detail of the flower or the leaf or the fruit (ibid, p 8). It is the challenge of how to let the moment be what it is, ‘without making a minute of it,’ as Thoreau put it on July 23, 1851. It is the challenge, as Thoreau put it on the same day, of giving yourself over to the ‘impression’ while making sure you recall enough to give it truthful ‘expression.’ Poetry, he thought, put an ‘interval’ between the two; it waits ‘for the seed to germinate naturally.’ Thoreau does not there elaborate on his metaphor. But its implication is that the world, one’s experience of it, sows a seed in one’s body and mind; there that seed must stay a while until it is ready to find expression in a way that is natural to the poet as well as true to the experience and its world. How does one learn
not to spoil nature by one's reflection upon it, by one's work upon one's text? How does one let the world dawn on one, sow its seeds, without reducing the business of being-in-the-world to an exercise in chronicling creation here? Thoreau's biographer Robert Richardson quotes Thoreau, in an entry in his *Journals*, worrying away at this question of scale in writing and seeing, in mid-August of 1851:

I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more detailed and scientific; that, in exchange for views wide as heaven's scope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope. I see details, not wholes nor the shadow of the whole. I count some parts, and say 'I know'.

—Richardson, 1986, p 247.57

Though he troubled himself about the balance, in the *Journals* in particular, he struck it very truly, brilliantly for the most part. Observation leads to reflection; the image always accompanies the idea, as in the passage Carolyn Servid read. But his arrival at a prose that did transcend the problems he envisaged—the risk that his engagement with the pond would reduce itself in fact and in prose to fastidious observation and arid, listing articulation—did not dawn on him as a revelation, entire and clear. It did not fall from the sky. He did not find it lying upon the shore. It came out of his taking his thinking outside, from engagement in mind and body with one place and out of his determination to write, later, as though he were always in the moment of his engagement in the world. He came to his solution, then, out of his agonising on the matter, his careful and endless exploration—in the world as well as in the mind—of the kind of looking one must learn to do, and the kind of writing that would be adequate to the expression of one's impressions. If the seed is to be sown, one must walk out in the world as a poet and a naturalist. And then one must, later, write as a poet, in whom the seed of the world has gestated.

The poet is more in the air than the naturalist, though they may walk side by side. Granted that you are out-of-doors; but what if the outer door is open, if the inner door is shut! You must walk sometimes perfectly free, not prying nor inquisitive, not bent on seeing things. Throw away a whole day for a single expansion, a single inspiration of air.

—August 21, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p 54

And a writer who wants to do justice to what he or she has seen in this way must do more than give a 'faithful, natural, and lifelike account of their sensations.' A writer must find a prose or poetry fresh, strange and vivid enough to touch and stir us, to change us even. To report one's responses, to give an account of what one saw and how one felt, would not do, thinks Thoreau.

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57 Frank Stewart's exploration of Thoreau's search for a way of seeing and of writing that would transcend mere nature observation led me to Thoreau's reflections upon it, and is the source of my own reflections here: see p 8 of *A Natural History of Nature Writing*.
What is needed, he suggests, is a work of words, seeded by the experience, by the place itself, but nourished in one’s mind by love and time, and given a form, by that gestation, that ‘affects’ the writer and then (with luck and grace) the reader with as much force and originality and mystery as the experience in the place affected the writer. It might be a prose like this:

Sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new impression; sentences which suggest as many things and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct; to frame these, that is the art of writing. Sentences which are expensive, towards which so many volumes, so much life, went; which lie like boulders on the page, up and down or across; which contain the seed of other sentences, not mere repetition, but creation; which a man might sell his grounds and castles to build.

—August 21, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p 54

Thoreau calls these sentences, the kind adequate to the challenge of writing nature, ‘nutty and concentrated,’ like nature herself. He does not say how one learns to write them—but he learned, and I wonder if it was not largely from his readiness to step outside convention, beyond literature and society, to look to all of nature for lessons.

As with so much in Thoreau, there is, in what he says about writing, a paradox. The more a writer tries humbly to give the reader the place, by making what they see as a plain, transparent report of their bit of the world, the less they will succeed, the less they will give us of its nature. The more one works to give a reader forms of words that are themselves vivid and mysterious, shapely and fresh, and therefore also more patently productions of one’s own hand and heart and head, and, so, disjunct from the world one is wishing to articulate, the more one may give a reader an experience akin to that which one knew in those moments of intimacy with a place—as powerful, as authentic, as memorable, and, because seeded by that encounter, redolent of it. The more one’s writing is one’s own and wild—patterned with many forces, not quite in control, a little dangerous, but limber and sufficient and original to one’s nature (see Richardson, 1986, p 252)—the more it might serve to articulate the wildness of the earth, and one’s own place in that poetic order.

This is the kind of prose Buell, perhaps, has in mind when he speaks of the role of ‘stylization’ in allowing a text to suggest or gesture at a place; the kind of writing Ponge and Paul had in mind when they spoke of adéquation—‘an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself.’ Such a mode of expression might be the most fitting kind of engagement with place, a dancing with it, a becoming part of it. ‘[A]n activity in words,’ wrote Paul: a performance in rhythm and sound, an act of space creation through words, a dynamic thing, alive and complex at the moment of its writing and again at each moment of its being read, suggestive of a much larger world that has led to it and includes that sentence’s arc, as the single moment-in-place is of a much larger local reality. As in love, one allows the other to express itself, herself, himself, the
more one speaks of and with that other in one's own true voice. One never mimics, and one must be present.

Thoreau had an idea that the kind of writing nature demanded, the kind that might do it justice, needed to be imagined, and in a sense actually practised, not as a sitting, but as a walking—as an activity or performance, made with the poet-writer's entire body. Frank Stewart finds this set of sentences in Thoreau's *Journals*:

How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live! Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow, as if I had given vent to the stream at the lower end and consequently new fountains flowed into it at the upper... Only while we are in action is the circulation perfect. The writing which consists with habitual sitting is mechanical, wooden, dull to read.

—Stewart, 1995, p 4; Thoreau, *Journals*, August 19, 1851

To write only what one has encountered in the flesh, out of a relationship constantly renewed with the rest of creation somewhere; and to write, even when one sat down to it, as though one were at that moment 'in action,' fully engaged, body and mind, in expression of that moment one had caught, that memory of it, that reflection of it—this is to write directly out of one's whole being's engagement with the world; it is to conceive of writing and practise it as activity, as dynamic, in the same way that Thoreau came to understand places as enmeshed and fluid activities, dynamic entities, always in the act of creation.

In September of this same year, 1851, Richardson tells us, Thoreau was reading Cato the Censor's *De Agri Cultura*, and was very taken with his careful and uncompromising attention to the practicalities of Roman farming, his advocacy of the virtues of the country life; and he admired 'the packed, severe style' of the prose. Cato admonishes a writer, *rem tene, verba sequentur,* [grasp the thing, the words will follow], and the epigram seems to have spoken to Thoreau and helped him reconcile his tension between fact and poetry (Richardson, 1986, p 250; Stewart, 1995, p 8). Writing well, making the things sing, demands attention to and loss within those things of the world; and it demands a trusting that the real things to which one gives oneself over will give rise later to words, a sequence of meaningful and shapely sound that is the truest poetry of fact.

Cato and Thoreau may have imagined in the epigram a statement of the continuity that can hold from intimate encounter with the actual world to vascular expression of it: one activity of distinct parts, or movements, in which world generates word, and word is an expression of world, suggested by it; in which world is reenacted in word.

Attend closely, go away; and then let the words, seeded by the intimate encounter, rise in your mind and express themselves in your prose. Let them come and let them stay wild so that they might speak of the wildness of things.
Henry David Thoreau was a man of letters. Practical though he was, and dedicated to the facticity of the world about him, his allegiance lay with literature not with science. As we have seen, he felt himself torn between a discipline of close and careful observation that he came increasingly to respect and pursue; and a conviction that speaking truthfully of (and for) the living world demanded a language that the scientists of Harvard and the academicians of the world disdained. 'I can express adequately only the thought which I love to express,' he wrote on July 7, 1851.

His life teaches us the virtues of observation in the field, but his writing often belittles the methods and merits of scientific knowledge. Here he is on that theme on January 7, 1851:

Science does not embody all that men know, only what is for men of science. The woodman tells me how he caught trout in a box trap, how he made his trough for maple sap of pine logs, and the spouts of sumac or white ash, which have a large pith. He can relate his facts to human life.

The knowledge of an unlearned man is living and luxuriant like a forest, but covered with mosses and lichens and for the most part inaccessible and going to waste; the knowledge of the man of science is like timber collected in yards for public works, which still supports a green sprout here and there, but even this is liable to dry rot.

—January 7, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p. 41

This is not so much an attack upon science as a reflection upon its limitations as a way of seeing the world and living a good life. It also speaks again to his conviction about the superiority of grounded, lived, embodied knowledge over the abstracted, universal and dryly articulated knowledge of science.

Thoreau anticipates in passages like this, as Loren Eiseley commented, the 'process philosophers' of the twentieth century (Eiseley, The Star Thrower, 1978, p. 224). He was a proto-phenomenologist, a man who knew that the writer's true task was not to discourse about, to dissect and analyse, but to sing, out of his entire self, out of the fullest mindful and sensuous engagement, the things-in-themselves. What counted for Thoreau were the lively and elusive truths of the moment, the truths that arise only in a relationship between the embodied mind of a witness and the embodied mystery of other things. And the way to write them lay somewhere between the silence of witness and the disembodied, lifeless articulations of the clinical analyst. Between the wordlessness of the woods and the woodsman, and the inanimate discoursing of the experts, falls the song of the way things are—wildness and wild writing. Witness and wordling call for a kind of singing, such as the phenomenologists came to ask of the researcher who looks into the lifeworld of things, of human being-in-the-world.
Thoreau offers a precocious critique, then, of the paradigm of scientific method, with its emphasis on analysis and objectivity and its lifeless, toneless language, that came to dominate western epistemology. He saw that a certain intimate way of knowing the world demanded a broader and shapelier vocabulary than scientific method generally allowed; and that a knowledge respecting only what scientific method revealed necessarily excluded a certain knowledge of the world, a knowledge he came to see late in his life that was native to the indigenous people who came before him in his beloved Concord—idealising, perhaps, but seeing something few of his contemporaries, few enough of us yet, saw:

Our scientific names convey a very partial information only; they suggest certain thoughts only. It does not occur to me that there are other names for most of these objects, given by a people who stood between me and them, who had better senses than our race. How little I know of that *arbor-vitae* when I have learned only what science can tell me. It is but a word. It is not a tree of life. But there are twenty words for the tree and its different parts which the Indian gave, which are not in our botanies, which imply a more practical and vital science. He used it every day. He was well acquainted with its wood, and its bark, and its leaves. No science does more than arrange what knowledge we have of any class of objects. But, generally speaking, how much more conversant was the Indian with any wild animal or plant than we are, and in his language is implied all that intimacy.

—March 5, 1858, Shepard, 1927, pp 192–93

Richard Nelson reads this passage and takes a seat among these trees for which we have so few words and of whose lives we still know so little. We share some more readings and then walk back slowly to the bus. Afternoon passes in discussion at the Thoreau Institute. But it is the lake and the readings there that stay with me, long after I am gone and the conversations we had inside the institute buildings have been forgotten. Sharing his words by the pond from which they arose continues the dance he began when he walked and lived here, when he pulled his desk outside and wrote of himself here as though his life and the life of the place depended on it.

Despite Thoreau's cranky critique of science, Thoreau practised in his naturalism and articulated in his prose the marriage of imagination and observation, of poetry and science that has come to be the habit of nature writers ever after. He understood that he must grow intimate with a thing to approach any true knowledge of it; that what he saw was just a small piece of the warp and weave of nature's fabric, what he heard was just a phrase of its great song; and that expression of that fragmentary revelation demanded a humble diction and a poetic ear. In these realisations, and the work he made out of them, he anticipates the nature writers who followed, many of the best of them here with me now in these trees.
Picking up and putting down the edition of selections from Thoreau's *Journals* that I have on my desk in Karoomba, and which I have been, as you see, making repeated sorties into as I recall my day at the pond, I am struck by how often music comes up. Thoreau had an ear for nature as well as an eye. 'You must walk so gently as to hear the finest sounds, the faculties being in repose,' he reminds himself on July 23, 1851. And so he went. Such a practice allowed him to hear and write the chapter 'Sounds' in *Walden*. But that whole book is an act of auditory imagination, a sustained and circuitous musical perambulation of the woods, a musical elaboration of a place and the ideas it seeded in a man. It hears that place's musics from many points—not of *view* so much as of *hearing*, and not from points, or not only from points, but on such walks—and it sings them, or if not them, then this man's response to them, in which you hear the place somehow in its counterpoint, in the agreement of the singing with that which it sings, that to which it responds in key. The book is Thoreau's activity in words to record an activity in the flesh of putting oneself about a place and listening to it. It is a listening, choreographed and sung in prose. 'Let him who has ears, hear,' he writes June 13, 1851. And 'sing,' he might have added.

He put it like this in late 1855:

> My body is all sentient. As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if I touched the wires of a battery. I can generally recall—have fresh in my mind—several scratches last received. These I continually recall to mind, repress, and harp upon. The age of miracles is each moment thus returned. Now it is wild apples, now river reflections, now a flock of lesser redpolls.

—December 11, 1855, Shepard, 1927, pp 148-49

He listened, yes, with all of his body and not only to sounds. His whole mode of apprehension was, I think, musical. He moved about in the world and allowed its forms and relationships to touch and jolt him, to stir and inspire and thrill him. He cast his attention about everywhere within his corner of the world, feeling out the patterns of connection between him and the other beings present, and among those other things; intuiting the larger order; finding it suggested in the smallest things. And then he 'harped upon' this going out, this meeting with small manifestations of the miraculous order of the world. As Frank Stewart reminds us, quoting Thoreau, he spent his days 'trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express!' (Stewart, 1995, p 3; he quotes from Thoreau's introductory chapter 'Economy' in *Walden*, p 14).

Thoreau was drawn to music, the kind men and women make with voice and instrument. 'Listen to music religiously,' he enjoins us on June 12, 1851, 'as if it were the last strain you might hear.'

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58 It is in many ways, in form and expression, the kind of thing Paul Carter has in mind when he speaks of mobile, musical engagement with landscape. See my chapters 'The silent continent,' pp 102 ff and 'The text & the world,' pp 126 ff.
Music was, for Thoreau, the highest art, full of what men and women most needed to know. And so listening for all one is worth—this too was an art and an obligation. The world—nature, that is, including mankind's clangorous domain of commerce, transportation, communication, worship and art—was full of song. 'Sounds' is his recitation of, and it is his reflection upon, some of those sounds, from passing train to hooting owl. There is far more song in the world than most people have ears to hear, and every sound, heard and unheard, is, I think he is saying, part of a larger music. But that larger music, the whole of which all these sounds are a part, will only strike you as music if you can hear and carry its phrases over the long term, for these phrases are broken and discontinuous, interrupted by the seasons. Hearing the music is a matter of discerning the pattern.

At a distance in the meadow I hear still, at long intervals, the hurried commencement of the bobolink's strain, the bird just dashing into song, which is as suddenly checked, as it were, by the warden of the seasons, and the strain is left incomplete forever. Like human beings they are inspired to sing only for a short season.

—June 29, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p 45

'Beauty and music are not mere traits and exceptions,' Thoreau writes later in the winter reflection from which I quoted above (December 11, 1855). 'They are the rule and character.' This is cryptic—nuitty and compressed, suggestive of far more than it says, like a piece of music. Coming as it does after his exploration of how even the dead of winter contains enchantments, indeed that 'great winter itself looked like a precious gem,' I take his words to suggest that Thoreau understands the world as beautiful and as orderly and wild as music in its very nature, though our glimpses of that order are 'transient and partial.'

Earlier, back among those pages and days of his Journals in 1851, when Thoreau was thinking much about music, he wrote this extended reflection on the musical nature of reality:

There is always a kind of fine aeolian harp music to be heard in the air. I hear now, as it were, the mellow sound of distant horns in the hollow mansions of the upper air, a sound to make all men divinely insane that hear it, far away overhead, subsiding to my ear. To ears that are expanded what a harp this world is! The occupied ear thinks that beyond the cricket no sound can be heard, but there is an immortal melody that may be heard morning, noon, and night, by ears that can attend, and from time to time this man or that hears it, having ears that were made for music.

—July 21, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p 50

Thoreau's 'as it were' tells us he is not claiming that the atmosphere actually rings with symphonies. He suggests, too, that the hearing is a practice ('to ears that are expanded what a harp this world is') and, to some extent, a talent ('having ears that were made for music'). In any event, he seems to say, there is an order that may well elude us, and seem not to exist, unless we
pay attention as a listener must to music, 'as if it were the last strain you might hear'—for the rhythm and tone that betray the order of things. A little earlier that year, on June 22, Thoreau wrote in a moment of deep serenity,

I awoke into a music which no one about me heard. Whom shall I thank for it? ... I feel my Maker blessing me. To the sane man the world is a musical instrument. The very touch affords an exquisite pleasure.

—June 22, 1851, Shepard, 1927, p 44

The world itself is a musical instrument, in this conception. Touch it, let it touch you, and it sounds. The world is a space of dynamism and melody and pattern. To hear it, though, you must be sane—which is the same thing as to be 'divinely insane' for Thoreau—that is, you must be awake and have your inner door open to the world; you must not be locked tight inside culture and its fearful, narrow, sane and profane conventions. To hear the music you must leave Concord; you must leave the streets of pure reason; you must even leave your cabin in the woods; you must pull your desk outside into the world, walk, stand and listen. You must be present to catch whatever the sky drops, whatever rises from the ground, sounds from the woods, (Walden, 1854, p 14).

When I piece together these fragments and random notes of Thoreau's; when I listen to his prose and hear its musical phrasing, I begin to make out an argument for, an embodiment of, the musical apprehension of the world. Or of a pond, anyway. I read in the writings of this man the life of a vivid mind, divinely insane, wide awake. I read what it means to live deliberately; and I see what it means to write as though the writing were an act not only of human nature but of nature, with all its force. One pond alone has not given rise to all these thoughts and all this music. But that pond and the country of Concord this man walked articulated clearly enough to Thoreau the order of things for which these phrases of his were his attempt at an apt and lyric expression. These were things these trees and this water meant to that man. His music and his ideas were made out of his listening to the world just here; his joining of his words to the pattern of things just here. They are what he made out of that encounter. And they serve it well.

Walden is more formally composed than the Journals. It was, as his other books were, a self-conscious literary construction. As we have seen, he worried deeply, even as he composed it, about the artifice he was making of the journal entries, made in place, that went into its construction. But for all its art and premeditation, its long slow working and reworking—a process explored by many authors, including Buell—it remains a strikingly unconventional, original and compelling book, even now. It is not a neat representation of the place, Walden Pond; nor is it a tidily organised elaboration of a thesis about place, wildness, and the authentic life; nor again is
it a straightforward exploration of the natural history of the pond. The book fits no easy category at all, though it may have begun one.

No useful map of the pond emerges from the book. Thoreau is an eccentric and infuriating guide to his place (Buell, 1995, pp 134–35). ‘One of Walden’s more frustrating charms is that it so easily loses the reader in the landscape of the text,’ writes Buell (ibid, p 134). You cannot, in Walden, see the woods for the trees. Thoreau loses us, challenges our patience, dwelling long and deep on his favourite trees and moments, on places of no apparent significance, while refusing to sketch the relationship, in conventional terms, of each of those places to the other and the whole.

Nor will he stay on the subject, despite the promise of his neat chapter headings. He ranges far and wide thematically and geographically in every chapter, following a thought whose significance at first seems remote from his purpose. This happens too in the Journals, of course, though we expect it more in such a book of fragments. The same mind—‘a mind naturally expansive and all but vagrant’ according to Odell Shepard (Shepard, 1927, p ix)—lies clearly behind the uncontrived Journals and the literary product that is Walden. That mind’s unkempt geography is discernible in both.

In his ambling, conversational way, Thoreau writes according to his own nature and his chosen calling as an essayist. The essayist takes a walk through his material, whatever that may be, allowing herself or himself to be led as much as to lead, to be found as much as to find. He asks us to go with him; he leads us beyond and outside our expectations.

But Lawrence Buell argues in his chapter on Walden that there is more to it than this. ‘Thoreau’s refusal to organize the Walden landscape tidily for his readers may be one sign of his intent to get us lost in it’ (Buell, 1995, p 135). It is not just that Thoreau can’t give us a neat map organised to suit conventional human expectations—it is that he won’t. For two reasons, thinks Buell. One is his ‘ongoing commitment to a subjectivized, aestheticized vision’ of nature in prose. The other is ‘his habit as a naturalist of organizing the environment in terms of its points of nonhuman interest instead of in terms of the directions and markers that most human beings depend on.’ But both habits, argues Buell, point to a political project—a green one. Thoreau’s idea was to allow nature to have its way over his readers, to allow the natural to encompass and prevail over the human. And his method—radical if subtle and lost on many of the critics who read Walden as an exercise in retreat and an argument for quietism—was to slow and baffle his readers in the way that a pathless woods will defeat us and cut off our retreat, so that his readers are given a complete immersion ‘in life according to nature’ and will, if they stay to learn the lessons wildness teaches, be unable to ‘reenter civilized life again on the same terms as before’ (ibid).

I find myself lost in and frustrated by Walden in just this way. (I have lost myself many times as I wrote this chapter. I wandered off, led in unanticipated directions as I searched for passages
I seemed to remember in the *Journals* and in *Walden*. Thoreau has a way of leading you astray, engagingly and to good effect, more thoroughly than just about any other writer. *Walden* does not make the argument against the degradation of the environment and for the mending of our ways that Thoreau's contemporary George Perkins Marsh made in *Man and Nature*, 1864, (Buell, 1995, p 136). But, like all Thoreau's writing, and whether or not he intends it, *Walden* 's prose—the text's landscape—works on me, as on many readers, not by argument or exposition, but by making an imaginative space, inviting me into a terrain, in which a different and compelling order prevails, and getting me thoroughly lost in it. From that space it is difficult to emerge unchanged. The order that prevails is the order places have—wild, chaotic, ordered by other principles than the merely human. He has imagined the pond ecologically. His chief argument for the environment is to 'world' it again for his readers; to lose them in it and make it real.

In this way too, I think, Thoreau begins the project and the technique of many nature writers who have followed. He remakes the relationship between landscape and text, allowing the logic of the more-than-merely-human to work on the reader through that reconfigured relationship, in which the land shapes the prose as much as the text shapes the land (in the reader's mind). Thoreau makes a text whose naturalistic order, whose woods-like chaos, works on the reader much as the place itself might—loosing the reader from his or her socially constructed expectations (of a text and of a terrain) and losing him or her in its wildness. He allows nature to prevail for a while in the mind of his readers and allows them to begin to imagine the world, and their role in it, ecologically, as if nature, not just the society of men and women, prevailed.

If ever there was a man not finished at the skin, opened by love to his place, it was Henry David Thoreau; and if ever there were a prose porous, you would think, to country and likely to be expressive of it, it is the prose of *Walden* and the *Journals*. How do the pond, the woods and fields and meadows of Concord speak in his words?

Even at Walden Pond Thoreau lived in a tamed and cultivated landscape—hardly less affected by the habits and aspirations of men and women than it is now. The pond, as I have discovered, reaching it by bus from Harvard Square in under an hour, lies within a short reach of the busy town (Concord) where Thoreau was born and raised; where he taught briefly and unhappy, and worked at making pencils for his father and surveying in the countryside for clients; and it lies close enough to Cambridge, where he had his own classical education, and which was then, as it remains, a centre of academic learning, art, religion and society. He did not, and he knew he did not, go from the city to the wilds he merely went to the edge of town. And there, as I say, he lived among woods and rainfall and birdsound and town bells, aware that it was not wilderness but wildness he settled within, outside but not immune from, the hand of culture.
It is, I think, listening to some of his words read, the unreconciled qualities of this place that also characterise Thoreau’s prose. This country bears all the marks of human design, ingenuity and purposeful schemes, and yet it is not all under cultivation; it is not tamed or broken. Its trees grow according to their timetables and inclinations; its squirrels run and gather nuts; its leaves fall untidily; its water lies still or darkens and churns with weather; in it, other sounds than traffic and industry or careful conversation hold the air. It is an unkempt pastoral. Within its rustication, wildness runs, something seems poised, at any moment, to disturb the gentility that rests here.

In ‘Walking’ Thoreau wrote, ‘I would not have every man nor every part of man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future ...’ (Atkinson, 1992, p 656). This is not a picture of the Concord he or his audience lived within, which was a place where little land lay fallow, few enough old woods remained standing, and meadow and swamp were in decline. It is a picture of an agricultural landscape he had begun to imagine and bravely advocate, in which a just and sustainable, lively and self-renewing balance reigned; where culture and nature, cultivation and wildness, coexisted.

But in his own writing just such a ratio of wild to tilled does hold, I think. Thoreau’s sentences, even in the Journals, demonstrate a high degree of rhetorical control and order. They are often long and elaborate or crafted short and sharp, as angular and suggestive as cut gemstones, but, as Phillip Lopate claims, ‘clear at every moment’ (Lopate, 1994, p 479). They are fashioned, as this place is fashioned, and just as heavily worked. But they are not only that. They are also unruly, long, complex, strange and demanding. They seem to run where they will. The grammar of his society and its language orders them, but he unsettles it, pushes it to its edges, transcends it, you might say. A wilder order, logic, cadence, seem to impel his prose: what he calls, in ‘Walking,’ a ‘Grammatica parda, tawny grammar,’ the resilient, disobedient order that he reishes when he sees it in the fields of Concord, when, for example ‘my neighbours cow breaks out of her pasture early in the spring and boldly swims the river,’ reasserting her ‘native rights’ (Atkinson, 1992, p 652).

His writing is learned and vernacular, rhetorical and yet plain, polite but not compliant. It is, indeed, corn and deep lake and wood, writing; it is a wild and untamable heart beating in a realm of cultivated fields. It has pulse, and it feels a lot like the pulse of this unbroken, cultivated but wild place.

Listen to this. Notice its swell and rush and stutter and flourish. Notice how these sentences are as fresh and bold as a river or a hickory or a cow, the product of as much evolution and chance. Notice too how it is contrived as music is contrived; and how, like a piece of music, or like a landscape such as it describes, it exercises its genius, its mystery and power upon you. Hear its ideas; hear its music. See its lines; see its grid of design; see its unruly edges, its swamps and
thickets. Its rhythm fits the rhythm of the country it contemplates. If such a place, a house by
a swamp, could speak, it might do it thus:

Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the
impervious and quaking swamps. When, formerly, I have analyzed my partiality for some farm which I
had contemplated purchasing, I have frequently found that I was attracted solely by a few square rods
of impermeable and unfathomable bog,—a natural sink in one corner of it. That was the jewel which
dazzled me. I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my native town than
from the cultivated gardens in the village. There are no richer parterres to my eyes than the dense beds
of dwarf andromeda (Cassandra carylicata) which cover these tender places on the earth’s surface. Botany
cannot go farther than tell me the names of the shrubs which grow there,—the high-blueberry, paniced
andromeda, lamb-kill, azalea, and rhodora,—all standing in the quaking sphagnum. I often think that I
should like to have my house front on this mass of dull red bushes, omitting other flower plots and
borders, transplanted spruce and trim box, even gravelled walks,—to have this fertile spot under my
windows, not a few imported barrow-loads of soil only to cover the sand which was thrown out in
digging the cellar.

—'Walking,' in Atkinson, 1992, p 646

Taking myself to the pond; hearing there some of Thoreau’s words read; feeling that vascular
writing play its pulse and rhythm in the place that seeded it; hearing how it danced with, moved
in time with the pond and this intricate, restless, swaying and falling space around it; hearing in
the voices of these readers how Thoreau’s words have changed and called them to the land and
its speaking; returning to my home, later, and to Thoreau’s writing, I have discovered him, I think,
for the first time. I have found him and understood his writing by finding the pond; and by the rare
luck of having his work performed, as it was performed in its conception and drafting and
redrafting, there in those woods (and the wider country about) to whose call it was a response, of
whose dynamic body it is a kind of score. He had eluded me till then, and perhaps he eludes me
still. Like a place on earth, Thoreau’s writing is never the same twice; I find something new,
some more depth than I had realised, each time I return to it. I had not realised properly how
Thoreau learned at the pond to practise and articulate the kind of presence that a writer of
nature—perhaps any writer—needs to master; nor how he came to see writing as an activity in
words, born in physical encounter with the world, capable of expressing that encounter’s—that
place’s—true nature only to the extent that one’s writing never stood still, never surrendered
to conventional notions and words.

All of this occurred to Thoreau here, or hereabouts, in this landscape half-wild, half-tame. He
came to see, of course, that life itself depended upon the preservation of the wild order that has
always been at play. And he came, walking Concord's countryside, to see that wildness must run through a writer's sentences if life is to be sustained within them, if they are to be sentences capable of speaking for that larger wild order as it manifests somewhere. All a writer's care and craft must go toward the preservation and expression of that wildness—in the same way as a farmer's or a forester's care, their husbandry, must work, to sustain the wild order among their fields of wheat, their plowed soils, and their harvested woods, for their sake and the land's.

Writing, if it is true writing and not a tamed, felled, inanimate thing, is always an enactment—a performance in rhythmic and patterned sound—of one writer-in-relationship-with-the-world just here; of one corner of creation as it sang to that writer. And that piece of writing, to the extent that it is wild in this way, also participates in and perpetuates the wild music of the earth, as enacted in that place in that moment. In a pond, for instance.
9. The long coastline

Peter Matthiessen

Sagaponack, New York

The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, life
is your child, but there is in me
Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye
that watched before there was an ocean ...

Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-
beat's ancient rhythm I never learned it of you.
Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both
our tones flow from the older fountain.
—Robinson Jeffers, 'Continent's End'

The restlessness of shorebirds, their kinship with distance and swift seasons, the wistful signal of their voices
down the long coastlines of the world make them, for me, the most affecting of wild creatures.

—Peter Matthiessen, The Wind Birds

'It's too late for nature writing,' Peter Matthiessen said at a conference in New York in September of 2001. We have lived to see days, he went on, when corporate thinking and consumer behaviour rule most of the world; and there is no room in their logic for nature. 'You have to be an activist-ranter now, and a pain in the butt.'

At about that time, Matthiessen was bringing to an end a book he had been working on for a decade—a study of the world's cranes (the magnificent birds of the genus _Grus_). It is a lyric and stringent celebration of these heavenly birds; it is also a well argued defence of wildness in the world. It is, in other words, a piece of nature writing; and a good one. When I read his New York remarks, a year or more had already passed since I had visited Matthiessen, and seen his cranes on

59 Speech to first US Resurgence Conference, quoted in 'Morning Glory' by Suzi Gablik, _Resurgence_, no 210, Jan/Feb 2002, p 60
the screen of his computer. His words made me reconsider everything I am concerned with in this study; made me stop and think twice about the value of a literature of place; about the place of my own writing; and about the worth of his. Is it too late for *The Birds of Heaven?* Is it too late for nature writing? Are such works no longer relevant?

If it is too late for *The Birds of Heaven*, I suspect it is too late for all of us. For this is beautiful writing—hopeful, stirring, honest, wise. We will always need such writing. We need it for the same reasons we need the cranes themselves: to remind us of the beauty we may lose, in life and in literature, if we cannot take the time to care for what counts.

Matthiessen is often called a nature writer, and has always spurned the label. What he rejects is a kind of writing we have all properly lost patience with: pastoral, romantic nature appreciation without bite. But nature writing was never merely that, not when it was any good. And Matthiessen’s writing—whatever we call it—has always been good. Including his nine novels, the book of cranes is his thirtieth book. At its best, as in a few passages of the new book, his prose is painstakingly made, musical, rich with detail, precise. Its characteristic note is heartbreak laced with anger, recollected in quietness. He condemns atrocities and he witnesses miracles; he goads us to attention and calls us to action. Good nature writing does that. That’s why we need it.

‘Who cares about cranes?’ a neighbour asked Matthiessen on his return to Sagaponack in late summer 1992 from crane research in Siberia. *The Birds of Heaven*—the entire body of his work, really—is his answer. If we cannot care for cranes—beautiful in themselves, holy in the imagination of men and women, travellers of the earth, gifted singers, inhabitants of marvellous geographies—then we are lost. ‘[I]f one has truly understood a crane,’ Matthiessen adds, ‘one has understood everything.’ If that still needs to be said—and I suspect it always will—it is not too late for nature writing. It is, I think, why Matthiessen bothers to go on writing, instead of confining himself to ‘activist-ranting,’ something he also does well, something he was doing—no doubt elegantly—at the Resurgence conference that September. There is a future for Peter Matthiessen, there is a future for nature writing, as long as there is a tenuous future for the cranes and long coastlines of the world, as long as we care for the wildness and austere beauty they express.

‘Sons and daughters of Thoreau abound in contemporary American writing, if we can believe the reviewers,’ wrote Edward Abbey, one of the literary progeny, himself (*Abbey’s Road*, 1979, p xx). One of those he had in mind was Peter Matthiessen, whom he dubbed ‘the Thoreau of Africa, South America, the Himalaya, and the wide, wild sea.’ (As opposed to Ed Hoagland, ‘the Thoreau of Central Park and also Vermont;’ Wendell Berry, ‘Thoreau of Kentucky;’ Annie Dillard, ‘Thoreau of Virginia,’ whom Abbey believed to be the ‘true heir.’ Of Matthiessen, though, Abbey went on,
'I cannot forgive him for writing *The Snow Leopard, Far Tortuga*, and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, that strange, green, haunting, and lovely novel' (*Abbey's Road*, 1979, pp xx-xxi). Today, anyway, I take to the open road—well, most of it is not all that open—to find Matthiessen, Thoreau of the South Fork.

Specifically, I find, after much circling about, route 95 out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and point my hire car southwest toward New London, Connecticut. Then the car and I take the ferry from New London to Orient Point on the north fork of Long Island and on, via two more short ferry crossings, to Sagaponack, on the south fork, where Peter Matthiessen lives. Matthiessen has had to put up with a reputation as a kind of Thoreau-on-the-Road since he drove west with a box of field guides from his home on Long Island in the late 1950s and returned with that requiem to a wilderness lost, *Wildlife in America*, which was published in 1959. He has been travelling all the years since, far afield from Long Island, indeed all around the world; and, since 1960, he has been returning here, to a house set back from the ocean shore at Sagaponack, to write what he finds in the high and low, the deep and far places of the world. In the same house behind hedges where I find him, Peter Matthiessen has for forty years been turning his travels in the wild places into prose—into novels and an array of more and less literary nonfiction—of deep feeling and lyric power. 'He is our greatest modern nature writer in the lyric tradition,' wrote *The New York Times Book Review*.

'Our greatest living nature writer,' who thinks, as we've seen, that nature writing has had its day, has let me drop by for a couple of hours' conversation and a bit of lunch. I know he can hardly spare the time, working as he is to finish his book of cranes against a pressing deadline and the approach of his own winter migration. So I am on the road from Walden Pond, via Boston, to Long Island to meet him.

His Thoreauvian reputation dismays Matthiessen, McKay Jenkins writes in his introduction to *The Peter Matthiessen Reader* (Jenkins, 1999, p xii), and of course it is a trite commentary on an unequaled literary achievement, a body of work that speaks of deep independence of mind, determined literary ambition, and the service of a cause much larger than anything so merely personal as a reputation—I mean the defence he has made eloquently, beginning with *Wildlife in America*, of wildness and authenticity, wisdom and honour in the world of men and women and the wider world of all beings. But Matthiessen is an emphatically outdoors writer, a wanderer and a tireless quester for the grail—so the label sticks and lasts. His writing, too, is Thoreauvian (though it bears other comparisons and draws on other sources) in its stringency and integrity, in its experimentation, its muscular lyricism, and in its eloquent rage at the diminution of life, of wildness and wonder, being wrought by unrestrained commerce all over the world.
But he is, above all, his own man; not Thoreau's, nor anybody's, heir—though, of course, it is in this way more than any other that he may be seen, in life and in literature, as a modern Thoreau. His deepest commitment, like Thoreau's, may be personal integrity, self-determination, the authentic life (for himself, for each of us, for places and animals and marginal cultures).

I am not going to meet Peter Matthiessen, though, because he may be Thoreau's heir. I am going because his writing stirred me before I found the writing of many who have come after him. It helped me find my subject matter, to recognise my cause, and it encouraged me to find a voice, if I could, so honest and strong. Like Abbey, I found his writing strange, haunting and grand. I am going because his work and life have inspired the writing, to some degree, of some of the other writers here. Early in his career, Barry Lopez took himself to Sagaponack to visit Matthiessen. He recalls that visit and pays homage to Matthiessen in his essay 'A Voice' in About this Life.

Matthiessen remembers it too, and speaks of it when I am with him. Terry Tempest Williams, when I visit her in late November, acknowledges Matthiessen's influence and her admiration for his work. In her essay 'A Patriot's Journal' in An Unspoken Hunger, she goes to hear him speak against the war in Iraq, in early January 1991 at the American Museum of Natural History in Washington. That night, Matthiessen told a crowd that the part of the American mind that wants war is the same part that can't abide wilderness. Apt words still—another American war against Iraq begins as I write. In her essay, Williams quotes some of Matthiessen's words—a gentle, powerful rant. 'Issues of peace and issues of the environment are rooted in a sacredness of life,' he said. (Williams, An Unspoken Hunger, 1994, p 168). Both war and the human assault upon the wild offend against and disdain, he said, the principle of the sacredness of life. Williams' tone, describing this speech, is reverential. She depicts the two men that Matthiessen is—the naturalist-writer and the peace warrior;

Peter Matthiessen's work is worth studying for its own sake. But it has also changed, I think, the tide and current, the tone of nature writing. Matthiessen, a man now approaching his middle seventies and whose nature writing began in the late 1950s, stands on the divide between an older era of the literature of nature and a new one, which runs through till the present moment.

Something new—more overtly political, more concerned with indigenous and traditional wisdom, less formal in its diction, more modern in its temperament—began in the field after his Wildlife in America. Though his work carries echoes of the older writers, it also stands apart from them. It seems to me to stand at the beginning of the literature we think of as of our own time because it speaks in a contemporary voice about the concerns (loss of diversity, degradation of habitat, decline of indigenous human cultures, the retreat of wilderness, peace, the ecological and human costs of rampant global capitalism) that preoccupy us now. His writing seems to make a transition from old-style literary naturalism to an edgier and politically engaged, spiritually charged nature
writing. This has happened partly, I guess, because he has written so long, from the forties right up to the present day. But there is more to it than that. He modelled for a post-war generation a prose that engaged with the eco, to use Sherman Paul’s term, and yet did so in the literary vernacular of a new era, in sentences as cool and lyrical as any body else’s from The Beat generation. He is the model of the engaged writer of the ecological age.

His life and work allude to older forms and yet belong with and seem to inspire newer ones. He marks the passage between, on the one side, John Burroughs, Mary Austin, Henry Beston, Joseph Woods Krutch, Rachel Carson and even Aldo Leopold, whose work, though beautiful and eternal, now sounds out the music of a former time; and, on the other, Edward Abbey (who shares Matthiessen’s birth year of 1927 but whose influential writing began to appear later than Matthiessen’s), Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Richard Nelson, Linda Hogan and others—and all the other Thoreaus of the baby-boom. His prose, like the shore, belongs to both realms. His body of work is the littoral zone, where the literature of place has changed.

The sustained accomplishment of his writing, his rare literary voice, his undying commitment to social and environmental causes, the vigour of his fieldwork and the rigour of his research have inspired a new generation (and perhaps another now) of nature writers; and the continuing popularity of his books (all of which, he tells me with quiet pride when I am with him later in his writing house, remain in print) with readers—all this has helped, over forty years, to keep the genre of nature writing alive and even, to some extent, sexy, and its standards high. But all along Matthiessen has been reluctant to be called a nature writer himself. ‘There can be something self-indulgent about nature writing,’ he told me over the phone two years ago, the first time we spoke. And self-indulgence sits high up on his list of personal and literary vices.

The range of his own writing—novels, travel and place essays, nature studies, two books on native American issues, a book on Zen Buddhism, another in defence of the endangered tigers, and another in defence of the fishermen of Long Island—clearly extends too wide to be contained within the category ‘nature writing.’ But he loves the wild places and the lives of animals, and all those many books are alive with them. He is a writer who takes the natural world as seriously as he takes anything. Read his prose—fiction and nonfiction—and you will know the nature of some places on earth, their people, their other lifeforms, their vulnerabilities and pulse. This is what

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60 You could say the same perhaps of John Hay, but he is not so much a modern in his style as Matthiessen. John Haines, a man close in age to Matthiessen, writes a prose and a poetry of powerful, elegant modernity, yet his life has been more hermetic, less forceful in its symbolism than Matthiessen’s. Wendell Berry, another writer of Matthiessen’s vintage, has inspired the writing of many younger writers, but his work belongs less clearly than Matthiessen’s to the modern era. It is more parochial. It is unapologetically old-fashioned, and admirable enough for that. Its voice is prophetic and nostalgic. Matthiessen may not be alone on this threshold, then. And yet he stands apart.
one would like all nature writing to be. A reader wants—in nature writing; some of us would like it in everything we read—to get a feel for the world to which the words allude. And we do in Matthiessen’s books. Not only that—we hear his own heart’s beat, encounter his mind’s fierce engagement with the world.

He is a writer then—among other things, a nature writer. He is a writer who does not aspire to be a nature writer. But he is a writer who has very often put his craft to the service of those that cannot speak—disenfranchised peoples, threatened places and endangered wild animals. He began writing early—at school and seriously at college—and found that it suited him; but before he found his calling as a writer he had discovered his love of the wild. On childhood vacations at Fisher’s Island and the Everglades, and on the family property in Pennsylvania, he entered the world of the snakes and the birds and the fish. And he has never really left. If he had not been a writer the only other thing he would liked to have been is a marine biologist, like his brother. He would like to have known intimately the life of the sea and the character of the long shorelines of the world.

Nearing one o’clock, after an hour’s passage across the sound, I find a phone box at Orient Point and tell Matthiessen I am close. He gives me detailed directions to his place, but I find it hard to get them all down: the wind blows my page about, and I have to keep feeding coins into the phone, cradling the payphone against my shoulder. My road lies east to Greenport, and then south to Shelter Island on a small punt; from Shelter Island on another ferry to the south fork, and on across dry land to North Haven, Noyack and Sagg Road to somewhere close to Sagaponack. I lose my way at the point where my notes petered out, and I double back to a gas station outside Sag Harbor, where I am sure they’ll know who Peter Matthiessen is and where he lives. But they don’t, of course. They’ve never heard of him. And why should they have? They run a gas station not a bookshop. Matthiessen has only lived nearby for forty years, after all. And he’s not someone famous like a movie star, a politician or basketball player. He is just America’s greatest nature writer in the lyrical tradition, a reluctant literary hero. Clearly it is much too late for nature writing at the gas station. But the guy there knows where Sagaponack is, anyway, and he sets me on a course across fields of potatoes toward it. And quarter of an hour later, I find the lane where Peter Matthiessen lives in a house behind a privet hedge.

The book by which most people know Peter Matthiessen—The Snow Leopard—unfolds high in the Himalaya, deep inland and far from the sea. Even there, on his pilgrimage for hope, his search for the fabled, the actual, snow leopard, Matthiessen finds some ammonite fossils that speak of the time when these highlands were submerged in a restless sea. Many of his other books also rise
from firm earth—*The Tree Where Man Was Born*, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* and *African Silences* among them. But the sea, the ‘wide wild sea’ and other kinds of moving water, are rarely far away in his writing. Many of his books, most of his journeys, his life’s work and passions, walk the shores, swim the rivers, negotiate the estuaries and the swamps of the world. Some of his books are spawned like striped-bass upriver, or they are born and raised in the tideline, along one of the sandy reaches, the long coastlines, where land and wild ocean give themselves up to each other. Water—river and ocean—runs strongly through his body of work: *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, *On the River Styx*, *The Cloud Forest*, *Under the Mountain Wall*, *Blue Meridian*, *Far Tortuga*, *Men’s Lives*, *The Wind Birds*, the Mister Watson trilogy, *Nine-Headed Dragon River*, and even his latest book, *The Birds of Heaven*.

Matthiessen’s first nonfiction book *Wildlife in America*, though it tells the natural history of wildlife across all of North America and its sad decline, begins with a longboat putting out to sea, from an Icelandic shore, to take the lives of the last great auks.

> In early June of 1844, a longboat crewed by fourteen men hove to off the skerry called Eldey, a stark, volcanic mass rising out of the gray wastes of the North Atlantic some ten miles west of Cape Reykjanes, Iceland. On the islets of these uneasy seas, the forebears of the boatmen had always hunted the swarming seabirds as a food, but on this day they were seeking, for collectors, the eggs and skins of the garefowl or great auk ...

—*Wildlife in America*, 1959, p 19

The shore, more than any other terrain, is the distinctive territory of Peter Matthiessen’s writing. He often writes of it. But even, I think, when he does not write of that meeting ground of water and earth—that edge where he has lived and written many long years—the tidal zone sounds in his words, in the ideas he shapes with them. The marriage of the soft and hard, the steady and the restless, that which holds us here and that which speaks of elsewhere—those moods and ideas, those qualities of a place, the shore, pattern much of his writing.

For the character of the shoreline—land’s edge, sea’s end, place of ending and beginning, wreck and launch—is the geography of his prose; it supplies his prose’s meter, its ebb and flow, its elegiac weather. He is steeped in the life of the shoreline from his years fishing in a dory off the Sagaponack beach, his long years since surfcasting and pacing, studying the lives of the shorebirds, researching the social and natural history of the South Fork fishermen. It shouldn’t surprise us that his prose sounds a little like the shore. Its note is like the sighing of the seawind, the sound of waves falling and receding.

That tone plays through this passage, for instance, set in the deserts of Sudan, far from the sea, though made of sand and haunted by birds:
Night had fallen by the time the truck had cleared the city, and a spray of stars froze on a blue-black sky. The vague track wandered south into a soft emptiness of cooling sand, haired over thinly, here and there, by bitter thorns of drought. In the headlight's jogging beam danced ghostly gerbils, hopping and fluttering on tiptoe, like stricken birds. And farther onward, close to midnight, where the sands relented, came the birds of night—the African owl, and nightjars, and pale Senegal stone curlews whirling straight up into the dark like souls departing.

—The Tree Where Man Was Born, 1972, p 2

That timbre again haunts this passage from his fiction, set on upon the shore:

Sea birds are aloft again, a tattered few. The white terns look dirtied in the somber light and they fly stiffly, feeling out an element they no longer trust. Unable to locate the storm-lost minnows, they wander the thick waters with sad muted cries, hunting signs and seamarks that might return them to the order of the world.

—Killing Mister Watson, 1990, p 3

What we hear is his voice, in both cases; and it is the sound of the shore, an element he trusts, a place of his long acquaintance; it is the music of the meeting of his mind and the winds at the ocean's edge. It has the tonal character, I imagine, of their conversation, the sea and this man. It is wise, sad, quiet with grief, alive with the knowledge that life and death are two parts of one thing, they ebb and flow. This is the sound of the wisdom of the shoreline.

His writing, at its best, holds steady like the beach, but it is haunted, as with kelp and the bodies of mussels, by signs of distance and depth; it is visited, in the sound of crashing surf or the voices and motions of migratory shorebirds (plovers, turnstones, sandpipers, oystercatchers), by the songs and rumours of far places and times long ago. It speaks always of a deep repose and always of longing and long journeys. His prose expresses the same tension the beach does—that his life does—between what holds and what is never still, and it surrenders this paradoxical truth: the things that seem eternal to us—the ways of men, the bodies of continents, the mountains—are, in fact, the things that always fade or fail, while the things that seem impermanent and elusive—the tides, the migratory birds of the wind, old wisdom systems, ancient truths—are the things that endure and prevail. The duality of the shoreline, the meeting and accommodation of contrary worlds, warring worlds, each of which is not what it seems—this duality lives in Matthiessen and his work; this is the tension that quickens his writing and his being. He is a man who practises meditation and a man who argues without mercy or stint for wild things, noble, dying cultures, for dignified ways of life that are edging toward extinction because of how the first world—the world off the coast of whose capital city he is moored—wants to live.
He is a man who pursues stillness in his own life, and who awakens disquiet among the complacent realms of established power. He rages, and he intones peace; his sentences, his sometimes dense paragraphs, go on and on, in ebb and in flood, in doubt or wonder or conviction, in relentless pursuit of some far or forgotten shore, and then surrender something sublime, and rest—and move on again to carry on their questing. As the shoreline marries the dour and the delicate, the violent and the pretty, the repetitive and the fleeting, the masculine and the feminine, the yin and the yang, so does Peter Matthiessen's prose. It is composed in a cottage on a fish-shaped island anchored just off the coast of America's industrial northeast. And on the long coastline near the house, the eternal drama of wave and beach and the ancient—and faltering—engagement of men with the sea continue daily. Like the shorebirds, the windbirds, Matthiessen flies from this shore yearly to far and exotic places; but here, every year, he returns. His tales are often of those far places, but his voice on paper belongs to the shore as the voice of plover and sandpiper, curlew and godwit belong to it; to the far places, the high air, and to the humble sand where the sea falls on and on.

Matthiessen's prose, though grand and sonorous at its best, is not showy. It does not flash or sparkle. It makes a restrained and deep-voiced music, like the cello and the oboe. In The Wind Birds, he writes about the tones and gestures of some of the shorebirds, and it strikes me, as I read it again, how aptly it describes his own writing:

> The pervasive monotones of bare terrains, encouraging cryptic markings, have made the wind birds rather subdued in plumage, and such bright color as they have is usually found in leg and bill; even the avocet, American oystercatcher and ruddy turnstone are more striking in pattern than in hue. But inevitably, a thing well suited to its surroundings—a snowflake, a sailing ship or a spoon—acquires a true beauty of refinement: the soft dove-brown of the buff-breasted sandpiper, the sun color of the golden plover, the warm leaf tones of the woodcock are essences of earth and grass, of cloud shadow and the swift seasons.


The beauty of Matthiessen's best writing lies in its refinement too, and its characteristic tones might well be described as 'essences of earth and grass, of cloud shadow and the swift seasons,' its colours as 'soft dove-brown' and 'warm leaf tones' warmed fleetingly by sun. Through it all runs a 'pervasive monotone' of bare terrain, like a didgeridu or a sustained low note bowed on a cello. And every bowing, every phrase, is made with restraint. Plainsong, wind song, the cry of bird carried on the breeze, wave beat—this is how his prose, at its lyric best, sounds.

When we are walking in the fields behind the shore a little later, Matthiessen tells me he can't seem to find anymore the place where the lyric prose of The Snow Leopard came from. He says this calmly, in that very voice I have just tried to name. If what he says is true, we could forgive him after thirty odd books and five or six masterpieces. I think it is true that none of his recent
writing has the perfection of pitch, the elegance and rightness of rhythm of The Snow Leopard, The Tree Where Man Was Born and of his best novels. Perhaps the old music has been spent. But this passage from the cranes book suggests it has not gone out of him utterly. This writing may not be as lean and plangent as his best paragraphs from the seventies, but it is in the same register, and it carries, I think, his signature: sonorous elegy, restrained celebration, hard-headed mysticism, all articulated in long, undulant sentences, their syntax demanding, yet original and carefully enacted:

On a rare clear morning—the first day of summer 1992—flying across the Bering Strait from the Yukon delta toward the Diomede Islands and the Chukotskiy Peninsula of Siberia, I imagine the gray sun-silvered strait as seen from on high by a migrating crane, more particularly, by the golden eye of the Crane from the East, as the lesser sandhill crane of North America is known to traditional peoples on its westernmost breeding ground in Siberia. The sandhill crane commonly travels a mile above the earth and can soar higher, to at least twenty thousand feet ...

That cranes may journey at such altitudes, disappearing from the sight of earthbound mortals, may account for their near-sacred place in the earliest legends of the world as messengers and harbingers of highest heaven ... Every land where they appear has tales and myths about the cranes, which since ancient times have represented longevity and good fortune, harmony and fidelity ...

...The cranes are the greatest of the flying birds and, to my mind, the most stirring, not less so because the horn notes of their voices, like clarion calls out of the farthest skies, summon our attention to our own swift passage on this precious earth. Perhaps more than any other living creatures, they evoke the retreating wilderness, the vanishing horizons of clean water, earth, and air upon which their species—and ours, too, though we learn it very late—must ultimately depend for survival.

—The Birds of Heaven, 2001, pp 3-4

It is two o'clock, and late for lunch, when I knock on Matthiessen's door. The skull of a whale, silvered by sea and salt air, sits on the verandah—it is the one he hauled from the sand at low tide under the moon in December 1984, down here at Sagaponack, as he finished Men's Lives. Matthiessen lives on six acres in a grey clapboard house, three hundred years old. Within the privet borders, along with the house, are an old stables, converted now to serve as a meditation hall, and a small cottage, restored in the 1970s, where Matthiessen writes.

Before he settled here, and after a time with his first wife in Paris, Matthiessen lived in a small cottage on Fireplace Road, near the Springs, a little to the northeast of Sagaponack, near Three Mile Harbor. He lived there with his wife and young family after a few years in Paris in the early fifties, and he worked three summers as a commercial fisherman on haul-seine crews off the beach
of the South Fork and captained a charter fishing boat in the ocean and sound. In the cold months he wrote and hunted on shore. When his marriage came to an end around 1956, Matthiessen moved out of the Springs cottage and travelled widely in the States, researching *Wildlife in America.* ‘For the next four years,’ he writes in *Men’s Lives,* ‘I was traveling to remote corners of the Americas, from Alaska and the Yukon to Tierra del Fuego, and I rarely visited the South Fork’ (*Men’s Lives,* 1986, p 153). He found his present house and land on his return to the South Fork after the publication of the book of those wide travels in the Americas. *Wildlife in America,* his first nonfiction narrative, came after two novels, well reviewed but unremunerative. It met with wide acclaim. It got read. It opened some eyes—to the ruin civilisation had visited and continued to visit, at increasing pace, on American wildlife. The book is a chronicle of extinctions, a tale of declining diversity, a ballad of retreating wildness. And it made him some money. He paid thirty thousand dollars for the house, he tells me. Now a single acre here goes for one hundred thousand dollars.

His house sits in a pocket of the South Fork still called ‘Smith Corner.’ Matthiessen’s acres and all the land in the vicinity were originally owned by Richard (‘Bull’) Smith, who settled here after his exile from Southampton for sins that included illegal felling of the trees for profit. When we walk out later, Matthiessen points out the original family home of Richard Smith, which stayed in the Smith family until the present generation, when his descendants caved in to soaring prices and sold it off. It was Smith, I guess, and those who followed him to the flat lands of good soil between Wainscott Pond and nearby Bridgehampton to the north, who opened the country up thoroughly for farming; who cleared the scrub-oak moraine—denuded it in places that had been kept lightly timbered for generations by Montauks, its indigenous inhabitants. Smith and the settlers planted wheat, and when the American midwest cornered that market, moved into potatoes, strawberries, cabbage and other crops. Potatoes have dominated since the beginning of the twentieth century. Sagaponack takes its name, as does nearby Acabonack, from the Indians’ word for an edible tuber (the ground nut, *Aptos tuberosa*), predecessor to the potato, which they cultivated and gathered in both places (*Men’s Lives,* 1986, footnote 1, p 154). The Montauk, long before the coming of Smith and the others, ’dressed’ these fields for cultivation, with tons of local fish, menhaden, hauled by them from the seas. The sea and the land here have been farmed and have been informed by one another, since time began.

Matthiessen greets me kindly at the door and invites me in. He wears old blue jeans, a grey jumper. His face is deeply lined. His hair is grey and coarse and looks as though it has the weather in it, the outdoors. His expression and manner, though, are youthful, alert and kind; his eyes look gentle and steady, grey but full of light. At seventy-three, he carries himself like a man of thirty. Though I am feeling awed by him, it is not because of how he behaves; he seems simply
interested to meet me, anxious to show me hospitality. He takes my coat and hangs it. The floor of the house is made of large flagstones; and the walls are made of timber. The ceilings spread white and low: it is a house built when men and women were shorter, and it seems hardly to hold him. Its spaces are long, its shapes lean. It is both austere and comfortable, full of books and papers, like a hermit's cell grown too large. The tones of this house he has lived in over forty years and lovingly restored from its original ruin are grey and white and brown, colours of the earth, essences of the beach and sea and sky. Nothing flashy, the beauty of refinement.

His wife is upstairs working. 'Maria couldn't wait,' he says in apology. 'She's in the middle of things.' But he leads me into the kitchen at the back of the house and joins me in a bowl of soup—tomato and cauliflower, sharp and tasty. He cuts me rye bread and toasts it, standing to do this. When it is ready, he hands it to me on an ironstone plate and comes and sits opposite me at the long wooden table. He talks easily, lightly, without affectation and asks me as much—about my writing and the place where I live, about my wife—as I ask him. We mention his British publisher, Christopher McLehose, whom we both know. 'He is a very good editor,' says Matthiessen. Then he corrects himself. 'I should say publisher—he's a man of letters and a good businessman.' He takes care with words, even in lunchtime conversation. When I remark that one thing that distinguishes McLehose is that he takes care at Harvill to employ brilliant editors, he adds, 'And very pretty too.' Which I also know to be true.

'Do you want to take a walk?' he asks me when he sees I have finished my soup and toast. He suggests we walk down to the beach to feel the wind. The day has grown colder now and the wind is up. He makes sure I have a hat, that my boots are sturdy and my coat warm; he rugs up himself, calls to Maria, and we leave the house.

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*Men's Lives* contains a pretty good history of the settlement of Long Island, the clearing of the white pines, the planting of potatoes, corn and other crops. On the lane, he talks me through the natural history of the ground at our feet, ground he loves, whose wounds he feels. *Men's Lives* (pp 157 ff) includes a short narrative of the overfarming, the remorseless development of the lands about Sagaponack, the impoverishment of the ground and wetlands, the decimation of the fish and bird life through the fifties and sixties. It is a dismal and familiar tale: pesticides and fertilisers leach into earth and creeks, pollute the water table, slow the fish and thin the crabs and kill the birds who feed on them. The spawning grounds of marine animals, the nesting grounds of seabirds are lost when wetlands are filled and oil spilled; small local farms fail against huge agribusinesses on the mainland and then surrender to the influx of city folk. The decline of the fisheries and the loss of livelihood of the proud baymen who worked them is, of course, the story that book narrates.
The tale and the telling are pure Matthiessen: a mournful, precise, heartbroken recital of the waning magic of the world—the dying out of humane skills and good, hard work, the customs of men that cannot withstand what is called 'progress.' Matthiessen's eloquence is not sustained in this book as it is in his very best. *Men's Lives* is made from long interviews with members of the old fishing families, from Matthiessen's usual careful research in libraries, and from his own memories of fishing in dories from the shore of Long Island in the fifties. It reads as an accomplished piece of social history and recollection sewn together with lyric threads. It is a quilt of memoir, advocacy, evocation, oral history and journalism. And the seams show. While not in the first rank of his work, it remains a fine book, though; a more literary thing than the two Indian books (*In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* and *Indian Country*) for instance, or the book on the tigers of the east. Like them, *Men's Lives* is a book written more to serve a cause he feels passionate about than as a piece of literature. He has worked at its prose, I think, more carefully than in some of those other pieces of functional nonfiction; he has crafted it with more love as a piece of art, perhaps because the country he describes is his homeland, and the people whose livelihoods he defends are his friends and neighbours. But still, compared to his fiction or *The Snow Leopard*, it is, as he himself has conceded of much of his nonfiction, 'a utilitarian object,' not a work of art (Jenkins, 1999, p xxii).

Matthiessen once told an interviewer, speaking about these 'political' nonfiction books, including *Men's Lives*, that he did not regret writing them, but that 'I don't have any illusions about [their] literary quality... They are not as good as *The Snow Leopard*, or *The Tree Where Man Was Born*. They're not. And I could have made them good. But I couldn't make them good from a literary point of view and accomplish my purposes of social justice. It's very difficult to do' (Bonetti, in Jenkins, 1999, pp xxv–xxvi). He sells their virtues short. They are better books than he implies, and *Men's Lives* is the best among them.

But it is interesting that he dichotomises and feels a conflict between the kind of writing you do—in nonfiction, for him—for social justice; and the kind you do for its own sake. Clearly his best writing, including some of his nonfiction, pulls off both things: it is art and argument. But in his mind, fiction is for art, and nonfiction is for causes (including the making of a livelihood). Fiction is literature, laboured over, fastidiously crafted, emergent and mysterious; nonfiction, for him, is functional, no matter how well-made. It is a cabinet, as he puts it to Jenkins, no matter how well finished. It is for holding things. And it is only in fiction (and the literary nonfiction of the seventies, he adds when speaking to Bonetti64) that he works, as he puts it, 'like a sculptor,' that he polishes and polishes (ibid, p xxii). And yet, if he worked at those two pieces of nonfiction like a sculptor, perhaps not all nonfiction is a merely functional thing.

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64 In Jenkins, 1999, p xxiv
When I first spoke to him by phone in early 1999, Matthiessen firmly distinguished between his fiction and nonfiction. 'I only wrote nonfiction to pay my way,' he said dismissively. This is something that matters for him. He wishes to be known as a writer; and it seems to him that the true work of the writer is fiction; that fiction is the only true literature. Though I may think this view is false, though I might argue, as I do here, that not only is some nonfiction literary, but that it is in fact, in lyric mode, more akin to poetry (surely the highest literature) than the novel is; and though I might hold up two at least of Matthiessen's nonfictions as evidence, these are my views, not his, and I keep them to myself. In his mind, the conventional prose hierarchy holds: fiction is art; nonfiction is not. His works of nonfiction outnumber his novels by nineteen to nine (though nine novels alone in a lifetime would satisfy most other writers). He has spent, as he might see it, most of his working time making cabinets when he would rather have been sculpting. This is a source of tension for him, I gather, one of the polarities that define him.

When he set off in 1956 to research and write a study of the decline of America's wildlife, he did it not just because it mattered to him, but because he thought he might make some money from it. And he was right—though *Wildlife in America* was also a work of great literary merit, it sold in large numbers. It also touched the lives of many readers, becoming a book as influential almost as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which appeared a couple of years after it. From then on, through the 1960s and 1970s, to buy himself time to write his novels—*At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *Far Tortuga*—he travelled widely at the expense of magazines, mostly *The New Yorker*, turning out for them fine travel essays, which found second lives as books—*The Cloud Forest, Under the Mountain Wall, Sal Si Puedes, Blue Meridian*. In this period, he also wrote *The Shorebirds of North America*—another book that was published first as a set of essays for William Shawn's *The New Yorker*. That book, too, compared to the books that were about to follow, feels like fine journalism heightened by a few moments of pure lyricism. And then came the seventies, when he found that lyric vein and sculpted from it two extraordinary works of nonfiction—surely works of art, transcendent cabinets. *The Tree Where Man Was Born* (1972) was shortlisted for the American Book Award and *The Snow Leopard* (1978) won it. (His most writerly novel, *Far Tortuga*, belongs to this decade too.) He worked on these lyric essays as hard, finished them as carefully, as his fiction. And in the two decades that followed, though he travelled far and wrote many things, including the two Indian books, one of which wound him up in lengthy and costly court proceedings, the work that got his artistic attention was his fiction trilogy, *Killing Mister Watson* (1990), *Lost Man's River* (1997) and *Bone By Bone* (1999), books set in—and wonderfully evocative of—the Florida Everglades.

Though his fiction is very fine, and clearly more carefully composed, more literary in ambition, than most of his utilitarian nonfiction, his nonfiction, even that part of it he dismisses, is usually written with an ear for the rightness of its music as well as an eye for the accuracy of its content. We may read it, I think, as the work of a writer—a sculptor. It is less finished, but it is not unfinished. Read through the selection from his nonfiction that McKay Jenkins has made in *The
Peter Matthiessen Reader—open it at any page and chose a paragraph at random—and you will find nuanced, lean, musical prose. And his nonfiction has one advantage over his fiction—his first person presence, his voice. Even where he has dashed it off, his nonfiction speaks clean and clear out of Matthiessen’s immediate perception of the places and people he stands with, out of his acute awareness of the texture and character of things, out of his intimate participation in the world. And it speaks in his voice. It has the timbre of his own response, with body and mind, to the places he engaged with. In his fiction, despite its deep resonance and fineness, I find myself missing the intimacy of his nonfiction—missing him, in fact; his own voice, patterned by the place he writes in and loves.

For Matthiessen is above all a witness. His is a lyric rather than a narrative sensibility. He notices and gives expression to the world. He writes out of his own experience, not merely about it. He writes out of an engagement with a world he knows to be animate. He is not a fabricator of stories—at least he is not chiefly that. And just as he is avid for the details that articulate and the structures that compose the world in which he moves, so his gift in prose is for musical structuring of phrase and sentence, paragraph and section, which, when it is good, expresses some of the very structure of the world he witnesses. But his gift for structure and detail is more profound than his gift for narrative exposition. His best works of fiction—Far Tortuga and Killing Mister Watson—are masterworks of structure and voice and colour, not of narrative. They are more like poems than conventional novels, they are symphonic, piecing together as they do fragments of story, shards of perspective, to compose whole work; cutting and pasting pieces of melody, as it were, to make dynamic, complex, though unified pieces of prose. They are lyric works. In the same way that his best nonfiction is also lyric, the product of ‘an avid resolve to turn over every rock’ (Voigt, 1999, p 178) in self and place. It is the work of this sensibility I miss, I suppose, in his fiction, even when it is fine. It is himself, and the sound of the world he has witnessed. It is the lyric of his immediate engagement with the world.

Damaged and diminished though it is, Long Island’s ocean shore is his home. I can hear his pride and delight in it as he recalls it for me. The place has a longer history than its fifty year’s of decline at the hands of capitalism and progress, and he tells some of it as we walk under a white sky.

42 I am drawing here on ideas about the nature of the lyric and the narrative in poetry that Ellen Bryant Voigt elaborates beautifully in her essays ‘The Flexible Lyric’ and ‘Ruthless Attention’ in her book The Flexible Lyric, 1999, pp 114–71 and pp 172–96, particularly p 178. I explore these ideas further in my chapters on Laurie Kutchins and James Galvin, and in the conclusion.
A full eighteen inches of loam covers the island, he explains. The glacier that shaped the whole of the northeast of America pushed all this good black soil here and left it behind, when it receded. Think what a paradise this must have seemed, he says, to all those settlers from Kent. All this deep black soil and good trees. Along with oaks and elm and alder, white pines covered the island when the white men and their families came. They took all the pines, all the old growth, for shipping. Its wood is soft and tall and supple—and perfect for ships’ masts. The pines will return, he says, if they are allowed to, but they are nearly all gone now.

Just past Richard Smith’s house, still among the trees of the lane, Peter Matthiessen interrupts his natural history of the South Fork. A gathering of headstones stands in the winter grass where another road meets the lane. He sees that it has caught my attention. ‘Oh, that’s our cemetery,’ he says. ‘Deborah’s over there.’ He points to a stone, the whitest, near the back. The way he puts this, without fuss or sentiment, brings to mind the way he first speaks of her death, in the prologue to The Snow Leopard. At the end of a series of dense paragraphs describing his preparations in Kathmandu for an expedition with George Schaller to the Crystal Mountains, Matthiessen mentions a bazaar where, a dozen years before, he bought a bronze Buddha for his new wife. And then he writes one last sentence, like the final, restrained but heartbreaking and unexpected stanza of a long poem: ‘My wife and I were to become students of Zen Buddhism, and the green bronze Buddha from Kathmandu was the one I chose for a small altar in Deborah’s room in the New York hospital where she died last year of cancer, in the winter.’ This revelation and the line of space that follows it, seem to explain the tone of foreboding that hangs over the closely packed paragraphs that open the book; this sentence says what cannot be said; it lets us peer with him for a moment into the well of his grief; it launches the pilgrimage that follows. And yet it is quietly noted, as though it were just another detail in his preparations for departure; just as his gesture toward the headstone now is just another detail in the geography of Smith Corner.

‘... in the winter.’ The first time I read that phrase and the comma that precedes it like a sob—I wept. Plain speaking sometimes captures the thing itself and delivers it to a reader pure and true and full of that moment’s native emotion. Matthiessen has the gift of such speech. I stop a moment. There lies Deborah Love Matthiessen, the woman he first met in Paris in 1950 and then again, in 1960, on the beach where we are headed; whom he married in 1963; with whom he lived a tortured and beautiful life in this place, for a while.

We walk on down Bridge Lane toward the sound of the ocean. We climb the shoulder of the dunes. A cold onshore breeze, laced with salt and sand, hits me and takes the breath out of me. And then we walk down a path onto the beach. The Atlantic rolls in against the shore under the
wind, its sets flat and uneven. Up the beach five or six fishermen have cast their lines into the surf at a point where diving herring gulls betray a school of fish.

The shoreline runs away, east to west and into the afternoon. It is lean and long, a beach without a curve. I am used to the yellow crescents of Australia’s east coast, the white ones of the west. He has seen those beaches too. He comments that Australia has some great stretches of sand. What is remarkable here, he says, on his home beach, is the reach and linearity of it. It stretches in a dead straight line all the way from Montauk Point, to the east of us, to Saltair and Long Beach, almost to Manhattan. In reality, he goes on, this is an extension of the beach at Cape Cod; this is part of one long reach of sand, breached long since, made discontinuous by the endless insistence of the sea. This is part of what was once—and, being composed of sand, it was only ever a temporary arrangement between land and sea—an almost interminable shoreline. I see the long coastline—this vestigial one and that which preceded it and is now sundered—disappearing into the northeast. I can feel how the form of this shore, its nature and history, enchant him. This remnant of a once even longer line—an argument with the sea never quite won, a resistance to its advances never quite achieved—is important to him. Its improbability, its leanness and persistence. He looks up and down its length, as though for the first time, and I look with him—the long coastline of his home, its white sand grey in this low light, its dunes grassed and windblown; elemental and austere, in the way of all beaches, only, in this case pushed to an extreme of liminality and length and sustained like a chord.

He shows me where he found the skull of the finback whale in the tideline—the skull, six feet or so across that sits now at his house. He writes of this in the preface of Men’s Lives. The weathered skull itself, his finding it and hauling it home, what he makes of it in prose—these are pure Matthiessen. (I have a photograph of him standing grimly inside the whale’s gape.) The finback is the second largest living thing, after the blue whale, there has ever been on earth. What Matthiessen found in the winter evening, washed by the ocean, sinking into the sand, was the wreck of wild and beautiful form, an almost enchanted thing, something so large and unlike us that its death is harder to comprehend even than its life. What he found was the ruin of something—something like the natural world he knew as a boy or the commercial fishing industry of this very coastline he worked in as a man—something once so large and flush with life that its death was unimaginable, and yet here it is washed up, hollowed out, upon the shore. The skull stands in Matthiessen’s book, in his mind and by his front verandah, for the fate of all wildness on earth, the doom that befell the old days, and hangs over us all. ‘The world is losing its grit and taste,’ he says to me. But the whale’s skull stands not only as a gritty epitaph for wildness. Its appearance to him, a gift of the sea, and his hard work to haul it home—these speak also of the cycle of birth and death and rebirth that is the natural world. He fishes something profoundly dead from the sea and makes the episode sing of life and continuity. He makes of it an elegy and an assertion of life, an act and a symbol of resistance.
On December 4, 1984, finishing the first draft of these journals, I walked down to the ocean for a breath of air. The day was cold, with a northwest wind shivering the rainwater where ice was broken in the puddles. Rising and falling in flight along the dunes, a flock of gulls picked up the last ambient light from the red embers in the west. The silent birds, undulating on the wind, shone bone white against massed somber grays, low over the ocean; the cloud bank looked ominous, like waiting winter.

From the beach landing, in this moody sky and twilight, I saw something awash in the white foam, perhaps a quarter-mile down to the eastward. The low heavy thing, curved round upon itself, did not look like driftwood; I thought at first that it must be a human body. Uneasily, I walked east a little way, then hurried ahead; the thing was not driftwood, not a body, but a great clean skull of a finback whale, dark bronze with sea water and minerals. The beautiful form, crouched like some ancient armored creature in the wash, seemed to await me. No one else was on the beach, which was clean of tracks. There was only the last cold fire of dusk, the white birds fleeing toward the darkness, the frosty foam whirling around the skull, seeking to regather it into the deeps...

...fearing that an onshore wind or storm might bury it forever, I went down at dead low tide that night, under the moon, and dug the skull clear and worked it up out of its pit, using truck and chain. Nearly six feet across, the skull was water-logged and heavy, five hundred pounds or better. Not until one in the morning—spending more time digging out my truck than freezing the bone—did I hitch it high enough onto the beach to feel confident that the tide already coming in would not rebury it. By morning there was onshore wind, with a chop already making up from the southwest, but the whale skull was still waiting at the water’s edge. Bud Topping came down with his tractor and we took it home. When Milt Miller, who was raised by old whalers, had a look at it a few weeks later, he said it was the biggest skull he ever saw.


It is as though this thing, this image awaited him. He could have found nothing more fitting. In this passage, notice the large gestures of place (the cloud bank, the waiting winter), the delicate (gulls’ flight, the wind in the ice, ‘frosty foam’), the still and slow and silent (the skull itself, the dunes, the ‘silent birds,’ the moon), the moving (tides, wind, his digging to free it, his leaving and his return under the moon), the nostalgic light, the weather-worn space (‘massed somber grays,’ ‘dark bronze with sea water and minerals’). A shore passage awash with the shore.

Set against this the start of his novel Killing Mister Watson, from which I quoted above. It is more thoroughly worked for sound and effect perhaps, but not much more than the preface of Men’s Lives. It is rich with sea-smell and shore mood, bird habit and tide note. Its light—though this is a much more humid, southerly shore—is antique, gray and somber, and the air broods. This is the wake of a hurricane, not just the exhumation of a whale’s skull. And so the tone of the passage, the nature of the space it creates, is austere, in Matthiessen’s usual way, but it is outright bleak, as
betrifit the moment; its sounds restrained, hushed, 'muted.' It has cadence and melody, resonance of phrase and vowel (its opening sentence, 'brown spume and matted salt grass,' 'on the bay shores and down the coastal rivers, a far gray sun'), but restraint rules it, reins in its song. I quoted the book's opening paragraph earlier. Here is the one that follows:

In the hurricane's wake, the labyrinthine coast where the Everglades deltas meet the Gulf of Mexico lies broken, stunned, flattened to mud by the wild tread of God. Day after day, a gray and brooding wind nags at the mangroves, hurrying the unruly tides that hunt through the broken islands and twist far back into the creeks, leaving behind brown spume and matted salt grass, driftwood. On the bay shores and down the coastal rivers, a far gray sun picks up dead glints from windrows of rotted mullet, heaped a foot high...

— *Killing Mister Watson*, 1990, p 3

And into this scene, this patterned shoreline singing silently, comes (by foot and by water) human life.

A figure in mud-fringed calico, calling a child, stoops to retrieve a Bible, then wipes wet grime from the Good Book with pale dulled fingers. She straightens, turning slowly, staring toward the south. From the wall of mangroves far off down the bay, the drum of the boat engine comes and goes, then comes again, a little louder.

'Oh, Lord,' she whispers, half-aloud. 'Oh no, please no, sweet Jesus.'

— *Killing Mister Watson*, 1990, pp 3-4

We, too, are picking among the things the sea has left upon a shore. On the beach at Sagaponack, under a cold low afternoon sky, shorebirds busy themselves along a line of mussels washed up, still clinging to each other, from the outer banks. They run a long black line, left by the past days' highest tides, up and down the beach. Matthiessen tells me they've had storms here the last couple of days. I remember that it snowed two days ago in Cambridge, where I was. Winter is coming behind these storm fronts, which brought snow to Harvard Yard and mussels to the beach at Sagaponack. The storms were wilder, Matthiessen tells me, out to sea than here inshore. The big seas have loosed the shell-fish from the banks and carried them to shore, where they make a good feast for the gulls. These are herring gulls, he tells me, most of them juveniles, mottled brown all over, a few grey and white adults among them. They work the line of shell-fish and bicker.

Between the mussels and the lapping sea, scuttling back and forth ('like windup toys,' says Matthiessen), run some Pacific golden plovers, in their last days before winter takes them south.
They make way for us. ‘You have those too, of course,’ Matthiessen reminds me. And we do have them on our Australian shores, these astonishing, humble travellers of the world. I have seen them on a white sand beach in southeastern Tasmania in early May, thinking, I guess about heading north again. It is even possible these are the same birds. Their soft, musical two-syllable calls join ours on the beach, and the repeated outburst of the sea, pushing up the wet sand.

As I write this, I sit in a cottage by another coastline, at Camden Head on the northeast coast of New South Wales. This was once the house of the pilot and his family. From here at the mouth of the Camden Haven River, the pilot helped ships negotiate the passage from river to sea and sea to river, taking timber from the mountains behind Laurieton down the coast to market and bringing in supplies to the town and surrounding community. I am just here to write. The sound of the surf from Washhouse Beach is loud in the house, and the air smells of salt and high summer. There are plovers here with me too this brilliant January day. The same sweet voices, the same scuttling, endearing forms accompanied me on a morning walk today along the shore. Encountering them brought Matthiessen to mind, and his affection for these modest shorebirds with their gift for distance.

‘The black-bellied and golden plovers,’ writes Matthiessen in _The Wind Birds_, ‘are birds of Sagaponack... but... I have seen golden plover on Alaskan tundra and in the cane fields of Hawaii, and heard the black-belly’s wild call on wind-bright seacoast afternoons from Yucatan to the Great Barrier Reef’ (_ibid_, p 22). And here they are, further down the Australian east coast on a January morning in the sun. These small birds can travel, in their two annual migrations, two thousand miles without putting down. They know wide sweeps of the world and how to thread their course from coastline to far coastline. When we see them on a beach, feeding and making ready for breeding or migration, ‘[w]e stand there heedless of an extraordinary accomplishment,’ writes Matthiessen in _The Wind Birds_ (_ibid_, p 22). For they are humble in every way, and nothing in their form and manner advertises their talent for travel or their acquaintance with great stretches of ocean and shore. They belong to coastlines in two hemispheres, and they belong to vast distances in between. Like the on- and offshore breezes, like the flooding and ebbing tides, like the moving dunes, they speak at once, in their bodies and habits and voices, of here—this narrow marginal realm of sand and water—and of there—the far shores and ‘the firmament of wind and light’ (_The Birds of Heaven_, 2001, p 6) they travel. ‘One has only to consider,’ Matthiessen writes in _The Wind Birds_, ‘the life force packed tight into that puff of feathers to lay the mind wide open to the mysteries—the order of things, the why and the beginning’ (_ibid_, pp 22–3).

To hear the universal in the particular, to be drawn by the bird at one’s feet to the original, the deep silence from which all life and sound come—this is a recurring idea, a motif, and a technique (of witness) in all Matthiessen’s writing. It is the practice he follows, the cadence of observation-contemplation-reflection he follows again and again through his most interior, his most questing
book, *The Snow Leopard*. It is a habit of mind, a discipline, a lyric orientation that, I suppose, the shoreline and its lifeforms can school one in daily—because of the coexistence there of the local and the foreign, the here and there, the changeful and the perpetual, and because of the quiet eloquence that attends beaches and all wide-open, marginal places.

That embodied idea—distance and mystery incarnated—is almost the defining aesthetic, the characteristic note and gesture, of the shore. And that same note, I think, sounds in all Matthiessen’s best writing. Often enough he strikes it by reference, as in the *Wind Birds* passage above, to the mysteries; or in tropes (synecdoches) where the mountain or the bird, utterly itself, also stands in Matthiessen’s prose an archetypes, an expression of the Universe of which that landform and lifeform and the observer himself are all a part.

Divinity is immanent within particular moments, in *The Snow Leopard* especially, and the lives of man or woman, bird or river, that move in them. Each thing is an embodied mystery. The snow leopard, which he never sees, stands as a metaphor for the fleeting beauty of all life and the elusiveness, and magic, of whatever one seeks. The wolves, for example, Matthiessen observes at a distance in *The Snow Leopard*, hunting blue sheep upon the snow ring from the page, as they must have rung from the snow, with both immediacy and mythic presence (*The Snow Leopard*, 1978, pp 181–84). And we hear eternity in the beat of this great black eagle high in the mountains just short of Dolpo: ‘What can it be hunting, this heroic bird, in bitter white waste, at the edge of darkness?’ (*ibid*, p 167). That is as rhythmic a sentence as you will find outside a poem. And it ends in the kind of synecdoche I had in mind: ‘the edge of darkness.’ He means the darkness here, but also the kind Matthiessen is exploring, the kind of hell that every such quest must circle and descend into, hunting for truth; the kind that Dante had in mind.

Immanence and mystery convey themselves to us in the way Matthiessen sets small details within a wide landscape; the way he extends space—silent or ringing—around the lives he observes. Like this:

Gray river road, gray sky. From rock to torrent rock flits a pied wagtail.

Wayfarers: a delicate woman bears a hamper of small silver fishes, and another bends low beneath a basket of rocks that puts my own light pack to shame; her rocks will be hammered to gravel by other women of Pokhara, in the labor of the myriad brown hands that will surface a new road south to India. Through a shaft of sun moves a band of Magar women, scarlet-shawled; they wear heavy brass ornaments in the left nostril. In the new sun, a red-combed rooster clambers quickly to the roof matting of a roadside hut, and fitfully a little girl starts singing. The light irradiates white peaks of
Annapurna marching west for eighteen hundred miles, the Himalaya—the alaya (abode, home) of bima (snow).

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 23

Disputing the path is a great copper-colored grasshopper, gleaming like amber in the sun; so large is it, and so magical its shimmer, that I wonder if this grasshopper is not some old naijopa, advanced in the art of taking other forms. But before such a 'perfected one' can reveal himself, the grasshopper springs carelessly over the precipice, to start a new life hundreds of feet below. I choose to take this as a sign that I must entrust myself to life, and thanking the grasshopper, I step out smartly on my way.

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 125

The nights at Shey are rigid, under rigid stars; the fall of a wolf pad on the frozen path might be heard up and down the canyon. But a hard wind comes before the dawn to rattle the tent canvas, and this morning it is clear again, and colder. At daybreak, the White River, just below, is sheathed in ice, with scarcely a murmur from the stream beneath.

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 194

These are spare and melodic passages, in which the particular is rendered in clean prose with the quality (in that last paragraph particularly) of haiku; and explored deftly for its suggestions of more universal meaning. And then surrendered.

Another lesson the shoreline teaches, over and again, is that nothing endures except the deep logic and pattern of things. The shore and the coming and going of the birds upon it show anyone who attends to them thoughtfully that what belongs, what is indigenous to a place, does not necessarily stay there. Nothing stays forever, and most things come and go. No one must expect a place to stay the same—it is not the same from moment to moment, let alone from year to year. To hold its integrity it must yield to the pattern of tide and season and weather—to the way of things. Love what the place in the moment expresses, and let it go. The shore may reach you this. The birds come and go and come and go. The waves are never absent, and they never stay. The beach teaches non-attachment, an idea at the heart of Matthiessen's writing, even before he found a way of speaking of it in Buddhism.

If that idea—that change is the changeless way of things—can be said to have a shape and music—an incarnation—it is that of the shore and its birds. True presence on earth, a dignified, authentic life and, finally, contentment come from living wide open to the moment-by-moment unfolding of life wherever one stands, without demanding that the moment hold: this idea finds expression often in Matthiessen's prose; but its aesthetic—tenderness in a minor key—sounds in his writing everywhere. His best writing is austere, empty of sentiment, though full of love for fleeting things. It is rich and textured with light and lives that go as soon as they appear. The idea
of non-attachment, embodied and articulated by the long coastlines and their itinerant citizens, encourages a clean, unsentimental prose such as Matthiessen’s—deeply felt, calmly expressed; delivered clean of comment; released.

At daybreak, two great ravens come, their long toes scratching on the prayer-walls.

The sun refracts from the white glaze of the mountains, chills the air. Old Sonam, who lives alone in the hamlet up the hill, was on the mountain before day, gathering the summer’s dung to dry and store as cooking fuel; what I took for lumpish matter straightens on the sky as the sun rises, setting her gaunt silhouette afire.

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 183

In the frozen air, the whole mountain is taut; the silence rings. The sheep’s flanks quake, and the wolves are panting; otherwise, all is still, as if the arrangement of pale shapes held the world together. Then I breathe, and the mountain breathes, setting the world in motion once again.

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 184

We find here the perfect expression of Matthiessen’s lyric sensibility. He is ruthlessly attentive, to use Bryant Voigt’s phrase, for the arrangement of forms and shapes that order the world, here. And he edits his own prose in such moments very carefully, so that the arrangement of things in a place is articulated truthfully in the arrangement of form and sound within his sentences.

In The Snow Leopard, Matthiessen discovers and elaborates—out of his own experience in the Himalaya and out of the Buddhist thinking he does there—a way of being, a kind of spiritual philosophy, which is also a writing practice. It is an idea that runs through much nature writing, of course, not just Matthiessen’s, though his discovery and expression of it, and its particular Buddhist form, is powerfully his own. It is not only possible but necessary—for one’s sanity and to live rightly with the rest of creation—to be, from time to time at least, at one with the rest of creation; to transcend a narrow conception of oneself severed from the larger order of things; to identify with the living world, the actual, changeful and eternal earth. ‘The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist, as I do myself,’ he writes in The Snow Leopard (ibid, p 195). ‘The mountains have no “meaning,” they are meaning; the mountains are (ibid, pp 195–96). ‘An instinct comes to open outward by letting all life in, just as a flower fills with sun’ (ibid, p 195). ‘I grow into these mountains like a moss. ... I am returned into myself’ (ibid, pp 212–13). He discovers in the mountains how to reimagine self more generously, to imagine himself and, indeed, the place about him ecologically. ‘There is a mountain opposite,’ he writes, ‘but this “I” is opposite nothing, opposed to nothing’ (ibid, p 212). To live in this way demands a discipline of deep
mindfulness, presence of body and mind. To live well is to open yourself to the world, to stay utterly present, acutely aware of the life of things. Other lifeforms, Matthiessen notices, such as the wolves and the lammergeier simply find themselves at the centre of things 'and have no need for any secret of true being' (ibid, pp 227–28). To find oneself alive, a body inhabiting a particular space and time—this is a thing to be aspired to. This is to know a place and to oneself. This is to be.

To be in the world, and to open oneself to it as though it were continuous with one's own life, the man or woman must learn to attend to the things-in-themselves—to use the phenomenologists' language. When Matthiessen pulls this off, as he occasionally does in The Snow Leopard, the world rings with life. 'It is wonderful,' he writes of the blue sheep, 'how the presence of this creature draws the whole landscape to a point, from the glint of light on the old horns of a sheep to the ring of a pebble on the frozen ground,' (ibid, p 226) in a sentence that demonstrates not just how detail enlivens a landscape, but how noticing it and transcribing it thus animates also the text that arises from that encounter. Place and text seem almost inseparable and also akin. Matthiessen's sentence has the same clarifying power as the hillside and its sheep. Such passages draw thought (the writer's and the reader's) to a point as meditation and acute awareness within a landscape do. They express and also awaken in a reader pure presence. This and some of the other passages I have in mind are, of course, about such a practice of attention; but they also manifest it, a habit learned from and practised within the austere landscape of his journey, and owing something to the shores of home:

> Often I scan the caves and ledges on the far side of Black River in the hope of leopard; I am alert for fossils, wolves, and birds. Sometimes I observe the sky and mountains, and sometimes I sit in meditation, doing my best to empty out my mind, to attain that state in which everything is 'at rest, free, and immortal ...'

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 194

At that point, Matthiessen the quotes the seventeenth-century British thinker Thomas Traherne:

> 'You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself flows in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you.'

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, p 194

This mystic text encapsulates the state of ecological imagination, of avid awareness of one's place in the landscape, and its life around you. Matthiessen then continues, describing his meditation on Somdo mountain above Shey:
Now the mountains all around me take on life; the Crystal Mountain moves. Soon there comes the
murmur of the torrent, from far away below under the ice: it seems impossible that I can hear this
sound. Even in windlessness, the sound of rivers comes and goes and falls and rises, like the wind itself...
The sun is round. I ring with life, and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it, there is a ringing
that we share. I understand this, not in my mind but in my heart, knowing how meaningless it is to try
to capture what cannot be expressed, knowing that mere words will remain when I read it all again,
another day.

—The Snow Leopard, 1978, pp 194–96

But they are not mere words he puts on the page for us. They contain the music of that moment,
of the dancing mountains and the dance he shared.

Among other things, this practice of attention to the world makes Matthiessen a remarkable
observer. Every book of his, fiction and nonfiction, swarms with detail—abounds with the name
and nature of tree and rock and bird and animal; of scat and geology; of local hairstyles and local
weather; of the work of hands and the cadence of human speech; of the architecture and beliefs
and habits of native people; of the diet and customs of rare animals. The detail makes us trust him,
as McKay Jenkins observes, as a guide (Jenkins, 1999, p xiv).

But it is detail of a particular quality. When he writes his close observations onto a page, he works
to keep the thing he describes alive for a reader—even though he doubts the power of words
to express the essence of things. And often his people and his wolves, his trees and plovers, his
mountains and beaches and deserts and beggars and fishermen’s boats seem quick with life on the
page. Because of the detail that attends them, the particularity of his rendering of people and
things, they live, and his prose seems lively with them. Lifeforms and landscapes are sounded out
by his words—are sung—and take shape clearly in a reader’s mind, surrounded also by a kind of
mythic aura. ‘His scrupulous attention to the sensuous world,’ writes McKay Jenkins, ‘is one of his
defining traits; the capacity to notice the particular and infer the universal is for him a poetic as
well as a spiritual practice’ (Jenkins, 1999, p xvi). The best writers, along with Zen masters, know
that God is in the details, that local texture brings life and music to the poem or the prose. That
when one pays close enough attention to the lives going on around one and intuits something of
the nature of the intervals and relationships at play between them, something like divinity may
attach to the rendering one makes of that piece of the living world. And so it is sometimes in
Matthiessen.

Matthiessen’s practice of noticing in such lively detail lends his writing, most notably in the best
of his nonfiction, an extraordinary immediacy, as though it were a set of field notes composed on
the spot and barely touched, as perfect as the moments they relate. In fact, in the case of *The Snow Leopard* and other nonfiction he values most highly, the journals he composes in the field get worked and worried over, drafted into more finished sentences and paragraphs, tried, altered, sounded out, altered again, polished and made good over a long period—some years in the case of *The Snow Leopard*—in the writing house at Sagaponack. All his hard work goes toward making them sound as though they were immediate utterances arising out of the very moment in which they are set. And so, sometimes, they seem. This makes them, of course, shore creations as much as they are field notes, having been pondered and crafted so long in that nourishing terrain of his home.

But let me dwell for just a moment on this process of composition, and the paradox at the heart of it—that the more you work, in a certain way, at a piece of writing, the more it may sound as though it arises out of the moment of first encounter it describes. In his essay on the music of the poetry of Wordsworth and Yeats, Seamus Heaney speaks of 'the restings and hesitations of the workshop, the approaches towards utterance.' He has in mind the poet engaged in the hard work of musical composition in response to the promptings of an original inspiration, a haunting, usually the occurrence to him of a single line or phrase. If we substitute for Heaney's *'donna'—by which he means 'the given line, the phrase or cadence which haunts the ear and the eager part of the mind' (Heaney, 1980, p 61)—a moment of original encounter with a place (which is sometimes also accompanied by a phrase one might scratch quickly into a notebook or determine not to forget); and if you will let me imagine a writer like Matthiessen at work on a piece of lyric prose such as *The Snow Leopard* as though he were a poet, or near enough; then we can put to work Heaney's metaphor of the poet's musical workshop to throw light on the relationship that plays between the encountered place, the words that arise from it, and the lyric essayist's rendering of them—place and phrase—into prose. The more Matthiessen works, much like the poet Seamus Heaney has in mind in the workshop, trying each phrase and sentence against the quality of the moment his journal tried to capture, against the cadence of his original experience, the more his prose may ring true to that moment, and the more a part of the place and the particular moment may sound in it.

The craft of composition becomes, seen this way, a continuation of the dance or song or 'ringing' of connection Matthiessen notes between himself and the mountain, between himself and the eagle. I imagine the place continuing, in this way, in its witness Matthiessen, here by his home shore, in

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63 Heaney is referring specifically to the poet's work, including matters particular to poetry such as lineation and rhyme. But his essay, *The Makings of a Music* (*Prooccupations*, 1980, p 61) is an exploration of the workshop processes by which a writer moves from first inspiration to finished work, attentive to the integrity and 'pitch' of his or her original inspiration and notes. And since Matthiessen is a writer of lyric prose, careful about such matters as a poet is, perhaps I may be allowed to borrow Heaney's thought to cast some light on Matthiessen's work. I will have more to say about all this in my conclusion.
his working and reworking of phrases. That is the dance, or the song, or the rhythmic engagement the writer continues with the place, and it with him—the pattern of his searching for the right words, his abandonment of false notes, his final selection of an apt mode of utterance for what transpired in that landscape, the way he puts the pieces together and the way they subsequently unravel for the reader. The place and the song he shared with it may sometimes continue, may carry to his readers, in the rhythms of his sentences, in his arrangement of form and sense and sound in the final work. There may be, in this way, a continuum from the original 'ringing' engagement with place, through the rhythm of the making of the work, to the rhythm and shape of the final polished composition and the way its parts reveal themselves to the man or woman who reads that work, phrase after rhythmic phrase.

This is a truth that Thoreau understood. The mountain or the blue sheep or whatever, will only seem to be articulated in the writer's prose, the nature of the place itself will only reach the reader as though it were singing itself directly to her, if the writer works hard at the process of shaping an original utterance, apt for what it engages with; only if his shaping is attentive to the music of the original moment; only if he tunes all his phrases to the pitch, and shapes them to the rhythm, of the original instance of avid attention.

All this work of revision and rewriting takes place somewhere, of course. In Matthiessen's case most of it takes place here near the shore. It takes place in an environment that has housed and nurtured Peter Matthiessen since he was a boy and through most of his now long writing years. The South Fork surrounds the work; it sustains and inspires the worker. It sounds out home for him. Even while he holds onto the original moment and hammers away at his work, so that its forms and rhythms seem apt to express it, the rhythm of this homeplace goes on around him. Perhaps it is here, in the hours and months, sometimes the long years, of the labour of typing and retyping drafts, which become pieces of finished prose—perhaps it is in that work of writing that the shore gets in. In Barry Lopez, it would be the forest and the river; in Laurie Kutchins, the Wyoming wind. In Peter Matthiessen, the process of writing seems to work, to advance and recede, in a meter not unlike the sea and the birds up and down a long coastline. It is the meter of the man; the meter of his workmanship; the meter of his finished lines. And the more it is present, the truer his writing rings with the life of a place far away—just as the cry of the shorebirds and the fall of the waves at Sagaponack ring.

Matthiessen worries, in The Snow Leopard, that his staring about, 'trying to etch into this journal the sense of Shemy that is so precious' is an attempt to make permanent what must be abandoned to itself, and that it is 'to miss the point' and is doomed, therefore, to failure (ibid, p 227). There is more of that place 'in a single sheep hair' he writes, 'than in all these notes.' At that moment, in
a mood of sadness on the point of departure from the mountain, his writing may have seemed a doomed attempt at permanence. In fact, his note-taking and the writing up that will follow are part of a practice of attention, an attempt not to capture it, but to sing it once in the writing, and to let it ring again at every reading. Once it is written, a text of this kind is not properly understood as an object of silent signs set on paper. It lives for the reader every time they sound its words in their mind and inhabit the space those sounds make. Both place and text live again at each reading, each of them separate, but related and attuned, musically. How true a text is to the original—as an adéquation—depends on the truthfulness of the writer’s observation, his practice of attention to the essence of the place; and his or her ongoing attention to that moment and place in the making of the finished work. A work, so understood, of course, is not itself ever a finished material thing. The work starts as a response to a place; it continues in the crafting of an utterance; and it goes on and on each time it is read—sounded out, sung and inhabited, in a reader’s reading. It continues, and the place continues in it, but it is not and nor is the place a fixed and a permanent thing.

Matthiessen has written of his prose—the kind he takes trouble over—as an attempt to give the reader ‘the thing itself.’ He said this of his book Far Tortuga: ‘I wanted this novel to be absolutely spare,’ he said in an interview quoted by McKay Jenkins (ibid, p xxii). ‘I wanted the thing itself, as is said in Zen.’ I guess he means the place and the people, the boats, ‘the sparseness of sailors’ and their lives; the immediacy of particular moments, themselves. To me he says on the beach that he is proud of that book. But it is a book, as he puts it, that writers loved and readers hated. His grey eyes laugh and his stern mouth shifts to let out a deep chuckle.

If a book can manage such a spare singing of the thing itself, it will depend on grace and the disciplines of the poetic workshop. In the case of Far Tortuga, Matthiessen wrote, it was a matter of shedding the kind of metaphor and elaboration with which his previous novel, At Play in the Fields of the Lord, was rich (Matthiessen in Jenkins, 1999, p xxii). I suppose, too, that every attempt to write the thing itself will be another failure, to paraphrase T S Eliot; each of our attempts will fall a little short of the clean music (in which the thing sings) we strive for. But perhaps the perfection of the pitch of the final work is not what matters. For it is the striving that counts—the effort, the discipline, the essaying. (This, I think, is one of the morals of The Snow Leopard: the creature itself may elude you, but you will find it, you will know it, by journeying in its country. For everything that relates to it—its prey, the rivers it drinks from, the terrain it has to negotiate, the weather it has to survive, the tracks it leaves, its scat—speaks of it; and your seeking it in mind and place and on paper speaks of it too.) A work may seem—as sometimes Matthiessen’s writing seems—to ring clean and true with the original place. I think a reader discerns in the near-perfection of the words (in the seeking but not quite finding) that the writer has employed just about all the craft and care they are capable of, all their courage and power, in order to articulate in sound and sign the truth of the world they encountered. The striving sings
the thing itself—the thing the writer seeks to recall truly and articulate without affectation. The striving is part of the dance, of the ringing. Perhaps it is most of the dance.

Matthiessen began to pursue Zen Buddhism with Deborah Love in 1971. He writes about his journey with her in The Snow Leopard and in Nine-Headed Dragon River, and in the second book dedicated to his spiritual path, Matthiessen speaks also of his long Zen journey after her death. In 1990 he was appointed a Zen priest.

After we have left the beach and made our way back through the cleared fields to his place, Matthiessen shows me the cottage on his Sagaponack land he has turned into a prayer hall. Here he prays, meditates and teaches. It is a space of austere tranquillity. He does not speak to me at all about his practice; he looks nothing like a priest, nothing like the robed and inscrutable monks he found on his driveway one year on his return from long travels, an episode he describes at the start of Dragon River. As the plovers do not show off their migratory calling in their plumage and posture, nor does Matthiessen want to clothe himself in his faith. He has said ‘[I]f people come along and want to talk about Zen, that is wonderful, but I don’t want to brandish it. It’s just a quiet little practice, not a religion ... just a way of seeing the world ... and I find myself very comfortable with it’ (Jenkins, 1999, p xxvii). And so he seems to me. It is not Zen I have come here to talk about, and so we do not speak much of it. He shows me the meditation room. I take off my shoes to look into it. I look and feel the stillness of the space. Then I pull my boots back on, and we leave. He takes me to the cottage in which he now writes.

But, writing up these notes, I began to think a little harder about the place of his Buddhist faith in his life, how it squares with his temperament, with his activism and his writing. In The Snow Leopard, Matthiessen confesses to a ‘distemper’ that has run through his life, a feeling of being lost, exiled from home, severed from a realm of meaning and truth, alienated even from some true self. He recounts an experience on board a naval vessel in a Pacific storm in 1945 when ‘I lost my sense of self; the heartbeat I heard was the heart of the world, I breathed with the mighty risings and declines of earth’ (ibid, p 48), an exalting not a frightening experience, but a reconnection with the heart of things he yearned for ever after and sought to find again partly through the use of drugs. In the end, all his seeking, all his yearning and wandering in search of meaning, leads him to the realisation, dawning in the Himalaya in 1974, that there is no abstract place or order of meaning. There is just this moment and this; this mountain; this wave; this shore; this plover; this man now. Each of these is holy and part of the universe of holy things. “All the way to Heaven is Heaven,” he quotes St Catherine of Siena as saying, ‘and that is the very breath of Zen’ (ibid, 1978, pp 63-4). The mountain does not have meaning, as he puts it, it is meaning.
It strikes me that Buddhism, this 'way of seeing the world,' fits well a man so gifted at seeing clearly, at paying attention, so oriented to discover the unity of things, so committed to speaking the truth. It fits too the still man, the man with a gift for silence, the man wary of abstraction, the man who loves the grit and grace of things-in-themselves. It soothes and satisfies the impatient man, the man of haste and anger too. That man, and his struggle for equanimity, we see in *The Snow Leopard*, and I suspect we are shown his anguish and disquiet—the tussle between the tough and the saintly Matthiessens—in his novels: in *Mister Watson*, in *Lewis Merriweather Moon* in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. He might have found himself a native American rubric, had things turned out differently, he writes in *Dragon River*. But he found Zen, and it works.

It suits the kind of writer he is; it suits the man he is. It suits his lyric disposition. It fits well an the ethic and aesthetic that seem native to this man, and it matches the lore articulated by the shoreline where he makes his home—the impermanence of material things, the cyclical nature of reality, the interconnection of life and death. But how do we reconcile with its quiet wisdom of acceptance the other Peter Matthiessen—the man of causes, the outspoken and uncompromising critic of global capitalism and other modern evils; the defender of the rights of young native Americans—the pain-in-the-butt rantler, the warrior?

Somewhere he has written that Buddhism speaks of acceptance and understanding—it does not entail surrender. It has room in it, in Matthiessen's understanding anyway, for engagement, for passionate opposition, in words and actions, to ideas and institutions that threaten the livelihoods, the very lives and dignity of human and other beings—particularly disempowered beings—in whom, as in all things, the original unity and beauty of things runs. It allows protest and action against injustice and on behalf of the sacredness of life. Which is another reason Zen suits him.

For Matthiessen is a passionate and sometimes fierce conservationist; and an outspoken advocate of social justice. This has been clear since *Wildlife in America* and *Sal Si Puedes*. His *Tigers in the Snow* continues his work for threatened animal species, and *Men's Lives* argues fiercely against powerful lobby groups (industry and sporting fishermen) on behalf of the commercial fishermen of Long Island.

His strongest political protest came in *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, in 1983, a book prompted by the conviction of an Ojibwa Lakota man, Leonard Peltier, for the murder of two FBI officers on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Matthiessen's attack on 'the coalition of industry and government that was seeking to exploit the last large Indian reservations in the West' attracted a libel action by the former governor of South Dakota. It became the longest libel action in US history. It was an action he and his publisher successfully defended, but at the cost to them both of nine years and three million dollars; and an infamous attack upon Matthiessen's integrity in *Outside* magazine, which he also strenuously defended.
Matthiessen seems to me the kind of man who fights hard but not dirty because he fights from deeply held principles. He regrets the time wasted and the money spent on the Crazy Horse matter, but he regrets none of his opinions, nor his decision to voice them so unequivocally. He is a man not easily cowed. He despises bullying and oppression. He has an instinct for justice and a sense of calling to its defence. When I asked him once what moved him to write, he quoted Albert Camus’ 1957 Nobel Prize speech in which Camus said writers must speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Someone who has some insight into the Way—the just order of things—may, indeed must, speak against actions that imperil that just order. And so Matthiessen, the Zen priest, the man of nature, the lyrical prose stylist, the son of privilege, does speak out, in his writing and in his public advocacy. In his person, in his life, the contrary aspects of his nature—toward peace and art and acceptance on the one hand; toward engagement, argument and resistance—seem well enough at ease. In his writing he has not, as we have seen, achieved the same reconciliation. He has confessed that he was not able—though he says he knew how—to make his books of protest into good literature. He seems to feel that politics and literature do not mix. But this literature—nature writing—has often attempted to marry protest with poetry. Some other nature writers, even within the constraints of nonfiction, have combined literature and protest with more comfort than Matthiessen—Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Ed Abbey, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams and Thoreau himself come to mind. Even Matthiessen manages it, on occasion, better than he seems to realise, in Wildlife in America and in The Snow Leopard, most strikingly. And it is clear, no matter what he says, that all his fiction is political. It ponders and dramatises issues that run through his nonfiction: the plight of endangered species and human cultures; individual and institutional greed and violence. It is not pure art. There is no pure art. Indeed, the purest art may be the most powerful politics, since it has the power to change the way we understand reality.

But Matthiessen may simply be articulating with an excess of honesty a tension between politics and art, between activism and evocation, that is always present in this literature. No matter how well they resolve it, a tension between the overtly political and the artistic purposes of nature writing remains alive for all its practitioners. At the gathering I have left behind in Harvard, some nature writers spoke of the political nature of all true art and writing—it aims to change the way we see the world, and it does that best when it does not speak the language of politics. That is to cast politics very broadly and to allow more scope for literature to play out as it must, ringing true in the case of nature writing to the nature of places and peoples and one writer’s encounter with them. Others suggest we need a writing that provokes such change much more directly, that incites change in the world now. No doubt we need both. And Peter Matthiessen, as it happens, is pursuing both and letting the tension between them stand unresolved. He writes two kinds of books—literature and advocacy. But he does not try to mix them, as though he knows that politics
makes bad art and art makes bad politics. And perhaps he is right. He is anxious, though, as any writer might be, to help his readers understand the difference in his own body of work. Literature, for him, serves its own demanding god—a god of art not a god of war. As in his life there is the sage and there is the warrior, in his writing there is lyric and there is protest.

Zen does not ask its practitioners to bring their lives into any tidy order. It embraces paradox. The shore too, more than any terrain, is defined and sustained by oppositions. It is neither one element—water—nor the other—earth. It is both, and they never blend. Opposites play against each other on the shore, making it what it is. It moves; it shifts; it is water, and it is land. And the birds, which are part too of its pattern of forms and sounds, don't belong entirely, permanently here either. They belong equally to the sky and to coastlines far to the south. The shore is not one thing or the other; it is not entirely here nor there. It is both. Matthiessen, it seems, has grown content to let his art and his politics, his spiritual self and his political, stand separate. He is sea and he is land, and except for odd moments (as when the wave washes up the beach), he is rarely both at once.

In his low-ceilinged kitchen before we set out for the beach, Peter Matthiessen told me a story. It pointed up the difficulty for all nature writers of finding the right pitch, the right set of words, for talking about what is wrong with the way our culture engages with the natural world; for talking about corporate greed, the profit motive, the problems of the extractive economy and growth. It is hard enough not to alienate dedicated readers, who are already, most likely, sold on that idea; it is difficult to convince them that you have something new to say on the matter, some new solution to suggest. It is harder still to find words to engage the enemy—to point out to oil executives, property developers, agribusiness men and women, politicians, shoppers, and bankers that the way they do things must change.

'I rather disgraced myself with Marion Gilliam at Fire & Grit last year,' Matthiessen told me. Gilliam founded and funds the Orion Society, which sponsored the conference I have just left at Harvard, and which ran its own big conference Fire & Grit in July 1999. Matthiessen explained that he likes Gilliam, admires and respects what he does through Orion. When I visited him, Matthiessen had just returned, in fact, from an Orion-sponsored 'Forgotten Languages' tour to Florida. That program takes nature writers and poets around the country to read from their work and join conversations with community groups and schools about caring for the land. Matthiessen is himself a recipient of Orion's John Hay award for his work at the interface of nature and culture.

What happened at Fire & Grit was this. Orion had asked spokesman for one of the oil companies to speak at the conference and to be part of the dialogue. He spoke for fifteen minutes or so and,
according to Matthiessen, he seemed a very nice man, but he just delivered 'the usual corporate
patter' about the work the industry now puts into restoring its sites and keeping the damage it
does to a minimum. When the oil man was finished, Matthiessen stood up and, as he puts it, 'spoke
sharply.' It seemed, he says to me, that the man had delivered a well-rehearsed, oily presentation,
empty of new ideas and not really honest. 'I felt that needed saying,' Matthiessen told me. 'I may
have gone in a little hard,' but it is time, he said, to speak plainly with these people. He knows,
and knew at once, that what he said offended some people there. He knows that it embarrassed
Marion. Other people, including a number of writers, came to him and told him they were glad
he had spoken up as he had. 'I meant the oil fellow no harm, of course,' Matthiessen told me. Not
personally. 'But I don't think Marion has forgiven me—not ever will.'

As it happens, I had heard the same story told, at Harvard, by some of the writers who had been
there that day at *Fire & Grit*. For some of them, the way in which Matthiessen responded had
silenced a man, alienated someone, with whom the community of ecological thinkers needs
desperately to engage. It was an opportunity lost for conversation across the ideological chasm.
'We had invited that man to come among us,' said one of the writers, 'and we treated him badly.'
But others spoke in defence of Matthiessen.

It does not matter who was right, I suppose. Who is to say whether that was a time for peace or
a time for war? Who is to say there is room for only one tone of voice for such discussions? To
paraphrase Wendell Berry, if we are going to find solutions among ourselves, they are going to
be human solutions; and therefore, we are going to need human beings to argue them out; and
sometimes those human beings are going to speak and behave in a way we do not like, because
they are human and prone to be themselves. Berry had Ed Abbey in mind when he said that. But
he might as well have been speaking of Matthiessen, the ranted and lyricist; the activist and the
artist. Both Abbey and Matthiessen have been prone to speak their mind; but their integrity is
unimpeachable. And one of the things most admirable about them is that they can be relied
upon—in Abbey's case, since he is dead, we should say that he could always be relied upon—on
paper and in person, to speak, as Berry puts it, insistently as themselves (Berry, 'A Few Words in

I think Matthiessen was doing just that at *Fire & Grit*. He can be relied upon to speak as himself
and out of his own experience. He is prejudiced fiercely in favour of freedom and truth and
wildness, and against oppression, dishonesty and mere civility. He does not spare himself from
those prejudices, from his critical glare, just as he does not spare anyone else; that saves him from
any charge of self-service or hypocrisy.

The story tells me that in life as in his writing, Matthiessen understands that there is need of art
and need of war, of repose and of rage, but that he cannot do them both together. He will attempt
them both with absolute integrity, though, seeking nothing but truth and justice. And he will not stop. The struggle to speak rightly for those who cannot speak for themselves goes on and on, and it lies at the heart of his work and the centre of the nature writer’s challenge.

It may be that what happened at Fire & Grit, some remorse at his excesses there, has been sitting with him heavily; or it may just be that, much to his surprise, the world is changing. For in the introduction to The Birds of Heaven, which appeared late in 2001, Matthiessen writes this:

Surely a lingering sadness is unavoidable for those who revere the natural world and must bear witness to the ongoing degradation of our human habitat, tragically sacrificed to such narrow ideals as ‘gross national product’ and diminishing hour by hour, day by day… And yet, to my astonishment, in the second summer of the new millennium, after four decades of lingering sadness and pessimism about the future and vain angry protest, a curious optimism has opened in my heart like a strange blossom. Paradoxically, in this scary period when out-of-date Western governments seem oblivious to any need except those of ‘big business’—and in particular ‘big oil’ and the extractive industries—and just when the caravan of United States politics labors so heavily in its attempt at a U-turn back toward the past, signs of environmental heresy are appearing in the business world, a few thin cracks in the hard skull of the corporate mentality. For whatever reason, industry after industry and business after business are making a quiet shift toward environmental awareness.

—The Birds of Heaven, 2001, p. xv

As we leave the beach, a great blue heron alights from the fields behind the dunes and flies over us into the southwest, toward the pond. We stop and watch. Unlike the crane, Matthiessen reminds me, the heron flies with its neck retracted upon itself. This heron, its head back against its shoulders, its wings wide, is a large bird, but the crane is larger again, and it flies with its neck fully extended, calling its wild note as it goes. On just such a hard day as this, in November of 1997, a young sandhill crane turned up on this shore and wintered by the pond at Sagaponack. Unlike that bird, which had strayed far from its course, the great blue heron is at home on this shore at this time of year, and its flight above us speaks eloquently of the South Fork in this season.

Matthiessen is a man similarly at home in this place, and all his gestures, in prose and in person, speak of it, and of himself as one who dwells deeply here. He belongs here as the heron and the shorebirds belong, as the waters and sands do: he comes and goes; his being here implies and includes his flying often to far places. Like the heron and many of the other shorebirds, his voice and gestures (I mean, again, in his person and on the page) carry a sad note and hints of distant places, other realms, as though a part of him is elsewhere; yet, like them, his presence is both
powerful and contented, knowing himself at home here. Oppositions live inside him, define him, as they do the shore.

Spending this short time with him, walking this shore at Sagaponack, has revealed to me see how native Matthiessen is, despite all his travels, to this coastline. Reflecting on my walk with him, and rereading his books, I am struck by how the shore articulates itself in his prose and voice; how his writing too could be said, among other things, to belong to this Long Island ocean shore at least as well as any of the other lifeforms that inhabit it. I have noticed that certain qualities peculiar to any shore, to this one in particular, mark his writing—its duality and betweenness, the way it (shore and prose) is never one thing or the other, neither land nor sea, neither here nor there, but always both, unreconciled. And so I have tried here to elaborate the geography of his writing by analogy with the geography of the shore, especially the shore birds with whom Matthiessen feels such kinship. For me, that has deepened my understanding of both terrains.

These oppositions contend, I think, in the body of his work: lyricism and journalism; elegy and protest; literary integrity and political purpose; acceptance and resistance; the exotic and the vernacular; the physical and the metaphysical; the past and the present; the immediate and the remote. They contend, on the whole, with striking beauty; sometimes the music dies in the tension between them, but never for long.

But mostly I sense in his prose—and I feel in himself and his way of being present in his home place—a music that is the music of the shorebirds. At the end of The Wind Birds I discover a passage in which Matthiessen relates how the curlew and the golden plover—and other shorebirds—have been known in folklore as 'harbingers of death,' as singers of bad ridings. '[A]nd in the sense,' he goes on, 'that they are birds of passage, that in the wild melodies of their calls, in the breath of vast distance and bare regions that attend them, we sense intimations of our own mortality, there is justice in the legend. Yet it is not the death sign that the curlews bring, but only the memory of life, of high beauty passing swiftly, as the curlew passes, leaving us in solitude on an empty beach, with summer gone, and a wind blowing.' Apprehension of the fleeting beauty of life floods the song of curlew and plover and fills the sad lyric prose of Peter Matthiessen.

I stand with him for a little while longer in just such a wind, the summer also gone, the heron also flown, and then we walk back through potato fields to the house. This is when he shows me the temple and the ancient orchard and his writing house. Then I make ready to go, knowing he has left his book of cranes far from finished in the workshop. The day grows late too, and I have a distance to travel before I sleep. He feels inhospitable, he says, sending me off like this. On a page of my notebook he draws me a small map of the route I'll need to take west to the ferry at Port Jefferson. He suggests I look in first at East Hampton, and draws that on the map too.
The wind and my long morning’s drive on what is still for me the wrong side of the road have brought on a headache. I must look weary. ‘If you get tired,’ he says, ‘just come on back. There’s a bed for you here.’ I thank him, and turn the car toward the lane. He stands quite still, his arm raised in a farewell until I’m gone.
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning the following pages. The best possible results have been obtained.
10. The heart of an arid land

Terry Tempest Williams

The Colorado Plateau

I write to the music that opens my heart.
—Terry Tempest Williams, Red

Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary... For myself I'll take Moab, Utah. I don't mean the town itself, of course, but the country which surrounds it—the canyons. The slickrock desert. The red dust and the burnt cliffs and the lonely sky—all that which lies beyond the end of the roads.
—Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire

Remember that the yield of a hard country is a love deeper than a fat and easy land inspires.
—Bernard De Voto, The Year of Decision, 1846

It is a country to breed mystical people...
—Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow

Terry Tempest Williams had told me to meet her at the Double Arches.

It was the only landmark in Moab she was sure I would find. Speaking to her from my motel room near the railyards in Flagstaff, Arizona, the night before my visit with her, a map open on my knees, I told her I thought I could make it up through Monument Valley to Moab by two—easy—if I got an early start. 'I don't think you'll do it,' she said. 'Make it three, and meet me at the Double Arches.' She was allowing for my sleeping in or getting lost or meeting with some revelation on the way. And she had toyed with meeting me at the information centre, but thought I might not find it. She showed too little faith in my navigational skills, as it turned out. Revelations there were, but speedy ones. I made it to Moab on time but I never made it to the Double Arches.
Terry’s home lies close to Arches National Park, and ‘Double Arches’—the Moab MacDonald’s (yes, even there)—was her apologetic joke. (There is a famous double arch—all natural and slickrock red—within the park. I never got there either.) Right on two o’clock, I drove into town out of the desert and the purple sage. I passed the MacDonald’s, found the post office, parked the truck, and mailed some postcards home. I walked around the corner and found the information centre. I was at the counter buying two of Terry’s books—*Pieces of White Shell* and *Coyote’s Canyon*—when in she walked and caught me in the act. So our meeting happened just where she had meant it to, though not where we had planned. It was more apt and auspicious than it might have been up the road amid the smell of fries. I was to discover that little turns out as you expect with Terry—or in this landscape. Like her, this place has a mind of its own. It bewitches. It surprises. Magic and mystery attend Terry Tempest Williams, as they attend this landscape; and they are written into her works. Her realism is replete with magic as the desert is alive with spirits and parables. And both of them sing a haunted, angular music of the heart.

I am in the West now. Four days back I put down at Denver on Thanksgiving, and I have driven, since then, down the spine of the Rocky Mountains, south through Leadville and the valley of the Arkansas to Salida, then west through the Sawatch Range of the Rockies and out into lovely grasslands and cottonwoods along the valley of the Gunnison and its Blue Mesa; then south along the Uncompahgre on a morning of snow and over icy roads through the San Juans to Durango, to stand in wonder among the ruins and vistas of the Mesa Verde; and then southwest through the four corners, out into the Colorado Plateau and all its infinite deserts—painted, monumental, delicate and deep—until I stand now above the south rim of the Grand Canyon itself.

This is not the same country—it hardly seems the same continent—I left behind in the District of Columbia. It is a place of natural drama and vast and silent space. (Washington’s drama was all political and historical; its spaces full of human tragedy and triumph, and urgent with voices.) This plateau-land about me now is arid, sparsely vegetated, thinly peopled, open to the sky. And there is snow. There is snow in the desert—and this is a miraculous thing to my Australian eye. It reminds me that winter is close; it reminds me that I am in latitudes where, even in arid places, winter speaks in snow. Snow storied the red-brown flanks of the San Juans as I passed through a day or so before, and it articulates now the ledges of the canyon of the Colorado, white among the black juniper and pinyon pine. I stand at six thousand feet and look down to a river running green in a narrow gorge four thousand feet—and many long eras of the earth—below.

The canyon opens its mouth ten miles wide to the sky, and walls and slopes and steps of sedimentary rock descend through five hundred million years to that tongue, the river on its bed of Precambrian rock, rock so old it suggests eternity. But what remains is not nearly so
eloquent here as what is gone, all that time and all that rock laid down in Paleozoic and Mesozoic seas, shifted about in dry spells and erosion in between, uplifted and cut deep by rivers during the Cenozoic. Most of what was laid down over such a long time, and now is gone, has been lost—the Grand Canyon has been made—over the past six million years. That is fast in geological time, and the drama of that rapid unmaking is loud in the canyon. What is gone makes the canyon, and the canyon astounds us. I'd need to enter into its mouth to begin to understand what it says. But I stand here in the sun this morning and try to let it shape its space inside me. I need more time than I have. It is too large for my eyes to hold. The immensity of the space it makes is unfathomable to me in a morning—probably in a lifetime—and the orders of time the canyon manifests make a mockery of these few hours I have allocated to encountering the canyon. I vow, as everyone does, to come back. But I register rawness and a profound vulnerability. Earth is laid open here. And the space where it is broken is swimming with time. The canyon discloses, it seems, the whole slow history of the earth itself. The West lays eternity bare in this way.

Ravens fly across this disembodied earth, down into the deeper zones of life on lower ledges, and back again to the present. I envy them their gift for riding inside time, for plumbing, with flight and song, with dance, the mystery of a space so vast, all in the course of a morning's hunt for food.

The movement of plates that uplifted the Colorado Plateau also pulled it apart from the Great Basin to its west. The stretching of the Great Basin continues to this day, and will go on and on. One day the land may break apart here and let the ocean in again (McPhee, 1998, pp 141–42). One half of the country that Terry Tempest Williams calls home is being stretched and fractured into blocks that rise at one end and sink into the mantle at the other; it is shaping itself into angular waves of basin and range; and it is being wrenched apart from the other half of her homeland. The basin is being torn from the plateau; Terry's west is being torn from her east. If this is all her heartland, then it is breaking, left ventricle from right.

There is emotion embodied and drama unfolding here that express themselves in this woman and her work.

I come to Terry Tempest Williams, this day, out of Navajoland. That is her name for the country of the Navajo, more or less the same stretch of ground as the Colorado Plateau, a province in whose northern reaches she now makes her home. On reflection, it seems altogether right that I should come to her out of this storied landscape. It was in the plateau, among Navajo, their legends and the magic of their stark and broken landscape that her voice awoke and found expression in Pieces of White Shell. In that book, not her first, but the first she wrote for adults,
the first that got noticed widely, she began to tell her own stories, which were the gift of the Navajoland to this Mormon girl who entered it barefoot and attentive, alert for sharp rocks and revelation (Pieces of White Shell, 1984, p 3).

After the Grand Canyon I looped south through Flagstaff at the foot of the San Franciscos, sitting among its ponderosa pines, its redwoods, snow on the ground. This is volcanic country much younger than the plateau. I stay a night and head off early this Monday morning. My breath smokes the dawn air. The day has barely begun. The morning is still bluer than denim. I scrape a tough membrane of ice from my truck's windscreen and make north past Gray Mountain, into the Painted Desert and the Navajo Nation.

The Painted Desert is a pastel badland of pink and grey dunes, a body without a form. It looks as though it might run away in the next decent storm—but I guess it won't, not all of it, anyway. The White Mesa rises on my left, strong and flat-topped, and then the long Black Mesa, made of deep yellow claystone, three hundred million years old, stands up out of the desert on my right, and the sun climbs over its dark caprock. Black Mesa runs beside me for fifty miles into Kayenta. Even these island plateaus, their flanks furrowed by deep lines where water must run hard in rainstorms, seem soft and temporary things—contingent, and already radically reduced, terrains. They are surrounded by fallen rimrock, skirted by soft slopes of talus. Cottonwoods standing in dry stream beds have the same colour as the rock of the mesas, and they look just as dry and massive. Colour and texture and form all speak of dryness here. How, I wonder, do these giant trees, hold on? They learn how to wait, I guess. They stay where the water runs, when it runs, and they sink their roots down deep in broken ground.

The morning belongs to birds. Ravens fly in solitude, in pairs, in raiding parties, across the woods and rangelands. I watch them at their easy flight, shadows aloft, prayers in search of prey. They are birds of such tough and uncompromising elegance. Here and there they stand over a roadkill and make a desultory exit as my truck storms past—my truck trailing its long, morning shadow through the sage and juniper by the road. We disturb—I, my truck and its shadow—a congregation of fifty tiny longtailed birds, common bush tits I think, which have been picking among the shadows at the road's shoulder, and talking among themselves. Chatter, at my approach, gives rise to wild alarm, annoyance or maybe even joy, and they rise, and like a school of fish or a storm of fallen leaves in wind, they take to the air, giving way to me, this noisy desert traveller. A single redtailed hawk, white breast toward me, watches my approach from the top of a telegraph pole—a hunter at rest. Just about here yesterday, I had seen a tawny mountain lion resting on rocks above the grasslands, considering the sunrise, drinking the morning in. A legend lying on the earth; a hunter, like this redtail, at rest. I look for the lion again this morning. But she has gone to ground, become yellow rock again. For this morning belongs to birds.
I reach Kayenta this morning at 9:30, full of country, and pull in. The sun is up, and the day is warming. The truck needs gas, and I need coffee.

In town there's a MacDonald's and a Burger King, brand new. There's another place next to the gas station called the Blue Coffee Pot. It calls—its colour, its name, its independence—and I carry my satchel inside. It's nearly full, this ten-sided, new age hogan, but I find a seat. I am among Navajo. In fact, when I look up from my notes to glance around, I see I am the only white man here. There are couples and families, work mates. I am the only person by himself. They receive me among them in dignified but guarded silence, which is to say no one seems to take any notice, but everyone knows I’m there. A Navajo girl takes my order, fills and refills my coffee cup and delivers a huge plate of breakfast upon which I fall. No one makes me feel unwelcome. They let me come among them, they quietly avoid noticing me taking these notes, and they let me leave. And so I walk back to my truck and leave these people, in the heart of their country, among their legends and conversations, and drive north into a redder geography, a valley of improbable monuments.

Over the San Juan River and past the Mexican Hat, up around the latitude of three mountains—Linnaeus, Abajo and Shay—I pull over to take a photograph of a landscape that includes dry gulch, red slick rock, desert flats and the three blue mountains, covered in snow. I park the red truck on a flat gravel shoulder off the road, and throw it into park; leaving its engine running, I wander off to frame the country. I take a shot. And then I hear a sound behind me, something moving over gravel. I turn my head and see the truck rolling backward toward an arroyo. I run to it and make the cabin, pull the brake, just before the truck finds the wash. I laugh and offer prayers of thanks all at the same time. The gearstick has found its way into in reverse, I notice. How could that be? Desert trick or human error? Most likely the latter, but out here, in this place that seems half underworld, who knows?

I drive on through Utah, through sage and field and the rise of the La Sal Mountains and roll down into Moab's main street. And there, a little after two, I meet Terry Tempest Williams, dressed in purple and sage green. We greet each other with surprise and delight: the place had outsmarted us both into meeting where we should.

Terry Tempest Williams is identified, and has identified herself, closely with the West—its landscapes, its people, the treatment both have had to suffer, the magic that endures in her home country, savage and savaged lands. 'One of the West's most striking new writers,' proclaimed Newsweek on the publication in 1991 of Refuge. That is a book of the Great Salt Lake and the
deserts of the Great Basin. It is also a book about the poisoning of western lands and bodies by atomic testing in the Nevada. In her dialogue with Robert Finch, 'Landscape, People, and Place,' Williams speaks passionately for the West, its spaces, the mystery it represents to the East Coast mind (Leuders, 1989, p. 41 ff). So I have come into the West to see it for myself and stand with this woman within these lands she speaks for, sings from, defends with body and word.

But Terry Tempest Williams has become much more than a writer of the West. She is now one of the best known and best loved of American nature writers. Those are reasons enough for coming to see her. But having met her in the East, I wanted to come and talk with her in the Colorado Plateau. She has written and spoken passionately of her deep belonging to the geography of the southwest, to the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau in particular. I want to spend some time with her in the country of her belonging, and see how it may seem to shape her work. '[T]he landscape came before the words,' she told her audience and Leuders in 1989 (ibid, p. 41). But she also said there that the Great Basin was a lean landscape, 'perfect for draping ideas over' (ibid). I wonder if she has done all the draping; or whether the drylands have draped themselves on her, clothed her with language and ideas born there; I wonder with Williams as I have wondered with all the writers here, whether a beloved place has shaped some ideas and sentences in return for her attendance upon them.

Terry Tempest Williams has identified herself expressly and fully with her home landscapes. Her writing is more intimate and personal in tone and focus than that of many nature writers, past and present. We get to share the country of her mind—but this is true of many writers, Muir, Leopold, Austin, Abbey, Lopez and Nelson. With Williams we get to see more of her body, feel more of her desire, taste more of her emotional responses to place than we do with most writers in this tradition. She erodes the divide between self and landscape, finding herself in the land: 'I can look for my own stories embedded in the landscapes I travel through,' she writes in Pieces of White Shell (p. 3), 'my basin of tears,' she calls the Great Salt Lake in Refuge (p. 280); elsewhere, she imagines herself arch and feather and bird and sage; she reads events in nature as signs for herself, as metaphors of her life’s passage; and she aspires to speak the land’s tongue, to know its red grammar.

Williams’ work explores connections between body and landscape, between desire, intimacy and belonging; it proposes and articulates an erotics of place, in which land is lover, she, as inhabitant and poet, is lover of land, and touch is everything. I wonder what that oft-repeated ‘my’ means in her writing when she speaks of her places. I wonder which way and in what manner the possession, the intimacy, implied in her personal pronoun runs: whether it is a projection of her emotions onto land, a kind of psychological possession of them; or an expression of kinship, of her betrothal and passionate connection to the body and mind of a place she loves, flowing back and forth like vows.
I wonder, too, what particular links I may intuit between the land and her writing; how they may be said to speak a similar language, hold a related character. I am here to notice how I think these provinces and her fierce and storied belonging to them may speak themselves in her words—something I cannot possibly know in abstraction from them. I come to see if I can't fathom how this weird and lean geography in partnership with this gifted and place-passionate woman might have fashioned the erotic, personal and political, the fierce and fragile terrain of books like *Refuge*, *An Unspoken Hunger*, *Leap* and *Red*, and I come to listen for what truths it may have spoken to her, its witness; and what it may have to say to me, of itself and of her.

In Williams' writing the land is alive with magic and trickery. I come wondering what illusions it may offer me, alone or in her company.

I have three days with her in the part of the desert she now calls home, and I want to see what time and conversation with her may reveal about seduction and magic, love and erotics, story and politics; what it may reveal about Terry Tempest Williams, her voice and her place.

On a Wednesday night in a church by Harvard Yard, back in October when we met at a conference, Terry read a new essay, published later as 'Labor' in *Red*. At the centre of that essay rests a rock she calls the Birthing Rock, encircled by the red walls of Kane Creek Canyon just out of Moab. This late November afternoon, fresh from our meeting in the information centre, Terry drives me to the canyon in her white Subaru. It takes us five minutes, no more. Moab is set down among marvels and antiquities. Terry stops the car by the side of the track, and we walk down to her birthing rock. It stands on its own, a block fallen from the rimrock long, long ago, set on a natural platform above the pink sand of the watercourse. Its four flat sides, facets of a cut stone, wear a blue patina, and they are decorated with Anasazi petroglyphs. Black figures, animal and mystical, teem over it, and in the heart of them all a woman seems to give birth to four youngsters. Stories emerge from the belly of the desert, long after their tellers, the old people, have vanished.

The space is a stage and a womb, a site for story, a theatre for delivery, a place for remembering and beginning again. Here new conceptions found—perhaps they still find—their way into the world. Here the miracle of animal—of human—life finds embodiment over and over. Here the rocks are animated. They tell stories. The rock, writes Terry Tempest Williams in 'Labor,' is also 'my private oracle where I hear the truth of my own heart' (*Red*, 2001, p 154). Rereading this, I find myself wondering at that 'my.' How can this be her oracle only; how can it speak her heart's truths? Does it not speak its own; those of the women (almost certainly they were women) who found the rock, felt its holiness, and painted legends upon it? This 'my'—and her others—is not a pronoun of possession though. This 'my,' the 'my' at the beginning of *Pieces of White Shell*, where
she writes 'I can look for my own stories embedded in the landscapes I travel through' (p 3), and others—these sound like words of intimacy and connection, words of love. They do not deny the integrity of the place nor preclude the possibility that others may know it intimately too. They speak of touching, of connection, always a personal matter between two beings—in this case, a woman and a rock of stories. It is not that this woman owns this rock or that it has been waiting here for her; it is not that the narrative of her destiny has been lying buried in the sands waiting through time for her arrival. It is that these places touch her, as they might touch others. They speak. They are animated for this woman, and in them she finds cryptic expressions of how she might lead a life worthy of the landscape in which she finds herself. Terry Tempest Williams' desert is oracular for her. She is avid for the mystical experience within places like this—and, who knows, perhaps the place is avid for an attention such as hers, in which it is revivified. Her places begin to speak, before very long, to me too.

Here I am right now with Terry Tempest Williams at one of her oracles, the mother rock. Having written and spoken of it so passionately, she leads me to it and stays silent. She has been faithful to it, I think. This feels like the same place she wrote of, and it speaks to me with power too; but differently, since I am not a woman, since I have not known the rock as she has since she was a young bride, and I have not chosen as she has, despite all the promptings of her heart and body and culture, to have no children.

In the essay, she offers her own choice—not to bear children of her own—as an image, a metaphor rather than a model, of how we might learn to live differently. She offers, out of her life's experience, out of her listening at this rock, another way of understanding kinship, fecundity, responsibility and love: 'Would you believe me when I tell you this is family, kinship with the desert, the breadth of my relations coursing through a wider community, the shock of recognition with each scarlet gilia, the smell of rain' (Red, 2001, p 157). And she draws a powerful lesson from the redrock desert: erosion makes it the lovely, restrained and fecund place it is, a place that 'ignites the imagination' (ibid, p 154). We need to give ourselves over to transformation, like the desert, she argues; we need to remake ourselves and our relations with the earth out of surrender, such as that which rock makes to water and weather; we need to give birth to new ideas of how to live, growing as fertile and as self-possessed as this oracle of stone. We need perhaps to read the rock as a call to give birth to a new conception of ourselves, to new ideas not just to children of our loins. We need to reimagine kinship and maternity—to see the other beings around us as our children, our brothers, our sisters, our elders.

The essay is brave, outspoken, artistically elegant, and personal. It is about her; it is about the desert; it makes each a metaphor of the other's life; it makes a political statement of great sweep, drawn from the open legs of a woman on a rock. In this essay, as elsewhere in her writing, Williams' poetic engagement with place spawns political commitment and advocacy. Her poetics
gives rise to her politics. Both of them honour this place. She wants place to stir us, as the touch and memory of a lover stir us, to their passionate defence. This is one of the places that stirred her in that way; the message of rebirth is what she heard here.

The night that Terry read this piece at Harvard, a new friend of mine—a woman and a mother—came to me with tears in her eyes and said, ’Do you think I might meet that poet?’ I learned in that moment that Terry Tempest Williams has pushed the essay form into a new domain (much as this landscape, over the past one hundred years, forced men and women—like Mary Austin, Joseph Woods Krutch, John Van Dyke, Edward Abbey and Georgia O’Keeffe—toward a new aesthetic of land, a new sense of what is beautiful); and I saw that her art moved people. She read it dramatically. It is a piece of dramatic writing, of shapely rhetoric, of oracles stitched together. Into a poem. It works—this essay and much of her writing—as this landscape works: through striking image, charged with color; through fragments that throw our sense of order, stir us with their power and their odd but perfect juxtaposition. It works like rockfall and erosion (only faster). It is insistent, unrelenting. It moves to a jagged rhythm, stops and starts and stops. And starts. It sweeps you away or leaves you cold. There is nowhere to hide—you are in for the ride or you are out. It works like the flood at the heart of her essay, which she imagines sweeping down the canyon and carrying her turbidly away to a new life; down the birth canal and up, through death, to a new life.

Erosion. I look up. Canyon walls crack and break from the mother rock, slide into the river, now red with the desert. I am red with the desert. My body churns in the current, and I pray the log jam ahead will not reduce me to another piece of driftwood caught in the dam of accumulation.

Who has the strength to see this wave of destruction as a wave of renewal?

I find myself swimming toward an eddy in the river, slow water, warmer water. We are whirling, twirling in a community of currents. I reach for a willow, secure on the shore, it stops me from spinning. My eyes steady. The land is steady. In the pause of this moment, I pull myself out. Collapse. Rise.

—’Labor,’ Red, 2001, p 161

Terry Tempest Williams works like this. She works this ground, brilliantly. She lets her writing, in its sound, flow and image, encapsulate a place and, in this case, she makes her words work like—adequate—both a flood and a whole geological process of erosion. At the same time her mind works away. The flood and the rockfall—her words, I mean, in their image and music—are carrying a sediment of mind. You see it at work—the poetic becoming political, the poem becoming parable—in her use of synecdoche. She means her images and words are not only to be read literally, for the thing they point to—’dam of accumulation,’ ’community of currents,’ ‘the land is steady,’ ’Collapse,’ ’Rise’—but for a class of psychological, and social, economic and political
processes to which they gesture, for which they also stand. In the flood of her writing, the particular and the universal, the actual and the abstract are caught up together. They are all one. One of the challenges of Williams’ prose for many is to fathom where desert ends and metaphor begins; where place becomes prophecy—that is, to know what, in her writing, is actual and what is metaphorical. For her, the boundaries are porous.

This essay ‘Labor’ does what essays are meant to do: it generates a thought of universal application from personal experience and contemplation. In ‘Labor,’ the thought seems to rise directly from the place, from the mind of Kane Creek Canyon to the fired imagination of its witness and participant, Terry. There is the rock; it is her oracle; it speaks to her (well, actually it picks her up and carries her away; it is an enacted message); she speaks to us; they (the place and the writer) take us into a dream state; they pick us up and shake us; and we are moved. Places move her, and she writes to move her readers as she herself was moved. Her writing, freighted though it is with cryptic telling, works more like a river than a fable or a speech; more like a rapid kind of geology.

But I find myself wondering again, has she draped a thought upon the rock, or has it spoken forth and through her? I think the rock drapes her: because she wants it to, because she lets it touch her, because she gives herself up to places—their metrics, their messages. There is a continuum from rock to reader, and Williams is the medium. Through her, it—the rock, the thought, made of the same sediment—touches us. She merges with rock; she merges, at the other end, with reader until we too, if we surrender, become the place where the thought arose. And so the idea, embodied in the canyon and the rock, becomes ours, embodied in us. For a while anyway. This is the power of imagination, stirred by prose written by a woman whose own imagination is stirred by place.

Magically, the place seems to manifest the placards she waves: transform yourself, sacrifice, be reborn. This may be what Williams means in Red by bedrock democracy. This essay, which draws a credo from a stone, is redrock democracy at work, a politics that proclaims what stones would say if they could speak. It is political expression, accented with geology; it is a democracy of stones, written in the syntax of erosion. It essays a grammar and cadence of comingled protest and celebration. It speaks at once for the rocks, for the earth, for one woman and for the fate of all humankind.

I feel Terry’s hand in every phrase. This is artful writing. It is intended to rock us, to speak from her body—from the body of this canyon—direct to our body and soul. Oh, and from her head to ours, but through the body first. This is the writing she attempted in Leap, she tells me later—‘blood writing,’ written out of her body, her sensing, feeling body, and for the body of her readers. Her phrase is like Thoreau’s—‘vascular.’ Like him, she knows such writing is the child of hard labour of the mind and finger as much as it is the suggestion of a place. The more
thoroughly it is striven for, the more artfully it is made, the more the place may seem to speak in it. But she is not manufacturing a prose that is unlike her own voice. This is how she speaks —only the writing is compressed, made more intense by the erosional work of composition, as this place is made intense, made utterly and essentially itself, by erosion. Standing in this womb of a canyon recalling her reading in Harvard, I sense that Terry has learned in the desert to place words, much as this canyon has learned to place rocks, so as to move us deeper than thought.

Her writing has always had that quality. Don’t go to her for disquisition, for temperate exposition. Go to her for punchy, lyric prose that works the mystical moment and aims not to argue but to stir. You’ll find writing like that in *Pieces of White Shell*, throughout *Refuge*—though that is perhaps her most conventionally narrative work—and the essays. Its rhetoric is musical—and its music is all angles and syncopation—more than it is logical. Though it is sharply intelligent, and fierce. She has always favoured short sentences of a simple form. And sentence fragments. Her prose feels spare and sharp-edged, spacious and rhythmic, though off the beat and irregular, staccato. If she wrote music it would sound like Messiaen’s star music, his ‘Quatre études de rythme’ or Stockhausen’s ‘Klavierstück V’—all fragments and intervals, all shattered cadences and scattered tones. All made of dynamic, of beat and offbeat. And its beat is inseparable from its message. Take away Williams’ music and metaphor, and you’d be left with a bunch of slogans; absent the stories (its natural history and archaeology, the discontinuous narrative of erosion) from the red desert, from the Basin, and you’d be left with a bunch of rocks and saltbrush and sage. Everything depends on the poetry, which is to say on the structure, the composition and patterned sound; everything depends, in Tempesta Williams, on hearing the ragged, broken music of her prose, just as an appreciation of this arid country depends on feeling out the rhythmic whole of which the rock, the saltbrush and the sage are a few scattered pieces.

The writing in ‘Labor’ is most like the writing in *Leap*, a book also born and nurtured here in the redrock. Here, though, in this essay that reports her new beginning with her husband Brooke in the plateau, this wilder beat, this tougher aesthetic rings stronger than ever, as though it is possible and even necessary in such country. This place does not compromise or welcome compromise, though it houses ambiguities.

It is delicate though, quiet and restrained. We leave the rock and drive to the mouth of another canyon of red rock: Moonflower Canyon. Terry leads me into it, among cottonwoods, up a small stream running in a flat expanse of sand and tumbled mother-rock. We step across the water on stones. The surface of the stream has frozen in places, and the ice holds the patterns of large crystals. Beneath them on the streambed lie fallen leaves of Gambel’s Oak and Cottonwood. We walk up the narrowing canyon, headed for a place where the walls gather around a pool, and the
shallows hold broken red rocks and a clear reflection of the sky. Half way up the Moonflower walk, the soft song of a bird breaks into our conversation, and Terry stops me to point out the singer. ‘Canyon wren,’ she says in a whisper. His song comes down a sweet scale, down the canyon wall to us, followed by the bird himself, a small strong bird with long claws, good for holding to slick rock, and a long beak, good for singing long songs. Canyon wren is quietly clad in brown, spotted in black, white chested. He darts along the rockwall, and as we walk on toward the pool she comes along too, fleet and sure and full of song. While we sit and talk in the throat of the canyon, the wren’s voice never lets up. It is a sweet and insistent sound, rolling like a chorus, stopping and starting up again, a voice singing the alto part. A grace note, embellishing the canyon, decorating our own conversation.

I don’t know whether it struck Terry—I am pretty certain it did—but it struck me that, in that bird’s voice, that particular bird and the way this one followed us up the canyon and included its voice in our conversation, Terry’s friend and mentor Barry Lopez was with us. We talked of him there a little, as it happens. His truthfulness and purity, his earnest and wisdom, his struggle through despair to contribute to a literature of hope. One of his books of stories, Field Notes, is subtitled The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren. In his introduction to that collection, its opening fable, a lost man, seeking a way from his home country across canyons and deserts to the coast, encounters first some ancient pictographs, images, as he reads them, of a people’s love and fear, made on ‘the sienna rock’ of a dry wash; and then in another canyon, as night falls and he stumbles toward hopelessness, he hears the pure, bare, descending call of canyon wren. The sound saves him. It gives him hope. It leads him up the canyon, as our bird did, to water, to silence, to a holy place—and in Lopez’s narrative, it leads a lost man to the headwaters of a river he knows will take him to the ocean. The bird’s phrasing is the sound of hope. It is a testament to the forgiveness of water, the element in which it is easy to lose faith in these arid lands. Yet it is there.

It is not surprising we should have the company of such a bird and its song in this canyon. But it feels, all the same, like a blessing. Its song, so full of water, cold and clear, is a thing of beauty. It is a small and unremarkable coincidence, I suppose, that a mutual friend, a writer we both admire, who has influenced our lives, should have written of a similar moment of benediction, and that we should just now have been mentioning him. Yet this is just the kind of thing that occurs in Terry’s company. It was right that Barry Lopez should have come to both our minds and to our shared words, in such a place as this: his is a gracious and insistent voice, like this bird’s, pure and tenacious and sadly hopeful. On paper and in his person, it has been a powerful influence on Terry Tempest Williams’ writing.

Canyon wren sings in ‘Labor’ too, I notice, in the Kane Creek Canyon we have just left behind. It sang when Terry was there to reimagine birth, to give birth to a new self. It is here again now. Another small coincidence; a humble but inescapable intimation of meaning.
We say a lot sitting there on rocks and growing cold. The place itself, canyon wren aside, keeps a diligent silence. We speak about the time we shared at Harvard, and we begin to talk about this literature, and Terry’s practice of it. While we sit on those old red rocks, while the day pales, I watch half a dozen contrails pass high above in the thin blue altitude. Even this desert place is stitched into the fabric of the twenty-first century in this way. It traffics—the moving world of machine and oil and flight and fume, the world Terry and I move in too, outside moments like this—east and west, north and south through a desert sky that lies reflected here in Moonflower Pond. ‘Notice how the canyon resists the sound, though,’ says Terry. ‘It keeps its own stillness.’ In which the canyon wren keeps up its song and we our talk.

It is getting late now, and we are deep into November. But a light holds in the canyon, soft and rich with muted colour, reflected by rockwall and water, gathered by this place and held for a while. Terry marvels at that light, the way it reaches us indirectly, touches us and touches the rock as gently as birdsong or a benediction. ‘Remember the intelligence of that light, of that moment,’ she says to me two days later. Light is mindful in her world, moments can be wise. It has, for sure, a lightness of touch, the Moonflower Canyon.

It is touch we talk of here, as it happens. ‘I was drained by the Harvard conference,’ says Terry. ‘When I got back home, I came up here, I went up to the Slough, up to the Birthing Rock, to connect with an order larger than myself, larger than the human. To become whole again. This country heals me. Land can do that. It is possible to participate bodily in landscape even though it cares nothing for us in any sense we understand as human. We can be intimate with it. We can love it.’ And perhaps it is song and light and water, I am thinking, that it blesses us with, touches us with in return.

She speaks of her book Desert Quartet in this light. That book is a beautifully composed lyric essay in four short parts—‘Earth,’ ‘Water,’ ‘Fire,’ ‘Air’—in which Williams explores the intimacy and emotion, the desire and fulfilment and replenishment that are possible between a woman and a desert. ‘Earth. Rock. Desert. I am walking barefoot on sandstone, flesh responding to flesh’ (Desert Quartet, 1995, p 3). So she begins the quartet first published, with line drawings and paintings, in 1995; its text is reproduced in Red. It is daring writing, particularly for a Mormon girl. It brings to the page a language usually kept for desire and its expression between human lovers. ‘I stop. The silence that lives in these sacred hallways presses against me. I relax. I surrender. I close my eyes. The arousal of my breath rises in me like music, like love, as the possessive muscles between my legs tighten and release... [T]here is no partition between my body and the body of the Earth’ (ibid, p 10). Earth here is rendered as lover.

What Terry Tempest Williams, lover of rock, says to me there in our moment of stillness, is that places can speak right out of their bodies to our bodies, through eye and foot, through flesh and
muscle. They can touch us and stir us to love, as they always have, as they did for the Anasazi. Our relationships with them can make us whole. Wholeness is our 'unspoken hunger'—the subject and title of her 1994 collection of essays. Saving ourselves and our places on earth depends on our seeking wholeness—with and within landscapes, within our human relationships, with lovers and family and community. Seeking wholeness demands vulnerability of each of us, such as we practise at least bodily in love-making, and more largely in love. We cannot love without vulnerability, without letting ourselves lie open to the lives of others, to change and pleasure and pain, as this place, this pool and canyon, have opened themselves to the weather, to geological transformation and erosion (ibid, p 11). It is to places like this canyon, not just to each other, that we need to lay ourselves open, so that we might feel what it is like to be moved to the heart of our being. This is what she speaks of here; it is what she elaborates boldly also in her essay 'Yellowstone: The Erotics of Place.' She speaks of it in many of the essays in the masterful collection, *An Unspoken Hunger*, in which 'Yellowstone' appears. In 'Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough'—an essay of hope written out of deep despair, Terry tells me a little later—she quotes D H Lawrence: 'In every living thing there is the desire for love, for the relationship of unison with the rest of things ... Blood knowledge. Oh, what a catastrophe for man when he cut himself off from the rhythm of the year, from his unison with the sun and the earth. Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and setting of the sun, and cut off from the magical connection of the solstice and equinox'


The soft sun sets now on cattails in the Scott M Matheson Wetland Preserve—the Moab Slough, preserved for wildness, under that tame name, by the Nature Conservancy in June 1991. (Terry’s essay ‘Winter Solstice,’ from which I have just quoted, grew from her attendance at the dedication ceremony.) It is winter, again, just short of the equinox, and we stand on the edge of this sanctuary, this saved place. The slough, thick in reeds and cattails, dusky and serene at this hour, is a small wetland preserve, which Wallace Stegner, a friend of Terry’s, one of her elders, described at its christening as ‘a geography of hope,’ borrowing his own powerful phrase, with which he concluded his famous ‘Wilderness Letter’ of December 3, 1960 ‘That these delicate lands,’ Stegner went on at the dedication of Moab Slough, ‘have survived the people who exploited this community is a miracle in itself’ (Stegner in ‘Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough,’

*An Unspoken Hunger*, 1994, p 63).64

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64 Stegner was a man, Terry writes in a recently penned introduction to his novel *Crossing to Safety*, whose own hunger for goodness, for beauty and justice, was never satisfied (Stegner, 2002, p xviii).
'My heart finds openings in these wetlands,' Terry Tempest Williams writes in her 'Winter Solstice,' 'particularly in winter. It is quiet and cold' (ibid, p 62). It is cold and quiet here now, at this place where love for land, where a miracle of survival, and a metaphor of hope—a wetland in a worked-over desert—find expression. This is a place where it is possible for a time to be swayed, as Terry is, by the conviction that '[t]he land is love'—a love we have grown too hard of heart to return, for a love for which we hunger.

The cold and the falling light bring on another hunger—for food—to which we surrender. Brooke Williams, Terry's husband, drives into Moab to meet me and to join us for dinner. There, over tortillas, Terry tells me how a woman came to her at a reading and berated her for what she read as auto-eroticism in Desert Quartet. It was an impassioned and angry attack, Terry says. 'I weathered it, and then I told her what I told you in the canyon this afternoon.' She told the woman that the book was really about the possibility of intimacy, the need for love, between people and place. The woman calmed down, and later she wrote to say that, when she spoke to Terry, she had been, she now realised, standing on the edge of the kind of erotic relationship with place—that touching and being touched by the body and soul of places—that Desert Quartet articulates. 'What you said that night changed my life,' the woman wrote. As an academic she had been resisting that plunge into place, for fear of losing objectivity. She had let go now, she told Terry, and thanked her.

Desert Quartet was Terry's own plunge—into her own body, into a new erotic language for landscape. It was a breathtaking surrender to the actual world of a kind at odds with—though not utterly uninfluenced by—her Mormon childhood in Salt Lake City. It marked her coming into her own. It was a small death, a movement of the earth, an awakening to the desert, a finding at once of a new home and new voice.

Terry Tempest Williams is the first child of Diane Dixon Tempest and John Henry Tempest III, and she was born to them in Salt Lake City on September 8, 1955. Three boys followed. The business of her family's enterprise, the Tempest Company, is laying pipe. The male Tempests had been doing that for three generations when Terry was born. Now they are into their fourth, for her brothers carry it on. Tempests have always dug the desert. Terry was born with red sand in her veins, carried in her family blood. She learned the importance of the ground at one's feet; she learned the virtues of digging. I remembered this when I drove into Moab and saw on the outskirts of the town piles of yellow pipe lying ready for burial beside the highway, lines of her biography resting, vulnerable and raw, on the red soil.

Her father knew about weather and geology, worked inside them, and he taught his children how to read landscape, something of its capacity to fool and test and sustain a person. (Williams, in Leuders, 1989, p 43). Her family camped out on weekends in the Stansbury Mountains, by creeks
that ran, like all things, into the Great Salt Lake. Her family’s faith included the tenet that God lives mostly outside, in creation. Family and divinity inhabited the outdoors, and her family’s business worked in soil. It is no wonder that she learned as a girl that ‘[o]ur attachment to land was our attachment to each other’ (Refuge, 1991, p 13). Faith, land, work, family and faith were all aspects of each other in her childhood; and all of them were concerned with land. So it has continued. She married a man called Brooke Williams when she was still nineteen. She was working in a bookshop when he came in and bought her favourite book, a book of birds. Birds and books brought them together. They married soon after. Brooke had a degree in biology, though he was still working then in his family’s construction business. Terry and Brooke lived in Salt Lake City for many years until their shared love of the wild red country, their impatience with the city’s haste, with the way its lights had extinguished the night sky, took them to live in Castle Valley, twenty-five miles outside Moab. This was in the mid 1990s, after the publication of Desert Quartet.

Although that book is a kind of love-child born of her union (reunion, really) with the redrock desert, and although she herself has been reborn as a woman by her plunge into the canyon country, Terry Tempest had learned already from her family, particularly its women, how to love the world as a woman—what that takes, what that costs. One of these women was her mother, whose life and slow, dignified death, Refuge charts (along with Terry’s own slow and painful healing). Another was her grandmother, Kathryn Blackett Tempest, whom she called Mimi. With her she seems to have talked over many things. In her she had a model of dignity and passion. In Mimi’s company, Terry learned a love of the wild, a love of water and of bird. It was Mimi who gave her, for her fifth birthday, a copy of Roger Tory Peterson’s Field Guide to Western Birds—the book Brooke Williams bought from her the day they first met in Sam Weller’s Zion Bookstore (Anderson, 1996, p 976.) ‘The days I loved most were the days at Bear River,’ she writes in Refuge. ‘The bird refuge was a sanctuary for my grandmother and me’ (Refuge, 1991, p 13). Birds and wetland, sanctuary and the gentle attention of women entered her life as ideas and events early, and became sacred. They remain.

Another womanly body that tutored her in mystery, wonder, surrender and grace was the lake. She recalls in Refuge how, as a child, watched over by her mother, she floated in its brine and learned the sky. It was in this way, she writes, that the ‘Great Salt Lake flooded my psyche’ (ibid, p 33). What it taught her was how to beguile and seduce; how to cure oneself and heal. It got inside her skin, she implies, settled its sediments in her psyche’s terrain, patterned her with saltstain and watermark. She floated in it; it floats in her, she tells us. It taught her to be a mystic. Like the lake and the sky above it, Terry Tempest Williams uses a sensuous language that speaks to the body, where the mind and emotions dwell. She moves us, as the lake moved here, to faith and love. Mind follows, if it will.
At the University of Utah, Williams majored in English and minored in biology. She tells me that she approached the English department to see if they might let her do ‘environmental English’ and the biology department to see if they might let her do ‘literary biology,’ and they both said no. Though she went to work later in the Utah Museum of Natural History, and though her writing is grounded in sound natural history, she has continued to major in narrative, in story. If she is, as she says, ‘a naturalist first and a writer second,’ this is because ‘the landscape came before the words’ (Leuders, 1989, p 41). But they were always wedded, it seems—words and the world. Her masters thesis, in which storytelling prevailed over traditional scholarship, and mystical experience is described as natural phenomenon, caused consternation at the University of Utah. Drawing on her time teaching among Navajo children at Montezuma Creek, Utah, and the wider Navajoland, and ‘exploring narrative in Navajo culture’ (Anderson, 1996, p 976), her thesis was at first rejected by the university; then accepted for publication by Scribners, and then accepted by the university as a work of scholarship. She was, from the beginning, a storyteller—or a storytelling naturalist of the spiritual-physical world. And her dissertation became *Pieces of White Shell* (1984).

It is clear in this book how the writings of Gregory Bateson and Barry Lopez, in particular, influenced her thinking about story, land and culture. These men and other thinkers and teachers helped her see what the land and its first human keepers would show her. The Navajo, with whom she worked, taught her by their lives and stories that there is a way of living with land—and with each other in land—that proceeds by story. And it is the land that is the primary, the primal storyteller. From it ‘stories come to us and sing the mysteries which surround us’ (*Pieces of White Shell*, 1984, p 137). It is for men and women to listen, and then speak or sing what the land lets them know. Story as a way of life, as a way of knowing and passing on truth, begins with listening. ‘Storytelling,’ she writes, though it may challenge modern notions of what is factual, what really occurs, ‘awakens us to that which is real’ (*Pieces of White Shell*, 1984, p 134). Story is a way of apprehending nature as well as a way of speaking of it.

*Pieces of White Shell* received praise from Western writers, critics and readers. It also won her the 1984 Southwest Book Award for nonfiction. Slightly before *Pieces* came her book *The Secret Language of Snow*, written with her former teacher at the Teton Science School in Jackson Hole, Wyoming—one of a number of mentors she speaks of, Ted Major. It is an ecology, in free verse and story, of winter in Alaska. Just after *White Shell* came her children’s book *Between Cattails*, which narrates in free verse form the ecology of a wetland. It draws on her days with Mimi at the Bear River refuge. And it invites children to enter into the life of a marsh, the home of the birds and cattails, to step into the marsh she describes in their minds, and bodily, into an actual marsh of their acquaintance, and let it speak.
In *Coyote's Canyon* (1989), Tempest Williams took the next natural step after *Pieces of White Shell* and the other books that appeared around it: she writes her own myths, drawn from Utah redrock landscapes. She becomes the storyteller, the mythmaker, not just the teller of other people's myths. Stories, though they come from where we are, tell us who we are, while also relating us to the land and relating us and the land to our listeners. This is one of the themes Williams works through in *White Shell*. Now, in *Coyote's Canyon*, a collaboration with the photographer John Telford, she lays herself open to the country and writes the myths that arise to her, through her, of herself, and of all of us. 'The images and stories that follow come from Coyote's Canyon,' she writes. They are stories that remind us that 'beauty is not found in the excessive but in what is lean and spare and subtle' (*Coyote's Canyon*, 1989, p. 19). There is a fable about a woman like herself and a truck full of Navajo children and a mountain lion. There is one about a woman who lets herself, against her fears of what her family will think, wallow in the wet red clay of a wash; one about a man who writes poems and buries them in the Utah sand; another about the return of a mythic flute player, Kokopelli, to earth; one about a pilgrimage to an Anasazi cliff house; one, the centrepiece in some ways, in which a woman dances alone in the desert; and a finale in which a man and a woman make a spiral of coloured stones in the floodplain of a desert river, dance and sleep and flirt and enact stories of creation, and then leap into the river and float 'like a wish downriver.'

These fables have something of the naive wisdom, the power and polish of Lopez's stories in *River Notes*. They are myths, celebrations of desert life, of human life at peace with all other life, of the love one woman bears a place. The stories feel like blessings. Quiet, unremarkable magic happens in them, modest revelations occur. Nothing is explained. To call them fiction is to miss the point. These are stories in an ancient tradition. They are true in the way that mythology is true. They sing and they point to truths encountered in the land. Perhaps they are lyric essays, too—not fabricated but imagined out of actual encounters had by or related to the anonymous teller.65 They cleave to the real world, and they sing.

The stories are gentle and assured. When she wrote them, Tempest Williams was grieving hard for her mother, who had died in 1987 after being first diagnosed with ovarian cancer in the spring of 1983. In that context, the poise and peacefulness of Williams' stories are remarkable. But Williams' search for meaning and hope after that loss, and the loss soon after of both her grandmothers, gave birth in 1991 to a larger and more remarkable work, her great book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place.*

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[65] I have mentioned lyric essays in the introduction. I have more to say about them in 'The valley of the Wind' and 'The real world.'
Refuge embodies all the ideas that Terry Tempest Williams had been rehearsing in her earlier books: that place is identity; that attachment to land is the same thing as attachment to family; that what we do to land we do to ourselves; that what happens in our human lives happens also in the land; that consolation—the knowledge that we are eternal and go on and on, remade by death, healed by sorrow—is found in the places in which we find our stories of home. The book is brilliantly conceived and woven together with great skill. It is a narrative at once of a mother's death and a family's coping; a daughter's search for healing; the steady rise of the Great Salt Lake, its menace and its challenge to the authority of a city; the slow inundation of the Bear River Bird Sanctuary, the flight of its occupants and the refuge's resurrection as the waters fall back. Each chapter is named for a bird of the sanctuary. Each chapter marks the height of the Great Salt Lakes. Birds frame the story; the lake's reach choreographs its narrative. The survival of the bird refuge, the persistence of the birds, surrounds, echoes and transcends the tragedy of a mother's death. And the lake rises and falls, rises and falls again, telling its own story—of change and eternity—while a mother sickens and recovers, sickens more deeply, finds peace and dies. Family and land are one. Our stories are also the land's.

Refuge grounds a family tragedy, an ecological morality tale and a memoir of loss and healing in the natural history those narratives share in. Even a mother's death from cancer has its place in the story of the living world. It forms part of a larger story of birth and rebirth. Sadness and loss teach us what we love; they may even teach us how to love—generously, not fearfully; on and on in the face of everything. 'Grief dares us to love once more,' she writes (Refuge, 1991, p 352). In the book's final chapter, Terry Tempest Williams floats on the Great Salt Lake with Brooke. 'There is no place on earth I would rather be,' she writes. They float and you sense peace surround them and hold. 'My basin of tears. My refuge,' the book concludes. Nature is home. It supports grief. It offers refuge (ibid, pp 279–80).

Her mother's dying is as natural as the rise and fall of the lake and is subsumed by it. But, she discovers, in another sense, the one contained in her subtitle, that Diane Tempest's cancer is distinctly unnatural. In a powerful epilogue, 'The clan of one-breasted women,' Williams writes of her discovery that she and her mother witnessed the explosion, one day before her second birthday in 1957, of one of the many nuclear warheads tested in the Nevada desert in the fifties and sixties. Her father tells her that they were driving home from California early one morning when it happened. Her father's revelation is a white flash to his daughter, as galvanising as the one she witnessed with him in the desert that distant morning. Her discovery transforms her from a teller of stories to an activist, though she never stops being the former. She is engaged in a struggle; but she continues to engage us in story. The epilogue and the book finish with a description of her incursion into the Nevada test with a group of Utah women, and their arrest.
But poetics of place and politics come together in her last sentence. The women are dropped off short of the town of Tonopah, in the desert, and told they should walk home from there. The officials mean it as a humiliation. 'What they didn't realize was that we were home, soul-centered and strong, women who recognized the sweet smell of sage as fuel for our spirits' (ibid, p 290).

Refuge attracted widespread critical acclaim and drew a national audience. It won her the Lannan Foundation Award in 1993. Since its publication, Terry has found herself in demand as a speaker and writer. Her personal erotics, her drama and grace, the personal power and authority of experience that speak through her books have made her now, as I have commented, the most widely known and deeply loved of all contemporary nature writers. Not surprisingly she has drawn the fiercest love from women, young women in particular. In some of her writing now she speaks directly to women, arguing for a special role that is possible for them as beings who bleed, who give birth, who nurture and defend their young. 'As women connected to the earth,' she writes in 'Undressing the Bear,' 'we are nurturing and we are fierce, we are wicked and we are sublime ... We are the mothers of first words. These words grow. They are our children. They are our stories and our poems' (An Unspoken Hunger, 1994, p 59).

These are bold and poetic words. Terry's politics have been feminine since they emerged out of her upbringing and more directly out of mother's cancer; and they have been personal and writerly. She shows in her bearing, her behaviour and her prose how a fierce and vulnerable relationship with the world is possible; how it might be embodied and bodied forth in story. And story can be at once lyric and political. 'Labor' is a good example.

Since her mother's death and her own political awakening—though the Great Salt Lake entranced her in childhood, buoyed her imagination and bore her grief—Terry has found the redrock deserts a more natural home for her politico-erotics of place, as they were, indeed, the ground of her early writing, the geography in which she learned to tell stories, learned who she was and what the land wanted of her. That is where, in the red desert, she has gone to live now.

Terry was working at her latest book Red when I was with her. A collection of new and old pieces, all set within the redrock country, the book is, she writes, 'a gesture and a bow to my homeland' (Red, 2001, p 19). It is an enactment of both defiance and gratitude—a defence of this place (and all places) and a love song to it. She speaks in it for a 'bedrock democracy.' 'Each of us,' she writes, 'belongs to a particular landscape, one that informs who we are, a place that carries our history, our dreams, holds us to a moral line of behavior that transcends thought. And in each of these places, home work is required, a participation in public life to make certain all is not destroyed under the banner of progress ....' (ibid, p 19).
Her politics of place still takes root in poetics of place. She writes, ‘I want to speak the language of the grasses, rooted yet soft and supple in the presence of wind before a storm. I want to write in the form of migrating geese like an arrow pointing south toward a direction of safety. I want to keep my words wild so that even if the land and everything we hold dear is destroyed ..., there is a record of beauty and passionate participation by those who saw what was coming’ (ibid, p 19).

Powerful evocative language, which expresses a desire, a hunger—'I want,' I want,' I want'—for belonging and for a language lively and beautiful enough for expressing land, worthy of it; like it in wildness and form; good enough to record not only land but human participation in its life and in its defence. Each of us belongs to a particular landscape, she writes. This is a firm conviction. That place shapes us. Perhaps it is also possible to speak as that place does, for its sake and for the sake of its protection. She does not say just how this belonging, this shaping, this learning the vernacular might happen. It is a matter of practice, in the spiritual sense; it is a matter of love and losing oneself; it is a matter of dedication of one’s life to a place as though it were one’s lover, one’s husband, one’s family, one’s community—all her writing so far tells us that this is how the marriage to landscape and the remaking of oneself to serve it may happen.

When I was with her, I mentioned a passion of mine to redraw Australia’s state lines to conform with meaningful geographies—rather than the current colonial carve ups, conceived and named without a pinch of poetry. I mentioned that it is surprising how often such bioregional units might coincide with the ancient kingdoms of the Indigenous Australians. If this could happen, I found myself saying, three things of merit might possibly flow: governance would take its logic from local ecologies, rather than working at odds with them; new names for places, drawn from localities not administrative units, might stir, through their poetics, some passion, waken hunger for deeper local belonging; and reconciliation between latecomers and first peoples might take a leap forward, because ancient belonging, sensibly attuned to landscape, would be remembered and continued. Okay, I was being idealistic. But I can see now, since she had her head full of her own ideas of bedrock democracy, why Terry found the idea so exciting.

I imagine Terry sees her home landscape, in whose wild speech she longs to write, as the desert country of the southwest. But if a new era of bedrock democracy were to dawn, I suspect a line on its electoral map would run down about the longitude of the Wasatch Mountains, making her choose between the two geographical provinces from which she comes, in which her stories lie scattered. In which one would she do her home work? The tongue of which place would she adopt and practise in her prose? In Red, it is the Colorado Plateau, the redrock desert she now chooses. It is the source of her singing, the ground of her dwelling, the spring of her thinking, the subject of her loving advocacy. In ‘Changing Constellations,’ Terry describes how her writing soul had faded and diminished like the night sky back in Salt Lake City and how, without meaning to, she had come back to the desert and found herself breathing, seeing, and writing again. She asks herself at the end of that essay whether she is running from the city and from her past, or
whether she is ‘returning to the place where my animal body resides’ (ibid, p 123). But she knows that this is the place—the red plateau. In other essays within the collection it is clear that she knows she has brought her body back to where it belongs. If one is blessed with such a chance, and with the means to pursue it, one chooses the place, as she and Brooke have chosen the house in Castle Valley, where one’s body and spirit are touched and nourished.

But the fact that she would have to choose—unless she lobbied successfully for a confederacy of the arid southwest—between past and present places reveals a line of fault in the bedrock of her life, in the rock on which many of us live: we travel back and forth; we know a number of home places. And the time comes, Terry would say, for all of us to choose one. That is the point: we are called to choose a place on earth, even if our heart breaks. Or we let ourselves be chosen. It is not such a simple thing to know the place and the language of home. But we would have to come down somewhere in particular—this is her point—in a new kind of democracy based on home. Even though there may be many, or in her case two contiguous, landscapes that speak in us, for which we in turn would love to speak, each of us, including herself, would have us choose one. It has been our failure to be particular and intimate somewhere that has led us to forget the earth everywhere and live on it indiscriminately. When we do choose just one place to dwell in and speak for, though, there will be many places inside us, shaping thought and speech.

I have vaulted over a book of Terry’s just out when I was with her: Leap. Leap (2000) is a book impossible to categorise, in much the same way Refuge was—but more so. It travels deep in her inscape, her spiritual life, and it moves slowly through the landscape of Heironymus Bosch’s painting The Garden of Delights, which hangs in the Prado in Madrid. It charts her attempt to reconcile her Mormon faith with an aesthetic philosophy she discovers through this canvas—a way of seeing and being that values personal freedom and sensual depth; that finds divinity in the living world; that holds sacred art that honours any or all the works of creation, work that is itself both beautiful and truthful regardless of the culture and faith it springs from. A painting—and a book too—may be a prayer, she concludes, though her family’s faith tells her that that may not be. The assured, though grieving Terry Tempest Williams of Refuge, and the sexy, passionate and outspoken Terry Tempest Williams of the redrock essays get lost in this book, though it is earnest and often lyrical and courageous. A voice of humility and bewilderment is apt, since this is a spiritual quest, conducted largely in her head. ‘Let these pages be my interrogation of faith,’ she writes (Leap, 2000, p 5). She has moved on from the City of Latter-Day Saints, she writes at the start, a city whose mountains were ‘hollowed to house the genealogy of my people, Mormons’ (ibid, p 5). ‘I have moved. I have moved because of a painting’ (ibid). And at the end she has arrived at a new home, in a landscape ‘where more is exposed than hidden ... where the wind creates
windows, windows that become larger and larger through time until they turn into arches one can walk through' (ibid, p 266).

*Leap*, then, is the book that describes her leap from the basin to the plateau, from the salt lake to the red river, from the faith of her fathers to the faith of the earth. It is not clear where her Mormon spirituality is left, though it is clear some of it persists: the part of it, I suppose, that holds the desert sacred; the part that cannot be separated from the soil in which it found home. If the writing feels sometimes thin, it may be because that landscape is not present in the book as much as landscape is present in all her others. It was important to her, though, to spend time in the country of her mind. If the book seems fuller of sky than it is of earth that may be because in it she is leaping—she is, for its duration, airborne between one home and another. Where she lands is the redrock desert.

Terry looks at *Desert Quartet* as the book that allowed her to write *Leap*. It began her exploration of the erotic. 'The erotic and the spiritual,' she says to me, 'may well be one.' Both require our presence, our animated bodies in contact with what we love. I turn over her words in the silence she lets fall after them. We need to be vulnerably present with a lover and a loved land, with anything we love; intimate and reverent. Our body's task is to make a prayer—in sex, in words, in care, in paint—of its observance of the beloved.

We are having this conversation on the pink sand banks of the Colorado, where we sit a while on my second afternoon in Moab. The river rolls past green and blue and slow; and the sand is patterned with a frantic text made by the feet of birds—the three long prongs of the Great Blue Heron, the flatter marks of migrating geese, and the delicate arches of deer. Our feet have made stories too, among them; we sank quite deeply in the fine-grained mud of the river's floodplain. The day is still, but the river keeps on moving, cutting the country deeper. 'Writing is a spiritual practice,' she says to me there. As in intimacy with another person, we do it best when, with the best of our self, we seek to know the essence of the other, to honour the actual thing, the form, the being they are. In art, our production—a canvas or a text—should not aim to replicate the thing we study, but to honour it; as we love the body of the other in love but do not copy it in our honouring.

Later, in my truck, driving to Moab for dinner, she expands on this. She reminds me of the story she tells in *Refuge* about the Shoshone moccasins crafted for the feet of the dead (*Refuge*, 1991, p 234). The boot, she says, is beautiful because it is made in honour of the body; it is made, indeed, so that it might serve the foot of the dead one, that it might be fit to hold it—just that one beloved person's foot. It is holy because it brings to mind the foot itself, and the loved one whose foot it was. It reminds us of the foot by making a space that serves and might house the foot, but
does not. The thing it honours is not there, nor any replica of it. That, she says, is what the best art attempts. Not to replicate the landscape (or the body of the loved one, the reality of a moment or a life), but to bring it to mind, and in the process honour it by the care taken in the work’s production, the aptness of its shape and ornament: the beads sewn on the soles of the moccasin celebrate the life and remind us that these boots are not made for walking but for recalling a life once lived and now carried on in death (ibid, p 234).

I think about this as we drive by the river in the pitch dark. Above, the black sky is beaded with stars. The boot makes a space before our eyes. A text makes a space, I am thinking, in our imagination through its sounds and the images it points to, through its story’s arc and weave and form. In text, the work will be good, it will be truthful—and, in Terry’s conception, holy—if it is adequate to shape a space in the reader’s mind fit to house and hold the place or person the writer had in mind—not the actual place, of course, but its spirit, its genius, its essence. And it does not matter that the reader has not felt the place. They will be moved by the writing, as Terry in Refuge is moved by the burial moccasin, if they can discern in its craft that it is made to honour and house the beloved.

To speak in the language of her beloved place would be to write about it in a way that honours its truth and suggests its form, not by replicating the landscape in word pictures, but by allowing it to rise in the mind of the reader. The sense is, for Terry, I think, that the piece of art, the writing, say, must seem to a reader to come close to the thing itself. That is, it must seem to have been made out of intimacy (in the author’s life experience) with the place: to have touched it, in other words; and to allow the reader to touch and be touched by the place so suggested by the work.

This is what stories are for—the ones you tell out of the things the earth suggests to you. The land will tell you things about itself and about you—you, after all, are part of the land if you are intimately present in a place. Whatever it tells you, even if it is nothing so exact as an idea, your task as a writer is to honour the source. These are my words for Terry’s thought, and they come from long reflection on what she said by the river and in the cabin of the truck. This is what, I think, she has come to understand about stories. It is one of the things she knows about them, anyway. The better they resound with that one place on earth, the more powerfully they may also protest and celebrate and warn. All those things are the work of telling the truth about beloved places and their people.

Up in the Snake River valley, just a week later, I stand and study the fresh, deep tracks of a bear in snow. They are only minutes old. It is very late for a bear still to be awake and about. Winter has arrived, and the bear should be asleep. I have been standing with a friend of Terry’s, the poet Lyn Dalebout, listening in a sharply cold air to the sound of ice forming on Jenny Lake, its song like
that of whales heard underwater—otherworldly, weirdly beautiful, intelligent. As we stood there, a truck approached, its tires crunching over ice and snow. A young woman leaned out to tell us they had just surprised a bear on the road around the corner, and to be careful. We thanked them, and then we drove to see if we could see the bear.

All we find around the corner are tracks leading down among lodgepoles to the icy road. We can’t make out which way she’s gone—she or he, we don’t know which. I stand in the pearl-grey light and study the footholes in the snow piled deep by the roadside, hoping we see the bear—before the bear sees us. Apart from the soft song of the ice, which continues from the lake, the evening is scraped clean of sound. We can hear no sound of bear, though she must be close. There I stand, within range of attack, arrested by the beauty of these tracks. These marks in snow, I am thinking, bear testimony, by their shape and form, to this animal. They tell a pretty fresh tale. The shape they make in the snow—the space pooled now with shadow, and still warm with her—suggests the body, the paws, that made it. They witness a bear—a bear we missed but who probably watches us now—while in no sense representing her. They are not a likeness of her, but they honour and evoke her precisely because they are not a simulacrum. They point at what they do not contain. They leave the bear whole. These tracks make an accidental adequation of a hungry bear; and they are as sparsely and graciously composed as the best prose or poem. I aspire to that kind of clarity.

It was, no doubt, madness to stand thinking these thoughts so close to a live bear, a hungry one at that. I blame Terry. Her meditation on an Indian moccasin has got me thinking. Lyn hauls me back to her car, and we make off back to Moose.

Living in an eroded landscape has fashioned inside Terry Tempest Williams a thought about the way that a mind shapes a piece of prose, and why the finished sentence, if it’s good, seems to imply so much more life and poetry than it appears to contain. Her notion is an aesthetic of exacting restraint, such as the redrock desert knows; an aesthetic of erosion. Just as the shapes in rock that ornament and articulate the desert—Castle Rock, for instance, the thin minaret rising from sage plains upon which her study window opens—take whatever form they take because of the editorial work of weather, so the good sentences or lines of poetry a writer is left with in a finished work, Terry says to me, are what is left of the imagined landscape of thought and image and sound that settled and built up in the basin of the writer’s mind—they are what is left of that possible world of text once the wind of consciousness, of discernment, of spirit, has gone to work and carried most of the original terrain of thought and imagination away. The finished piece of writing—the work—is what the ‘erosional mind’ leaves intact. It speaks for all the rest of the country, formed from the stuff of our whole life, deposited in that great lake, imagination, formed into a large
terrain, uplifted in hope and swept away by the creative/destructive force that operates in the mind with the same will and power as weather upon land. This may be why, I think, works of great beauty make us weep. They always speak of loss. They are what remains.

Here in the canyons of her home, I am wondering where Terry Tempest Williams' heart lies. Where are her stories spoken? Is her story written in sage, in redrock, in swift (though dammed and diminished) river, in dissected plateau, in Great Salt Lake? In the blood of which place, mixed with her own, does she write? For she comes from two countries, not one. These provinces border each other in America's west—the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau; a sagebrush desert of basin and range, and a high red sandstone plateau deeply dissected by the Colorado and its tributaries. Though they border each other, they are distinct. She has roamed over both terrains in her life and work and writing. In the one she was born; in the other she now lives. Which of them speaks in her writing; in the likeness of which of them are here sentences formed?

Williams has, in her writing, identified fiercely with both places before falling finally for the red plateau. 'I belong to the Great Basin,' she writes at the start of *Pieces of White Shell* (p 1), but in that book she journeys through the red deserts of the plateau, Navajoland. She speaks of her journeys there as journeys out of her homeland—she means both topographically and spiritually, I think. She says in her prologue, 'Sometimes you have to disclaim your country and inhabit another before you can return to your own' (p 2). *White Shell* reports a journey out of the basin into the plateau, and a journey out of Mormon spirituality, out of western epistemology, into indigenous ways of seeing, into Navajo stories of place and life.

In *White Shell*, Williams' sense of what's possible in nature and in human life is enlarged by the stories the desert told her, and so is her sense of home. Her home includes, by the end of the book, the Navajoland. But, so enriched, in *White Shell* and in *Refuge*, she returns home to the Great Salt Lake. *Refuge* is a book of the basin, of Salt Lake City where her mother dies, where the Mormons have hollowed out the mountains to house their destiny, where the lake's waters are rising, where the bird refuge sinks and, in the end, survives. It is a book of the Great Salt Lake and the deserts to its west. The Great Salt Lake, she realises, is her refuge; it floods her psyche. After her mother's death and before she was finished writing *Refuge*, though, Terry Tempest Williams was expanding her idea of home again to include the plateau. Speaking with writer Robert Finch in 1989, in the conversation moderated by Ed Leiders from which I have already quoted, Williams bows to the neighbouring geographies of basin and plateau, both of them now, when she says where she and her words are from: 'I am here to tell you that I write through my biases of gender, geography, and culture, that I am a woman whose ideas have been shaped by the
Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin, that these ideas are then sorted out through a prism of my culture—and my culture is Mormon,' and articulated in story (Leuders, 1989, p 40).

Williams affirms here her belief that her writing grows from home ground, is shaped by geography. It would be wrong to suggest this amounts to a theory of how her words arrive on the page, and her erotic notions were yet to shape her thinking about writing into the shapelier form it now takes. But, all the same, she chooses her words carefully: her ideas, she says, are 'shaped' by place and 'sorted out' through a prism of culture, a Mormon filter, which stresses family, spirituality, the magical, and is itself deeply grounded in place. Place is there, then, at the beginning and the end of her creative process, as she sees it. 'The earth came before the words,' she said in that conversation. For she cannot separate her way of being a woman, her way of writing and her Mormonism from the ground they stand on. At the heart of the writing process, membranes of culture and gender, and, again, geography filter the rush of story—story that rises from land she knows as home. The story, importantly, washes through her and is flushed with her psychic life.

The particular place shaping and grounding her ideas is no longer just the basin and the Great Salt Lake at its eastern margin. Williams reminds her audience, as she often has in her writing (most recently in 'Changing Constellations' in Red), how Brigham Young came with his Mormons out of the mountains, arrived at a view of the Great Salt Lake and declared, 'This is the place;' and she adds, 'there are those of us who still believe it.' But her home terrain now includes the plateau beside the lake, country of a different quality, a discrete geology, alive with Navajo stories of belonging. Now the plateau speaks her stories of belonging too—as it seems to her it always has. Strikingly, if unconsciously, she put the plateau first even in that dialogue of 1989, two years before Refuge appeared.

In her writing, beginning before Refuge and proceeding steadily since, Terry Tempest Williams has been moving steadily east, out of the basin and into the canyons and arches, the old, eroding sandstones of the Colorado Plateau, until she can say that this is where she is at home, where her spirit is animated—where in a sense she has always lived. She announces her arrival in home in the plateau, as I have noted, at the end of Leap. In many essays within Red she speaks of her new home among the canyons and wonders, as I have mentioned, in 'Changing Constellations,' whether she is not 'returning to the place where my animal body resides' (Red, 2001, p 123). Strikingly in that essay she uses Brigham Young's words—putting them in italics to tell us she knows where they come from and to what they once referred—to describe how she and Brooke felt on finding the home they now live in, in Castle Valley (ibid, p 122).

At the heart of Red lies an essay of the same name, 'Red.' In it, firmly setting herself down within the red plateau, she writes 'I want to learn the language of the desert, to be able to translate this
landscape of red into a language of heat that quickens the heart and gives courage to silence, a silence that is heard' (Red, 2001, p 138). She asks, ‘How do I learn to speak in a language native to where I live?’ (ibid, p 137). She notes that for the people truly indigenous to the Colorado Plateau—Ute, Paiute, Hopi, Zuni, Dine, Hualapai, Havasupai—‘their vocabulary is based on kinship, shared stories, and a long history of inhabiting the desert.’ She goes on, ‘Native people understand language as an articulation of kinship, all manner of relations’ (ibid, pp 136–37).

Language, then, articulates relationships, including especially the relationships at play between those languaging animals, humans, and their human kin; and with their nonhuman kin. And it proceeds according to a pattern akin to the pattern that holds among all the beings within that desert. The geography of the language native to a place is apt for—it fits—the geography of the place. ‘The relationship between language and landscape is a marriage of sound and form, an oral geography, a sensual topography, what draws us to a place and keeps us there. Where we live is at the centre of how we speak’ (ibid, p 136).

But where does she live? Now, she lives in the red desert. Once she did not. It has always touched her life, and perhaps it fits her character and her habits of speech better than that different nearby place she has left behind. But, as she well understands, she is not indigenous as the Diné are indigenous to one place. She travels. She has given her heart to a lake. She gave it to a basin. Now she gives it to a desert. She has been native to lake, basin and plateau; she has entwined her love around them all, over time; and all of them, I think, live in her language. She may have to choose one geography to participate in the politics of place she proposes, but two geographies, at least, have coloured her poetics.

Though Terry and her red diction of desire and passion seem to fit best in the country where I find her, all the places she has been, particularly her desert places, both basin and plateau, have shaped her ideas and her prose. Her writing charts a course of growth and learning. She has a gift for intimacy, sudden and deep and long-remembered. The more she gives herself to a new beloved terrain—carrying with her, though, the memory and love-scars of the old—the more they change her so that she becomes in the end more the woman she always was, deep down.

Williams’ nature is porous, curious, mystical. She surrenders to places, has done so all her life, and so she is shaped by them. It is impossible, therefore, to separate her development as a writer from her movement from one terrain to another within the arid west. So Terry Tempest Williams’ prose grows more like the red plateau as her life and work proceed; and that landscape, which awakened her storytelling gift in the first place in Pieces of White Shell, stands as a metaphor for the character of her prose and her own nature—erotic, fierce, tender, angular, charged with life and death, erosional. But those traits were present all her life and in all her work, which was cradled in the basin.
The qualities that are native to her person and her prose seem to belong better in a valley of the Colorado—they are more explicable in the redrock desert—than in the Great Basin. The depth and colour, the range and daring of the books she has written after Refuge—An Unspoken Hunger, Leap and Red—may be encouraged and shaped by her dwelling in the gaping, blood-coloured, romantic landscape of the plateau. But these desert notes and tones are filtered also by the temper of the basin that persists within her, and by her Mormon faith, which tautens steadily, one feels, toward a break. Her faith, you feel, holds an unbearable tension now within it, like the terrain of basin and range itself.

Terry Tempest Williams remains a trickster and seductress, like the Great Salt Lake; her writing itself is still a kind of ‘dreamscape,’ like the basin, lean and miraged, haunted by distance (Leuders, 1989, p. 57). But her writing has grown denser, blunter, less pastel, more deeply toned in her last few books, books born and composed mostly in the plateau.

Though Terry has shifted her ground from the Great Basin to the Colorado Plateau, both geographies coexist in her work—although always the place she sets her feet down now lies at the centre of her speech. Both terrains share the shaping of her work because both belong to the one climatic zone, and it is dry. She finds her stories, she finds healing and meaning, in dry places. Aridity is the bed of her imagination. ‘Aridity, and aridity alone,’ writes Wallace Stegner, ‘makes the various Wests one’ (Stegner, ‘Living Dry,’ Marking the Sparrow’s Fall, 1998, p. 216). The country in the rain shadow of the Sierras, the land of little rain, where most of what falls from the sky is light and legend—this dry place teaches her aesthetics, schools her in rhetoric. Aridity is what unifies the neighbouring provinces she inhabits. They are dry lands scattered with miraculous lives of plant and animal, with surreal rockforms, deep colors and great holes in the earth. Space reigns, and in it each thing seems distinct and peculiar.

Both the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau belong to the same weather; they are dry and full of sage. They are full of distinctive animals and plants, all of them gifted at surviving where there is too little water. Each of them by those adaptations to tough country adorn it, decorate its underlying starkness, quicken and animate it. In people, those who survive it, such broken and spare country breeds mysticism, stoicism and deep love—it turns out autodidacts, entrepreneurs, poets and singers. The arid West has shattered many dreams that people brought to it, too, and it has been mistreated very often because those dreams, though akin to it in grandeur, were unsustainable in it, excessive, ill-adapted to it. But those natures responsive to, expressive of, adapted to its forms, to its dryness and intractability, sometimes become its poets. And something of the ‘forms and lights and colors’ (ibid, p. 216) of the dry west, something of its extremes of temperature, of rain and dry, its marriage of scarcity and abundance, its spaciousness and
improbability, find their way into the language—the forms and lights and colours of a life and a writing—of those people it claims. Stegner was one such man and writer. Abbey another. Williams is another yet. And strikingly in her writing, the beat of the place seems matched to a human heartbeat, measured out in text. The arid lands have found in Terry Tempest Williams a woman and a writer ready to listen, to adapt. They have found a sage listener, a storyteller, vulnerable to the magic and mystery as well as the deep facticity of these drylands. And she speaks as they do, for them, for herself, for life as it is lived here.

"The West is a region of extraordinary variety within its abiding unity," writes Stegner in that same essay (ibid, p 213). This is true of the neighbouring provinces of plateau and basin they are two parts of one arid whole, each distinct from the other. Drama in the plateau is express; in the Great Basin it is immanent.

Though the sediments that compose the plateau where Williams now lives are old, the uplift and deep, deep erosion that give it its form are quite new. They happened fast. Drama as well and ancient magic inhabit its canyons and ridges. Terry's spirit—both oracular and dramatic, both restrained and expressive—is well housed, and so is her prose, in such a landscape. She runs like a river through her places, cutting fast and deep, picking up stories like sediments, running red with them, adding their histories to her own. Her essays and stories are deep and sudden, passionate affairs, meant to last forever; they change your life; and then they are over. But they are performed with swift, sure, condensed phrases and clauses, that imply more than they say, like oracles, like this country. Like the plateau, she is the master, the mistress, of compression. Of the sudden dramatic, heartbreaking or breathtaking gesture, in the midst of endless space and light:

Just then, we hear the garage door open. Dad and Brooke are home. A few more breaths ... one last breath—Dad walks into the room. Mother turns to him. Their eyes meet. She smiles. And she goes.

He kneels by her side, takes her hand, and says, 'Diane, finally you are at peace.'

—Refuge, 1991, p 331

In the basin, on the other hand, drama is immanent. It waits to spring. The crust of that country is being stretched by the movement of the plate on which it sits. Tension therefore runs through it, and has thrown up its ranges, pulled down its basins. Occasionally, the tension expresses itself in a tear across the surface, and steadily another part of the sagebrush ocean rises, another sinks. Its skin is thin and it threatens to break open, fracture, change the face of things, lay open its heart. There is power and danger barely hidden. It lives within earth, just below the surface, no matter how plain that surface. The Wasatch Mountains are the most easterly range in the province of
the basin and range. Terry and her family grew up digging into the soil of that country, string
with tension, coiled with life waiting to articulate itself.66

Terry’s prose has always been alive with a quality like that of the basin, too. A book like Pieces of
White Shell has about it the same restrained, deceptive calm; a composed and quiet sedition; a
revolutionary plot still dwelling underground. Its surface is still, but it feels as though it is drawn
thin, as though at any moment it might fracture and give rise to a sudden range. The surface does
occasionally give, in that book; and what arises is a story, some magic, a revelation; and then the
calm of the sage resumes. In her later writing, she lets the country—now mostly the more
voluble plateau—rise in the weird shapes, the daring, edgier phrasing of Leap and the more
recent essays of Red. In these pieces her prose surrenders more to the drama of eternal recreation
she sees written about her now in red—but not completely. But even in the more daring works,
the ones I’ve mentioned and even Desert Quartet, the skin that holds the body of her text remains
taut with a habit of civility and poise, learned in the basin, practised in a Mormon home.

Until Leap (possibly still), her life, like the basin, contained fundamental tensions, and you felt
them in her prose. In her case, they were not tectonic, but they may as well have been. She was,
she once said, a ‘radical soul in a conservative religion’ (in Life, quoted in Anderson, 1996, p 973).
As Lorraine Anderson puts it, ‘She is also a feminist in a patriarchal religion, an environmentalist
in one of the very few American religions that in the 1990s has not embraced ecological values, a
woman who has been arrested for civil disobedience in a religion that holds obedience to civil
authority as an article of faith, a childless woman in a pronatalist religion’ (ibid). She is a
sensualist, an eroticist, in a society that frowns on the body’s desires. All these years she has
harboured these contrary forces, as the Great Basin has harboured its tensions. She made a jump
in the end—and became, if not a range, then a plateau.

In his book Basin and Range, John McPhee travels into the Great Basin with geologist Kenneth
Deffeyes. The two of them in conversation with each other and the Nevada desert give off a
palpable sense that the basin is, beneath its quietness and apparent slumber, alive. ‘The earth is
moving,’ says Deffeyes. ‘The world is splitting open and coming apart... It is live country. This is
the tectonic, active, spreading, mountain-building world’ (McPhee, 1998, pp 45–6). And though its
silence is profound, this country has a powerful rhythm, coagulated in its ups and downs, which
express that ongoing energetic dance of rise–fall–stretch–rise–fall. It goes like this:

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66 I rely for my geology chiefly on John McPhee’s Basin and Range, 1981, reproduced as the first part of his
Basin Fault Range Basin Fault Range A mile of relief between basin and range Stillwater Range Pleasant Valley Tobin Range Jersey Valley Sonoma Range Ondographic rhythms of the Basin and Range.


I am going to have to take their word for it, since I have not yet travelled through it—well, I just cut into its edges on my way from Castle Valley to Salt Lake City. One thing I notice is that just such a rhythm—just such a surge and spread, jump and rise and fall—runs through Tempest Williams’ prose. She could almost have written that passage of McPhee’s. She has written this:

Heat. More heat. My face flushes red. The fire’s hands are circling. I sit inches away from something that tomorrow will not exist. The blue-eyed coals I gaze into will disappear. Ashes. Ashes. Death is the natural conclusion of love.

—’Fire’ Desert Quartet 1995 p 43

This is one example, but I could find thousands more. She has, I think, the rhythm of a highly strung and lively terrain inside her. Even when, nowadays, she sings a landscape—I mean, of course, the Colorado Plateau—whose genius is for lying still, and quite unstressed, surrendering to the work of erosion, this rhythm, though it shifts into something more like the turbidity of flood waters now and then, persists:

Where I live, the open space of desire is red. The desert before me is red is rose is pink is scarlet is magenta is salmon. The colors are swimming in light as it changes constantly, with cloud cover with rain with wind with light, delectable light, delicious light. The palette of erosion is red, is running red water, red river, my own blood flowing downriver; my desire is red.

—’Red’ Raí 2001 p 136

Old lands live on in her, as they do in all of us, particularly in a woman so passionate about family and place. They live on and shape both thought and expression because she is, like all of us, a human animal, a woman; and memory and family tie her to a basin and a lake, even when she finds her home and grounds her work in redrock canyons. For there is no leaving the landscapes of our childhood, even though we may come to belong—where perhaps we have always belonged—to a different terrain. ‘Who we are is where we are and where we have been; and it is whom we have been there with.’

—Timber The Blue Plateau

67 These are my own words, part of the chapter Timber The Blue Plateau.
Over both basin and plateau, those arid realms, the same sky holds, the same weather, more or less, does its thing. And I think Terry works under the influence of that sky. Her writing is not dense. It is light. It darts and suggests flight. It alights here and offers a quick song; flies and finds another perch, and sings again. It is like birdsong. Birds unify Refuge. ‘I am a woman with wings,’ she writes in that book (Refuge, 1991, p 273); ‘[t]he birds and I share a natural history’ (ibid, p 21). She flies, as a feather, in Pieces of White Shell. She leaps like an angel in Leap, a book of airiness, of spirit and mind. Though her newer work—particularly the new pieces in Red like ‘Labor’—dwell on ground and feels rockier, still it has a lightness, a quickness that is her character and is the character of the air out there. Even on ground, she dwells and moves and sings like a bird, like a canyon wren.

Terry is given to rock and influenced by sky. She also demonstrates in life and prose an affinity for water. In the desert, water is a god. It is the magic—or some of it. Everything depends upon it, scarce and ephemeral though it is. A woman so native to arid ground knows this, and loves wetlands, lakes and rivers, where they run. The waters she has known and loved—Bear River, the Great Salt Lake, Moab Slough—have taught her about flow and buoyancy, about nurture and stillness. She has these things in her nature too, but she found them spoken in water, and when she writes, she seems to recall the wisdom water knows, the importance of simplicity and transparency, for example.

You will find these qualities in her prose. Sometimes it lies easy, goes slow—not only when she writes of lake and river. It is always transparent, open if not easy to get to the bottom of, like water. Open Pieces of White Shell at any page, and you will find this intelligent languor. It is there in the stories of Coyote’s Canyon. You will hear it in the melancholy of ‘Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough.’ Sometimes waters rage in the desert too, and her words storm with them—in the flood sequence in ‘Labor,’ for instance and in ‘Undressing the Bear.’ But I think you will always hear the water in Terry’s words. They engulf or they buoy you; they carry you along; they embrace you. Even when she rages or grieves, she finds a soft diction—water in the desert, lake or river or rain. Her words on the page, like her voice in the canyon, come out sweet and smooth.

Listen to this from a new essay ‘River Music,’ which puts me in mind of our afternoon on the same river bend, November 28, 2000 (though the water that day of winter ran green):

May 28, 2000—a relatively uneventful day. A few herons fly by, a few mergansers. Two rafts float through the redrock corridor. I wave. They wave back. One man is playing a harmonica, the oars resting on his lap as he coasts through flat water.

Sweet echoes continue to reach me.
I sit on the fine pink sand, still damp from high water days, and watch the river flow, the clouds shift, and the colors of the cliff deepen from orange to red to maroon.

—'River Music,' Rak, 2001, pp 148–49

I have the advantage of you here. I have heard Terry sound this out. She wrote this piece for a CD cut by her friend in the Moab music shop. It is the first track on a CD of local musicians singing music songs. The cd was made to raise money for the ongoing campaign to save and restore the much put upon Colorado. Music again put in service of a local cause: poetics as a vehicle for a politics of place, a redrock democracy. Terry bought a copy from Greg and gave it to me. I played it as I drove among the arches that day and all the way out of Utah. I have seen the river run blue, and I have heard it read. I have heard it read. But a water quality, sometimes red, sometimes blue, sometimes a torrent, sometimes a pond, runs through much of Terry Tempest Williams’ prose. You will hear it if you listen. It is in her voice. You will know that, if you have heard her; but it is there on the page.

Terry Tempest Williams has drawn her voice from the desert. Her voice is not the desert, but it suggests the desert. It runs through it, miraculously, like grace, like a river. It honours this dry country and touches us with it because her voice’s house—her body—leans into her places, past and present, basin and plateau, lake and river, range and canyon, and is touched by them. The arid lands are places where the elements are starkly present—earth, water, fire, air. Terry’s prose is an aptly elemental expression of the arid zones she loves. She writes in many colours but most of all in red. It is the colour of many things, including passion, heart’s blood, slickrock, erosion, birth, river, bird, coyote and sunset.

Four o’clock. This is the place. I am sitting in Terry and Brooke’s living room in Castle Valley, looking north through wide windows, over their patio and across grey-green sagebrush to Castle Rock, a monument on a mesa. Castle Rock is red, the colour of rust: a tall, strong, sharp-edged spire on top of a pyramid of sandstone atop a mesa. Its colour fades as I watch it in this falling light, in this rising cold. But it seems to glow as though it held the memory and gentle warmth of the day longer than it should against the night. Dense green Utah junipers hold to the slopes and valley floor. There is Mormon Tea and Russian olive and rabbitbrush up in the wash. Terry pointed them out to me earlier when we walked with her dog Rio among the slickrock and sand.

This is not a place of trees. The road into the cluster of widely spaced houses that is Castle Valley crosses a dry creek bed, and that crossing is held by the most massive cottonwood I have ever seen. I stopped beside it as I drove in this morning, and marvelled. Right now, I can’t see that anyway. Mostly I look out on rock, rockfall from ages of slip; and soft red earth.
I am looking up to the ridge where, in the midday we sat in cold sand, making figures and lines in the earth and talking, bathed in light and looking down into the next valley. And night is coming on.

Up on the same mesa where Castle Rock sits, west of it, run the Nuns and the Priest—spires made by long erosion. The redrock erodes to sharp edges. It tells tales, always has. Like these: a castle; some nuns, a priest. West of them, rises the Adobe Mesa, solid, an undecorated massif of more red stone. Lower than the storied ridge that separates this valley from the next, a low spine of stone, populated with juniper runs east. It looks like the back of a crocodile.

East of the house the La Sal Mountains rise, their northwest flanks covered in snow and ponderosas. These are mountains formed by volcanic activity, not part of the long geological story of the sandstone, and very much newer. In front of them, only a mile from the house Round Mountain sweeps up to its low peak, like a teepee, from the flat land. It looks like a holy mountain, a shrine. A walk around its base is a meditation, says Terry. Up in its basalt crevasses hawks and eagles nest. Behind me, so to the south, running east-west, the other side of Castle Valley is a long straight line of flat-topped mesa, coming to earth in layers of red, whose gently undulating storeys the snow spells out. It skirts are spotted with green.

And here, in these sage and grass fields, within a mythical, astonishing landscape, sits this house. It is built from a Frank Lloyd Wright design. Walls of windows facing east and north and south carry you outside all the time, and carry the mesas in. I too have come inside, just now, because it is growing cold out, and the house is warm.

Around the house on two sides runs a stone rubble wall colonised by sage. These, Terry has told me, are there to keep the floodwaters out. Unlikely as it seems this dry winter’s night, the house is set down in a floodplain. If you were not careful you might get swept away.

Four-twenty-five now, and Round Mountain and the mountains behind have fallen into greyness, are surrendering their colour. But Castle Rock still holds its warmth and light. While I have been here making notes on my laptop, Terry has been working out in her study. She comes in now and flicks a switch. ‘Look at you sitting here in the dark,’ she says. Then, urgently she adds, ‘Can you smell gas?’ I hadn’t noticed, until then. I guess it crept up on me. But she smells it straight off, and now I smell it too. She is alarmed. She switches off the light and suggests I turn off the computer. And she calls her father. ‘He’s been laying gas pipe all his life,’ she says. ‘He’ll know what we should do here.’ Her father, John Tempest, suggests we turn everything off and get ourselves outside. So we do. ‘My father said I might have blown us up when I turned that switch on,’ she says as we sit in the falling light on the patio.
As we sit there with the gas off and the doors wide open, letting the gas out and the landscape in, light plays in the sky. The sun has gone behind the mesas, but just when it goes, the light returns and lifts in the sky, and falls on the rocks all about us. It is reflected out of cloud that looks like river shallows. This is secondary light, muted, luminescent. The clouds turn vermilion; the sky behind the rocks to the north goes from violet and blue to purple. The tip of the tallest of the mountains to the east—the one called Tukuhnikivats, 'the peak that keeps the light the longest,' which I remember from Ed Abbey's Desert Solitaire—turns ultraviolet and then yellow. And still the glow rises and rises and stays and rises again. Terry likened it later to a multiple orgasm, and I'm going to have to defer to her on that.

In this long twilight, this drawn out blessing, Brooke comes running home through the sage fields. 'I startled some deer out there,' he tells us. 'I heard coyote too, and I'm afraid the deer ran from me right toward them, to their death. But what are you guys doing, sitting out here in the cold?'

Terry explains, while I stand out in the drive agog at the light show, glad to be alive to see it. Terry and Brooke decide to forget about cooking the steak for dinner and drinking the red wine. That had been the plan. Brooke will sit with the house and wait for the gas guy to come and check for the leak. But he sends Terry and me into town for dinner. 'I'll come along later,' he says. And he does, but not for some hours, until the danger has passed and the leak is stopped.

Terry is astonished by the light. 'We've never seen it go on so long as that,' she declares as we make for Moab. It was the gas in the house, she reflects that forced us outside to witness this display of sacred time. Inside, profane time held in the dark—'propane time,' she quips. 'And you were the caretaker of the light.'

'Is it possible to make a living by simply watching the light?' Terry asks at the opening of her essay 'Ode to Slowness' (Red, p 141). If it is, this is the place—Castle Valley, a place blessed by light and slow time.

'Perhaps I shall be an arch tomorrow,' Terry writes in Pieces of White Shell (p 30).

Tomorrow—the day, that is, after the erotics of the desert sky—Terry sends me off to walk among arches on my own. I drive north toward the Arches National Park where Ed Abbey spent so much time. The road runs along the line of the Moab fault. To the east the rock layers lie two thousand feet lower than those to the west. After paying my entrance money, I drive up into a landscape scattered with monuments, balancing rocks, windows, petrified dunes, gold-coloured pinnacles—a spectacular ruin of an ancient order of stone. It is poised, this landscape, in its present moment of decline. We catch it just like this, in our time. It is poised between its solid past and
its future fall. It almost seems to hold its breath. Change is written all about this static landscape—written into rock by wind and rain, storm and gravity. Here is the story of the stones, lying all about: plateau becoming mesa; mesa becoming arch; arch on the point of collapsing into rubble; rubble becoming desert floor. It is poised. This is the moment you turn the page between chapters; this is the silence between the notes. And here I am in that moment within a landscape of fragmented narratives, of overlapping timezones.

I park at the head of the trail up to Delicate Arch. I take the path, and I pass no one coming or going. The track wanders by an old settler hut, over a bridge, across soft sand and expanses of naked yellow stone, and I go with it. It cuts through juniper, sage and pinyon pine; it unwinds toward the Delicate Arch. I am there. I climb over the lip of red rock and behold the arch. It is unaccountable, an elegant mystery. It stands like a huge red whale's jaw upon this slickrock, solitary on the edge of a bowl, a thing made by the fiat of winds. I can see right through it, through the eye of god, across a red desert to the snowy La Sals. At the feet of the arch, facing west, is a great elliptical basin of stone, hollowed also by the wind, an arena for spirits, surely. This is a holy place—Terry's word. And a palace of the winds. No winds play today, just an assembled silence, a pool of lost time. In the southwest, monuments and ridges compose a city on the horizon.

The north wind picks up as I make my way back. The day is growing late, and I have another arch to visit yet. Half way back I meet a man and woman in their sixties, walking with a dog toward the arch. 'Is that your wife who passed us just now?' she asks me. 'I'd be very surprised,' I say in reply. 'To the best of my knowledge my wife's back in Sydney.' 'Well, if you get a move on, you might get lucky,' her husband says. 'She was pretty good looking, I thought.' But I catch no one on the trail, and there is no one waiting at the carpark.

What do I make of this? There may have been a woman, of course—perhaps a woman who had been an arch yesterday. Whom did these people see and why did they take her for my wife? Coyote in drag?

I follow my love into the desert. My beloved leads me on, just ahead of me and out of sight. I think of Terry's saying to me the day before: the writing I need to do is 'always just out ahead of me. Just out of reach. I reach for it; I follow it.'

At the head of the trail up to Landscape Arch (the one pictured against a deep summer sky on the cover of my copy of An Unspoken Hunger) I find a coyote. Another one saunters in the middle distance, her mate. A woman is getting close to her to snap a photograph. 'She snarled at my wife when she came out of the toilet,' the woman's husband says to me, when I leave the truck and
walk over. Raven sits on the roof of the pit toilet and caws. Two tricksters and harbingers together. The husband of the woman at whom the coyote snapped points up the trail I am about to walk. 'I'd keep my eyes open, if I were you,' he says. 'A wolf, or maybe it was a coyote, crossed the track half way up there as we were coming back.'

Coyote has a powerful reputation in the redrock country. His name is synonymous with trickery and seduction, with shape-shifting and elusiveness. These are qualities of the landscape itself: 'its chameleon nature,' changing from one moment to the next, tripping you up with a surprise just when you thought you knew it well. 'The trickster quality of the canyons is Coyote's cachet,' writes Terry in Coyote's Canyon (p 19). And Coyote's message is that it is the desert that matters, the desert that goes on, the desert that may teach us what we need to know. Coyote pricks pomposity, fools and disconcerts us; Coyote reveals the desert:

Coyote knows we do not matter. He knows rocks care nothing for those who wander through them; and yet he also knows that those same individuals who care for rocks will find openings—large openings—that become passageways into the unseen world, where music is heard through doves' wings and wisdom is gleaned from the tails of lizards. Coyote is always nearby, but remains hidden.

—Coyote's Canyon, 1989, p 18

I set off through a slot canyon, beyond which a wide flat expanse of red-grey earth, sagebrush and juniper opens out. The light is falling, but the sky is clear, like yesterday. I walk over patches of rock-hard snow. A flicker—black and white and flashed with red—drums out some message on the silver trunk of a juniper. I am thinking about the coyotes behind and the wolves or whatever they are ahead. I look behind to see if I am being followed. Soon I just start seeing this wide and lovely desert woodland, and I am lost in it still when the long lean reach of the Landscape Arch emerges right here beside me out of the thinning light. It has stayed hidden against the rocks behind it until I shift and see a patch of sky beneath its slender arc. There it stretches, poised a moment before its fall. Perhaps it will be a pile of rocks tomorrow, perhaps in a thousand years, or a hundred. It seems to compose a fragile gesture of resignation. I feel an immense deep stillness up here among the weathered bodies of the old Utah junipers and the arch's haunting note above.
I stay a while, and find myself asking the place to remember me, promising to remember it too.
I sense mystery collapsing into sentiment. It is time to leave.

I take up a stick to go back with, remembering the wild dogs. Five minutes later, an animal, slick and grey, all tail it seems in that fast moment, slips from the sage on one side of the path and disappears into sage on the other. My whole body awakens with fright and wonder. I bristle, feel my shoulders rise, my pores open, all my senses kick in. The animal made no sound, and when I pass the place it crossed the path, I can make out no sign of it. As I walk on, I keep turning, sensing it behind me. I am wide awake.
I reach the old juniper where the flicker tapped, but she is gone. I stop and peer ahead into the canyon, trying to make out the shape of waiting coyotes. At my side, a grey-brown animal slips from the sage, and I jump. My heart falters. And I see it. It is a jackrabbit. When my heart is back in its proper place, I find myself laughing and enter the canyon without fear.

But fear, I notice, has woken me to the land. In my fear the whole place quickens. And fables walk; and animals change their shapes, and play their jokes. I am so easily beguiled. This is, after all, the desert.

The coyotes are gone from the carpark, but as I drive away into the glow of the rocks, into a sunset that is turning the shoal of clouds crimson, a coyote comes from the sage toward me. This is another animal, much more golden, and smaller, delicate in her movement. She comes right up to where my car is halted. I wind down the window to let the sunset in and to ask her what she wants. She doesn’t say anything. I’m a little scared to leave the cabin, so we sit there holding each other in fear (I’m fearful anyway), in fascination and desire. She looks gentle and beautiful to me. I want to know what this coyote knows. I’d like to look that good in a desert sunset. I’d like to feel so at home here. I’d like to know what she wants of me. But we are lost to each other, tonight anyway. For some reason it almost breaks my heart to press the pedal down and move away. She stands watching me go.

My beloved? Coyote out of drag? It’s a coyote, Mark, get a grip; complete and entire, utterly herself. That is magic enough. I feel called to stay, but I don’t stay. It is growing dark and cold, and the sky is dying to embers. I am as hungry as she is.

There are people in Moab who knew Ed Abbey well. Terry knew him a little and loved him a lot. *An Unspoken Hunger* includes a eulogy she made for him. In the bookshop, *Back of Beyond*, José Knighton tells stories of walking and camping with Abbey, and of burying him somewhere out here. He gives me a copy of the book he, Knighton, has written about this place, *Coyote’s History of Moab*, and tells me which arches to be sure to find.

I am aware of Abbey as I walk, later, in this landscape he loved; I am aware of his presence here because I have read his stories. His voice and character seem to stay here in just the same way the character of this place seems to live and fool around inside his stories, made out of love for it. He was a trickster and a lover. He was a kind of coyote. Perhaps it was Ed then I met up there among those arches of his.
I talk to Terry this night by phone. I tell her what has happened to me among the arches, and she tells me I have been showered with revelations and desert magic. They sound like blessings to her. She has had a small one of her own this evening. Brooke was out picking sage for her to take with her to Washington DC, where she has to go on Friday to read a Liturgy for the Earth she has written. 'I can crush its leaves between my fingers and remember who I am,' she wrote of sage in Pieces of White Shell. It still smells like home, this desert plant of basin and plateau, of all the arid West. Brooke found sage. He also found in the red sand an arrowhead, made of quartz—an Anasazi arrowhead. The ancient ones have gone now, but these were their hunting grounds once. Their stories lie still in the desert from which they—stories and people—rose. What they have left, in stone and figures on stone, in cliff dwellings, speaks of them and their desires, their belonging here. It is part of the grammar of the West, the language of red—arid, angular and broken, eloquent with loss and departure. We can almost touch these people in the bodies of their work, made with their hands out of desert. Profane time stops, sacred time starts, in that touch, and the memory of their walking in this land becomes another story that deepens our own belonging here.

It deepens Terry's belonging anyway, and it might deepen mine if my being here were not so short and did not end tomorrow, when I head north, up through Salt Lake City and on to Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

On the road, I find myself thinking a lot about magic and revelation. Nothing that happened about me in Terry Tempest Williams' country is beyond explanation, of course. I saw no actual ghosts; I witnessed no authentic miracles. The magic I speak of, the magic Terry writes of, is a kind of experience of qualities in things that surpass and defy our expectations. These are, understood one way, using Terry's own metaphor, the erotics of place. Those sunsets, those coyote encounters, the accompaniment of canyon wren—these are the rare rewards, incidents of grace, that happen now and then when you hold yourself present in the land in the way that Terry does. They are pieces of a story, a story that even seems to include the listener, but a story that went on long before we stumbled by and will go on long after. They are small parts that hint at a whole.

Maybe Terry has schooled me in presence, and I have been blessed in return with a few outbreaks of wildness. Erotic encounters with people, and with places, open up emotional realms—in the other and in ourselves; they reward intimacy with sudden moments of unprecedented sensual experience; they may reveal aspects of ourselves and the other that we have never seen in decades of thinking we knew that person or place.

Stand close, make yourself vulnerable, let go of preconceptions, and unexpected music and light, emotion and coincidence may occur. In life and in prose, Terry Tempest Williams leans toward such wild, erotic, magical moments, and she finds them now and then. She has a gift—in person
and in prose—for intimacy with other people and with places. Perhaps that gift invites marvels and sudden revelations to her. Intimacy demands emotional engagement. It may be that when we bring to an encounter with the land the kind of presence that we bring occasionally to a lover we make ourselves ready for aspects of the land that otherwise are lost on us.

I find myself thinking ahead to the work of James Galvin, whose writing offers up the idea that the real world has a face it mostly turns from us. Occasionally, people who have learned how to pay attention to places, who have stayed and wondered long, are visited by moments in which they realise that the world is not at all what it has always seemed. Magic and mystery may be the rewards for learning to see poetically—like a geologist, a poet, a lover such as Terry Tempest Williams, or a man like Galvin’s Lyle, who has worked a stretch of land for fifty years. My small moments of revelation in Terry’s country may have come from seeing for a while as such a woman sees, of being close to her in her country. In a literal sense, much more goes on inside the life of a coyote or a cloud, than we can begin to imagine; ancient realms are contained within the sediment that composes desert rocks. Everything is not as we come to imagine it through conventional, textbook perspectives. Let go of those—of ‘society’s oughts and shoulds,’ as she puts it in Coyote’s Canyon (p 16)—and we may be allowed just now and then to walk through that window or arch into a moment of the inner nature, the musical heart, of a place.

Williams’ writing dwells often on the extraordinary and inexplicable, and it moves outside linear and orderly modes of expression, to shake us out of fixed positions, to stir us into intimacy, to shatter the shell of the familiar, which surrounds the extraordinary inner life of the world. In words, she animates landscapes whose teeming mysteries may escape us otherwise. And in the flesh, who knows, perhaps something of her discipline of intimacy, her way of apprehending reality, rubbed off on me and the real world turned its other face my way a few times.

Incidents of shape-changing and out-and-out magic occur mostly in Terry Tempest Williams’ fictions not her essays—the stories in Coyote’s Canyon, for instance. In Pieces of White Skull, a work essentially of nonfiction, she describes a council of desert animals just as though it happened; in Refuge, she sinks into the bosom of the salt lake. These are moments of magic realism within works of nonfiction, to be sure. But it is clear she wants us to understand these events as metaphors. These are stories. These are miniature myths—the kind she studies among the Navajo and the kind she says we must make for ourselves. Very largely, Williams respects readers’ expectations of books that purport to engage with the real world. She does not falsify or fabricate. She does, however, imagine the real a little more deeply than others. And she tells stories, even when she is not writing fiction. Stories are a way of seeing reality—it’s insides, its essence, its patterns—and they will not see it literally so much as poetically. They see patterns, textures; they hear rhythms and harmonies. And they are a way of telling that apprehended reality
—dreams, fantasies and parables are among stories' devices. Stories pursue patterns of connection, they concentrate on moments, that may be of little interest to science, and way beyond its reach.

I find myself thinking back to David Abram's idea that what we call the supernatural may be better understood as attributes of the natural, not encountered much and proudly defiant of explanation. His shamans practise close encounter with the natural world and learn its secrets—and each of us might do the same. In this sense, Williams is shamanic—to her are revealed sometimes the hidden powers of things; to her are sent signs of the natural world.

In the prologue to *Pieces of White Shell*, Terry Tempest Williams tells the story of a weaver finch that flies down the chimney of her family's home on the weekend after Thanksgiving; flies through the fire and sets down on the Christmas tree just as her grandmother tells the season's story of new life. This story had begun, as usual, with her words, 'You see, this tree is alive.' This is a tree so crowded with ornamental birds and angels the Tempests have taken to joking that it moves. Suddenly it is a living tree with a living ornament, this bird.

The event is extraordinary, if explicable, and touched, in the telling, with awe. It is a marvel, if not a miracle or a sign. Earlier in the prologue, Williams has explained that Mormons share with Navajo a belief 'in a power that moves us, directs us, cares for us.' 'We are a spiritual people, Mormon and Navajo ... The Navajo have their sacred mountains and we have our sacred groves and temples' (*Pieces of White Shell*, 1983, pp 3–8). The story of the bird belongs in such a cultural setting. Terry's own culture disposes her to a worldview and language that have room for the existence of magic and miracle in the world. She was schooled to expect them even before she moved to that miraculous place, the red desert.

If you live in the desert, you will see ordinary miracles every day. Terry grew up with a lake that rises and falls, shifts its shape, merges with the light, and allows a girl to defy gravity; she lives now within a valley of extraordinary light, near a river that has carved canyons of impossible depth. She lives among birds and mammals and reptiles that need to learn the trick of invisibility, and other acts of guile, just to stay alive in a land of little rain. It is a land that teaches the possibility of magic, the necessity of illusion.

Terry Tempest Williams writes landscapes in which, as one of her narrators expresses it in *Coyote's Canyon*, 'the lines between the real and the imagined [are] thinly drawn' (*Red*, 2001, p 54). But she lives in a place where one learns the inadequacy of our notions of what is real. She has also learned in Great Basin and red desert that places are dynamic spaces, composed of lives that are fast and slow, enduring and changeable, where sands fly, rocks fall, landforms alter, rivers run red, run blue, run high, run low, canyon wrens come and sing up water and go. Her writing—all of it, but particularly her fables and her poetic riffs, her narration of miracle and magic—tries to show us, through its many devices, that her places are animated, are made of energies at play, most of them
beyond our senses' reach. To reach for them, one needs imagination, specifically an ecological imagination; one needs to be present, listening and letting oneself be moved. Her writing tries to move us, its readers, from a position that imagines places as finished and inanimate, as silent and still, as disenchanted. Her writing is a song of, and a dance with, places she experiences as lively, mysterious and rhythmical.

Magic attends Terry Tempest Williams. She belongs in the red desert—a place where everything is rarely as simple as it seems; in an erosional landscape that, in its present form, is an expression also, an apt memorial, of a departed country, a former world. You can sense what is no longer here in what remains; the past lives on, enfolded in and celebrated by the present.

Terry has a gift for intimacy with people and with places that makes them deeply and immediately hers. She hungers much for country, and she writes out of her earnest desire to know the ground she stands on and to be known by it in return. She wants to learn a language spoken among the red rocks and sage, so that she can make some sentences, composed of words first spoken ages ago, and still spoken without sound, in the landscape she loves. She wants most to honour and protect this place on earth and all who live inside it, not excluding rock and river and light. The politics of nurture and restoration begins in intimacy, arises in erotic encounters with the wild, and speaks itself in stories true to such encounters.

I was worried before I walked out with her into her country that she found too much of herself in it. I held a small suspicion that she did not leave the land enough space to speak for itself. But I realise now that her writing enacts her love and contains the country in the way a wife holds intimate secrets of her husband, and sometimes speaks them. In the way the Shoshone burial moccasin honours the life of the man or woman it is made to fit. Its making requires and speaks of intimacy. Terry's 'my' is an expression of love—a mother's, a lover's. Her identification with country speaks of intimacy not ownership or projection. She is a woman, above all, of heart. And her heart is incapable, like this country, of playing false, though it is fast to passion, and given to playing games to trip up the self-assured and fool the predator. All of them, these games, are really a dance, and they lead you deeper into the nature of what is real here at the heart of an arid land. Where she dances; the prose you read is the dance she makes with this ample and animated, shape-shifting place.

Navajo and Mormon worldviews share a rootedness in magic. Terry Tempest Williams inherited a feeling for it, and it is fed by the country. The magic here, in the red country, is quite real. And in Terry's writing it is no affectation. It is a quality of the place and of her dance with the place.
II. The valley of the Wind

Laurie Kutchins

Wind River Basin, Wyoming & Shenandoah Valley, Virginia

The wind keeps telling us something
we want to pass on to the world:
Even far things are real.
—William Stafford, 'Whispered into the Ground'

The Wyoming wind is a cadence always beyond me. It extracts from the land its ruthless music, dust and grit and a dry clamor of snow. Wind sounds I was to learn before any other. Its scrambled song is my story, its directive my own paradox.
—Laurie Kutchins, 'Wind Ensemble'

Six years I have loved your name
on my tongue
more than I've loved you.
—Laurie Kutchins, 'Shenandoah'

Driving east this morning out of Jackson, watching the Tetons fall behind me, climbing an icy road out of the Snake Valley, over Togwotee Pass, and dropping down into a new watershed—the grasslands between the Wind Rivers and the Washakies—I travel Laurie Kutchins' 'childhood country.' This is terrain she has 'taken down into the bedrock of her psyche,' as she puts it; country whose lines and scents and textures she experiences over and again in her adult dreams; arid land inseparable in its nature from her conception of herself. It is a geography alive with stone, sage and snow, and, like childhood, restless with longing, fear and desire. This is the ground of most of her writing, the place she feels her poetry is bedded; a place she breathed in, as a child, and has spent her life uttering in her work.

*48 The phrase belongs to Stanley Kunitz. He uses it in a poem ('The Abduction') Laurie sends me to explain her attachment to this terrain, to question the term 'dream country' I had used in my first draft. Childhood country is the better term. Laurie spent many of her childhood holidays near Jackson and travelling the road I am just embarking upon. So this terrain belongs to, contains and expresses her childhood years.
It is the fourth of December, and winter is on the land. It lies white upon the ground all about the road. The tracks of elk and deer, of antelope, of coyote, already tell the day some stories, the pattern of their passage. I enter from the west the valley of the Wind River and keep on going all day across the body of Wyoming, a land of open spaces, shaped and animated—almost defined—by the wind. And when, late in the afternoon, I reach Casper, I arrive at the place where Laurie's life began.

It is a day of immense stillness. Nothing crowds the sky. The ground—wide fields of sage and bunchgrass, broken ridges rising in low relief, the prairie scoured with small watercourses, the cottonwoods and willows keeping mostly to the rivers and leaving all the rest to the 150 tribes of grasses and the snow—the ground lies vulnerable to the wide blue sky, to all that winter light; and I feel as though I intrude upon a mystery, a delicate and savage intimacy between the country above and that below. The colours here are brown and blue and white. Only those. But they are enough to paint a spare and tender landscape.

At Dubois I stop to post some cards, to drink some coffee, to listen to the place a bit. I left Jackson early, icicles hanging from the skirts of the truck, and at Dubois, though I have driven for hours, the morning still holds. The sky is clear of cloud, china blue.

Coming into town, some broken red sandstone cliffs and tawny badlands suggest the inundations that covered this ground—made some of it—long before the mountains either side of me now got here. The pink sandstone belonged once to ranges much older than the Wind Rivers south of me, the Washakies and Owl Creeks north—to Precambrian mountains, the 'Ancestral Rockies.' It got washed from them in late Precambrian times, sedimented in seas and formed into rock when the seabed rose and the waters drained away. Those wide beds of sandstone were shattered and spread by the coming of these late Cretaceous and early Tertiary mountains, whose remains I see beside me now. Then, fifty-five million years ago, lava flowed in from fissures that have since become the Absarokas, and ash floated in and lodged here from other volcanoes farther afield. All this ground was then for a long time a plain. Sand dunes formed here in some places, carried, like most things in Wyoming, on the wind, in particular from Yellowstone. The whole of central Wyoming filled with sand. This happened only twenty-something million years ago. The small badlands outside Dubois—and others I pass through this day—are survivors of the sand hordes of that earlier era.

A lot has happened here over a long time, and it goes on happening, even on a slow day like this one.69

69 I rely for my geological understanding of Wyoming chiefly on John McPhee's brilliant and beautiful Rising from the Plains, 1986. For the creation of the sandstones, the coming of the Wind Rivers and the arrival of the dunes see pp 43–53. I will write more of the geology of Wyoming and its connection with Kutchins' poetry later in this chapter.
The Tetons, which I have now left behind, are so new, in geological time, they are still rising. All that naked rock still pushes skyward. But this landscape, east of the pass, is lying low. Its ridges stand in lower relief and are in decline. But once they rose, faster than wind and water could wear them down, and they stood much higher than the Tetons now stand. But that was long, long ago. Their story since is mostly one of loss and diminution. All the same, as though to prove the persistence of the past, Garnett Peak, south of me in the Wind Rivers, is still, defiantly, the tallest mountain in the State of Wyoming, touching the sky a couple of hundred feet higher yet than the Grand Teton.

In Betty's Cafe I order a donut and find a booth. I sit and open my laptop on the benchtop to take some notes of the morning's drive. There is a stove burning, and the room is warm. White curtains hang in the windows. Betty comes over and puts a mug of coffee and a donut on a white plate onto the bench, smiles at me, says, 'There y'are,' and I thank her. I'm wearing the boots I bought back east, still wearing them in—a slow matter when nearly all you do with them is pump the pedals in a truck. Though I've walked a bit in them too. It's only three weeks, I think to myself, sipping black coffee, since these boots took me along roads—Frog Hollow, Mill Creek and Mount Zion—in the Shenandoah Valley, where Laurie Kutchins now lives. Now they're under a table in a town she knew as a girl. I look around at the others here, all men, apart from Betty. If I weren't wearing boots, I'd be the only here who wasn't. The men here wear hats too, flannel shirts and padded jackets, and greet each other with laconic warmth. They have a shy kind of dignity I admire; dry, deep, ironic voices. They have names like Rosco and Bud. They talk weather and politics: a presidential election held a month ago is still undecided. Betty thinks they should do the whole thing over.

The coffee is bitter, but hot, and Betty keeps filling it up. I realise then that I didn't come here for good coffee or even a donut. I came for pause and for company, the company of people not passing through like me. I came for a little hospitality and to hear how this landscape speaks in the voices and manners of its folk. Having discovered that, having eaten my donut and taken my notes, having listened to the scrape of boot on wooden floor, to the roll of low voices for half an hour, I rise, pay Betty, thank her and push outside into the morning. An old America hangs on here and an even older geology with which that old America, in its accents and dress and timber vernacular architecture, seems at home. Some men and women can still survive as ranchers. Betty can earn enough to make do from a small cafe. Not everything is owned yet by the corporations.\footnote{For an account of the colonisation of the west, including parts of the northwest, by large eastern corporations and even European nobility, see Ian Frazier's \textit{Great Plains}, 1989.} I nose the truck out into an almost empty road, take a right at the end of town and enter into wide brown rangelands again, fenced from time to time with post and rail, dotted with cattle and horses,
with some deer, some rolled hay waiting in stubble, with cottonwoods and weathered timber houses. Winter shadows pool around sagebrush and tussock, deepen and double the courses of creeks. This is a country of strong, simple line and form, a gestured place, angular, sketched, and unfinished.

The road holds close to the river through Dubois and on southeast. It bends northeast with the river at Riverton and heads for Shoshoni. There the river ends in a lake and takes a different name (The Bighorn) on the other side of it, having cut through the Owl Creek Range. The road runs on east from Shoshoni, across high prairie, scattered pink-brown buttes and sandhill ridges, threading between the Bighorns to the north and the Rattlesnake Hills and Granite Mountains to the south, never out of sight of higher and broken ground until it comes close to Casper, where the plain seems endless, and I feel like I am sliding across the bottom of the sky; and even then, when I look southeast, I see the Laramies pushing up out of the prairie. I travel east through Moneta and Hiland, Waltman (population ten, elevation six thousand feet), Powder River and Natrona and down to Casper. Somewhere in this high plain, just after Waltman, just after three in the afternoon, a coyote moves low along the high bank of an irrigation channel. I watch it step through grass and snow, a creature from a much older time, at a much more ancient occupation than mine, sitting here in boots inside a metal cabin speeding east.

But it is the country south of Dubois, between Crowheart Butte and Fort Washakie and on down to Lander, I loved best this day. The great red butte stands up a thousand feet, capped in flat hard sandstone, above the grass and sage of the basin of the river. In its name lies a story. Washakie was the chief of the wise and peaceable Shoshoni. He bested the chief of the warlike Crow in man-to-man combat, cut out his enemy's heart and ate it, settling the eternal contention between the two people for the butte and its surrounding hunting grounds. A harsh and heroic story; a monument of nature and folklore to resilience and the futility and endlessness of earthly desire. A symbol of what it takes to survive out here. All the good Wyoming stories seem to be about persistence, stubbornness and suffering. They are about big ideas whirled by wind; about acceptance; failed ideals at whose end men shrug shoulders and carry on. No one shakes their fists at the sky here.

Laurie sent me this way through the Wind River Indian Reservation, running a line southeast from the river, toward the Continental Divide and the rivers, chiefly the Popo Agie, that run from it through this country making for the Wind. Passing through it, I recognise a landscape I dreamed, when I was a boy, of living in as a man. It is country I long for, even when I am inside it. I have been driving it all morning, but its elements are gathered intensely here, all about Highway 287. Either side of me the ranges step down into the valley through low buttes, ledges, broken red bluffs (those tender Triassic sandstones again, older by a long way than the ridges they
flank), here and there some brown badlands. Rattling cottonwoods; cured grasses; dark waters running under ice. Something in me hungers for lean and open country. Worn and arid: country like this. It holds the music of home, though I’ve never been here before. This is a country the dream of which I share with Laurie Kutchins, but not the memory. That is all hers.

Later, back home, when I reread her poem ‘Men Kick Stones When They Walk,’ I see that it draws this very country, draws it from childhood memory; gestures to life and embeds in voices and bluffs and smoke and weather the desire and longing and pain that also compose one’s childhood country. Laurie tells me its narrator and characters are fictions, but drawn from life. The cowboys in it are men she knew once. The mood belongs to her real childhood. The poem carries a child’s frightened awareness of some inchoate domestic conflict, fearful awareness of shallowly buried violence, and pain, along with wonder at weather and landform, joy in early mornings, remembrance of the exquisite comforts of hot breakfast made by mother, and the intimations of the winds. It explores the ways in which the places we love and the lives we lead embody also former worlds; include pain and trouble one buries in strata low down and out of sight, but which sometimes thrust themselves up, unbidden, out of silence. These elements of the poem belong to its lyric structure—its texture, its music, the quality of the space it shapes—more than to its narrative. And those tonal, textural qualities of the poem belong also to Laurie’s actual life, to her memory and to the ‘childhood country’ the poem explores. Its music (I mean rhythm, tone, actual sounds and voices and moods), if not all of its events, belong to her life’s experience in this terrain. The poem pieces together fragments—of musical phrases, of memory, of desire, of fear, of imagined scenes, of meteorology and landform. And just as the geology of this part of the world, in its bits and pieces, is eloquent of earlier violence, human and tectonic, and is made beautiful, is made coherent, by time and erosion, so, the poet wants us to know, is a human life—this child-narrator’s, that cowboy’s, that father’s, anyone’s.

The poem is a narrative of a ranching life Kutchins never actually lived, one that belonged to her childhood country, though. In its images of such a life, in its hints at larger human and geological stories that go on outside the poem, it is a song about the nature of this Wyoming, which surrounded her, to which her childhood belongs, from which her own singing comes. Her poem speaks of one of the ways in which Wyoming has been lived in its recent history. The poem expresses, in gestures, a little of the rangelands’ picturesque and parsimonious nature and of her own psyche’s geomorphology. The poem grows out of her attachment to this place and its stories, which pattern her still. It is lean and lyrical, like the landscape there. It chants, for instance, some of the mythic names I have been passing through today, geology become story (Washakie, Crow Heart, Wind Rivers, Bull Lake); some of the many words for rock and weather (cirque, blizzard, storm, avalanche, snow, ice and, of course, wind); the same gravel voices and scrape of boot on timber floor I heard in Betty’s Cafe; the landscape’s massive silence and the way it echoes in its people. And it alludes to some of the betrayals the landscape has known over time, and the
forgivenesses, which are remembered in its forms just as smaller betrayals and forgivenesses are lodged in the bodies of the narrator's parents in the poem, just as they are lodged in each of us.

One night, waking me, the scuffle of wind at the water pump, lifting and lowering the arm at the rusted hinge. Wind harnessed in the cottonwoods groaning down by the vacant bunkhouse, a sound I half-dreamed was Wally, whisked and cussing.

Wind scraping the voices of my parents, so hushed in the cold of the kitchen it seemed they were sleeping ...

I lay there deciphering the sounds the dark gathered in my ears, wind slapping the house and Dad asking: still your lover?
A phrase set loose and lost in the open space between hunch and consolation ...

And soon the November sound of the men—Dad, Wally, and Steve boot-kicking the cold between shed and house, chores and breakfast ...

It seemed as if the weather controlled them, and it was always changing. Dad said he could feel a storm in his knees; I could feel it in the way they talked of the cold, the truck that needed tires and the Tuesday blizzard sulking over the tops of the Wind Rivers ...
I could feel it when their so longs
brushed the shadows in my ears,
in how far away the horizon leaned
afterwards, and in her hard glance
down to a pine gnarl in the floor.
And in a silence
locked in each of them
like the straight dirt road
into town ...

Their voices stayed with me, like the way
men kick stones when they walk,
boot tips pointing toward timberline,
some waiting country high up and pure,
cirques where the snow is constant.

—‘Men Kick Stones When They Walk,’ Between Towns, 1993, pp 17-21

Among other things, this poem explores the continuities, the reciprocities that run between landscape and people still open to it. Wind, the moving air, the breath of the place, the creator-destroyer spirit, is the force, in this poem, that links the people with the place, that fills them with it. It is the wind, here, that seems to write shared stories of loss and longing into the landforms. I will have more to say about all this later in the chapter. But let me get myself to Casper, where Laurie Kutchins began, this daughter of an oilman and an exile.

In Casper, in her mother’s house, I speak with Laurie on the phone. She asks me about my drive and says she had guessed I would love that country best. I speak of cottonwoods the colour of a paper bag on the river bends, arid, elegant faces of worn sandstone, dry fields of grass, A-frame fences, snow among sage and shadow, horses, hawks and antelope, the sky and escarpments. ‘Did you notice the purple in those sandstone bluffs?’ she asks. I did, now that she mentions it. ‘I’m glad you’ve seen it,’ she says. ‘I wish I were there again.’

But she isn’t in the Wind. She is in the Shenandoah, in Virginia, tonight, where she has lived some six years, without yet falling under its spell; where she has raised a family and where she teaches and writes. She tells me that the owls that called from the black locust trees in the creek below her house the first night I stayed with her in Singers Glen are calling back and forth again tonight.
So Laurie is not with me in the country of her heart and writing. Not physically. But, in another sense, through the conversations we shared in the Shenandoah, through tonight’s talk on the phone, through another conversation we had three nights ago when I was in the Tetons, she does accompany me here. In the front of her first book of poems, *Between Towns*, she has written: ‘For Mark, to carry on your journey west, where the wind found and formed my voice.’ Imagination, conversation and wind—the air that runs continuously around the whole earth—join her to this place of origins, the country where her songs are born. And yet she is not here, of course, except in her body’s longing, her mind’s reaching, her words’ singing, for Wyoming. Absence, though, can take a physical form—as in the shape of an eroded landscape, as in homesickness, as in grief—and it can stand as real and present as anything tangibly here. The Wyoming landscape, for instance, is a testament to lost ground, to all the loss that has fashioned it. It embodies absence. Loss lives here. My days with Laurie Kutchins in Virginia were touched by the absence of Wyoming, as much as they were by the weather and natural history of Singers Glen. And my days here now are touched by the absence of Laurie Kutchins, daughter of the wind, of the rock and sky of Wyoming. The wind has picked her up and carried her away east, leaving a space that speaks of her; and over east, she sits east with Wyoming lodged inside her.

I bring to Wyoming, along with Laurie’s poems, some questions that were born in Laurie’s yellow study in Virginia, in the rounder and more even-tempered valley where she lives among much milder winds.

How is it this place explains this writer’s work? How does her exile from it help explain the writing she is doing now? How does a place for which we hold no love (I mean Virginia) still touch a place-writer’s work? And how does a beloved place from which we are removed still sing to us and in our work? How does displacement—the distance between a writer and her homeland—sound in text? Can I feel out here the meaning of Laurie Kutchins’ conviction that her voice is born from the wind of Wyoming? What does that mean for her writing, when she is so far from her voice’s source, from her nourishing terrain? Does the amplitude of Wyoming sound in Kutchins’ work? And how? How do wind and weather and erosion, which are so prodigious here, help me understand the work of this singer of place, Laurie Kutchins? How is it wind articulates place, sings and divines a landscape? And what has wind got to do with poetic utterance?

I must address a threshold question too, before I go on: what am I doing looking into the work of a poet? I said at the outset that, though it is a difficult thing to bound this genre, there are some reasons why it makes sense to focus on *nonfiction*, on lyric essays, in particular. One of the reasons is that I am myself writing in that mode; a second is that most nature writing has taken place in essays; and a third is the nature of the essay itself, and its peculiar aptness for witness and
landscape. But I also said at the beginning, in 'The essential prose of things,' that along the way I found I could not exclude poetry from my study; that I discovered I was really making a study not of nonfiction place writing but of a lyric mode of apprehension (of the natural world) and composition (of landscape-oriented texts); and that, therefore, I was really looking at poetry all along. It was right about now, in Laurie Kutchins' work and in her native Wyoming that this began to dawn on me.

After dinner on my first night at Singers Glen, Laurie took a call from her mother in Casper. I heard Laurie explain that she had a visitor staying whom she'd met in Harvard, a writer. And then her mother must have asked, 'Is he a poet too?' because Laurie began to say 'No' and then turned to me coyly and said, 'Well, yes, he is a poet. I've been reading some of his work.'

Laurie seemed too realise, I think, that the work of the poet and the work of the lyric essayist differ only little in nature, though much in form. Prose is made of sentences and paragraphs. Grammar orders its structure and appearance on the page. The only breaks within a piece of prose are between sentences, grammatically ordered, and paragraphs. In poems, there are breaks, of course, between the lines. Metrical phrases, which are also syntactical units, clusters of thought, clusters of sound, are broken into lines, according to the poet's rhythmic scheme and the requirements of the particular form she employs, traditional, formal or personal—a haiku, a sonnet, a traditional ballad; a poem of eight-footed lines (octometer), say, in stanzas of four lines (quatrains). There are line breaks. Breath, and orderly patterns of sound determine the shape of the work, its look on the page, its rhythm in our mouth and ear and memory. We can see and we can hear the difference between a poem and a piece of prose. Poetry is by its very nature a metrical and a musical form. Prose, it has been usually said, is not. Better to say, perhaps, that it hides its rhythms, subdues and muffles its musical patterns by denying itself the line breaks that articulate these elements in a poem.

So, although there are patent, visible, formal distinctions between the poem and the paragraph, and although these differences count, when the prose is lyric, I think the differences count less, at least in the ear of the reader. Mary Oliver writes in one of her handbooks for poets, '[t]he metrical poem is a pattern made with sound just as much as it is a statement made through sound' (Oliver, 1998, p 6). I would say the same of certain works of prose, for lyric essays—they make patterns of sound as much as they make meaning through sound. Where a writer works in a lyric


[13] I have spoken about the lyric essay in chapter three, 'The essential prose of things,' and will have more to say about it, and about the differences between poetry and prose in my chapter on James Galvin, 'The real world.'

[14] I say more about lyric essays, too, in the next chapter. Coincidentally, at Laurie's home in Virginia I found the special 'Lyric Essay' edition, fresh out, of Seneca Review, and was first alerted to the idea and form of the lyric essay.
mode, they use language not just to signify, but to articulate the nature of things, as though from the inside. They attempt this through those elements of their writing that are not merely functional—the elements that belong to song and work through music; hence, 'lyric.' They do it through the patterns of sound they make through the words they choose and the way they string them together. I noted at the start how many of the writers whose work I admire have been poets as well as prose writers—among them Annie Dillard, John Haines, Linda Hogan, James Galvin and even Henry David Thoreau. Wherever a writer is concerned deeply with the sound and rhythm of their sentences at least as much as their information content—where their aim is to set thoughts to music, to bring to language some elements of song—then some poetic element orders the work. Perhaps this is what Laurie had found in my writing. And it made me, for her, a poet.

In her essay 'The Flexible Lyric' (Voigt, 1999, p 115), the poet Ellen Bryant Voigt attempts to distinguish poetry and narrative prose, emphasising matters of structure and texture; but she begins by noting W H Auden's warning that it is 'a sheer waste of time to look for a definition of the difference between poetry and prose.' And so it may be. Auden wrote that in his book of prose, *The Dyer's Hand* (1962). Voigt presses on, though. She puts the difference down to the distinctive characteristics of lyric and narrative modes—the former being the realm of poetry and the latter of prose, as usually understood.

By speaking of the lyric essay, I suggest, of course, that prose, too, can be poetic. This is the kind of realisation that led Auden to his conclusion that distinctions collapse the closer one looks into poetry and prose. But, in the face of Auden's sensible warning, I want briefly to explore Voigt's distinction between narrative and lyric, in order to point up what makes a poem a poem, what makes a piece of prose, prose, and why—in the case of most of the prose that most powerfully expresses the inner life of places—that distinction does not hold; or holds only so far.

Ellen Bryant Voigt can help explain, I think, why it seems to me that Laurie Kutchins' poetry (and for that matter, the poetry of James Galvin, which follows, or any poet) is not an utterly different thing than the prose of the other writers I consider in this study. And why, therefore, I might spend some time considering it.

Syntactical structures rule in narrative. In most narrative discourse (that is, in prose), as Voigt puts it, words and phrases 'perform as semaphore': they signify. In lyric discourse, on the other hand, specifically in poems, 'compression and song will freight the signifiers with additional, usually emotive, information. Compression and song, of course, are the characteristics most firmly assigned to the lyric and they release a poem for "excursions into particularity"... ' (Voigt, 1999,
Poems, along with lyric pieces of prose, do their work through what Voigt calls their texture, by what I have called music (I think we mean the same thing), as well as by logic. That is, lyric relies on sound pattern, rhythm, compressed image and tone to communicate its essence; and, of course, it relies, like all writing, on grammatical, lexical, semantic structures that allow them to make sense and mean something. It sings, and it means; and the singing is not marginal. Lyric writing, when paraphrased (and, if we are not careful, when translated), loses that which made it what it was—its music, its texture. Its truth lies in the particular manner of its telling; lose that, and you lose what counts chiefly in it. In narrative, the words and structures are more purely functional: they are there so that a story gets told, sense gets conveyed and meaning arises. Words are there to say what a writer means you to understand—that is, they are there to signify things, not to sing; they convey meaning, not texture or song. The lyric sings and means, but what it means is the child of its music and form as much as it is of the signification of the words it sets to music. By contrast, the narrative tells and means—but it is the meaning that counts, and you might tell it differently and mean much the same thing. To paraphrase Archibald MacLeish, the lyric poem (or prose), like a song, is; the narrative poem (or prose) means. The poem is; the prose means.

This distinction between the lyric and the narrative helps us see how a poem differs from prose; but it also sets lyric prose (which aims not just to mean but also to sing) apart from the rest of the (tuneless or tone-deaf) prose discourse. It is allied with poetry; perhaps it is poetry. Although there will be a huge range of difference among the prose works I might call lyric, all of it (and most of the writing of most of the writers I study here) will be more like poetry than it will be like a scientific paper, say, or even a certain kind of novel, in which it is the story more than the telling that counts. There will be about lyric prose (fact of fiction) a quality that makes it strange and particular; voiced not merely communicated; sung not merely told. Texture, ‘excursions into particularity’, rhythm, tone, voice and colour all count in the telling. Such narratives as Galvin’s particularly, and Laurie Kutchins’ own essays (to which I turn later in this chapter) sing and compress. They are lyric.

The musical difference between the poem and the lyric essay is not, I would say, one of kind but one of degree. Both place emphasis on the patterns of sound they employ in the telling; both are

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74 Voigt’s quotation comes from John Ransom’s ‘Criticism as Pure Speculation,’ in Young and Hindle, (eds) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom, 1984.

75 The poet Archibald MacLeish famously wrote—in a poem, of course, ‘Ars Poetica’—‘A poem should not mean/But be.’

76 As I say, I explore the differences and similarities between lyric prose and poetry further in my chapter ‘The real world,’ where I also expand on what we may mean by ‘music’ and ‘lyric’ and the ways in which music arises out of the lyric essay.
utterances; both are sung. The lyric essay is perhaps a larger-scale musical creation, less melodic, less tightly organised; less like a song and more like a symphony. But also, because the lyric essay is less compressed and more discursive than a poem, it sounds more like a conversation and less like a dream. There is perhaps more silence in the poem, more time running through the lyric essay. But there is music, as I say, in both.

So, even though Laurie Kutchins writes poems, I have decided to travel the lyric landscapes of her words, her childhood and memory. There were other reasons: my conversations with Laurie were rich; all her writing rises out of places and, it seems to me, expresses them; she has thought and written carefully about the relationship of language and landscape; she writes lyric essays as well as poems. Her essay ‘Wind Ensemble’ appears in my own anthology of place essays, A Place on Earth. Read it, and you will see how little difference lineation can make to a writer’s music. She has written other essays in a lyric mode for other anthologies and journals, and she is at work on a booklength ‘mixed genre’ work about weather and narrative, The Weather Quilt.

And then there is the landscape of Wyoming itself, that embodied poem—reason enough really.

You will forgive me, I hope, if I proceed without much comment on the design, meter and pattern of her poems; on lineation and so forth. I don’t feel confident to say much on those matters. It is the larger, freer, patterns of sound, the textural devices—the looser music—of the lyric that I am concerned with here, as in other chapters. In any event, most of Kutchins’ verse is free, fluid and organic (which is how Mary Oliver describes free verse; see Oliver, 1994, p 67). Laurie breaks her lines where the rhythm of the thought demands, where syntax allows it, at the end of a phrase or clause. Most of Laurie Kutchins’ poems don’t rhyme either—another verse discipline the free poem puts aside, as of course the prose writer does. She does not often write poems to strict, traditional, formal metrics. Her poems are metrical, but their metrical patterns shift like weather and don’t hold. This is the way it is with free verse. Most of her poems are not written within one of the traditional templates of verse form—of line and stanza length. This is free verse, loose as wind, and just as intricately patterned. There is beat and there is meter, but these vary, throughout a poem, as line length varies and thought takes a different shape; just as tempo fluctuates within certain composed music (from bar to bar, I mean, in Messiaen and Stravinsky, for instance); just as meter alters this way and that in our speech and thought.

You will not find in Laurie’s poems the neat musical arrangements of a Frostean or Yeatsian sonnet, for example. But you will—as you will (though even more loosely) in a lyric essay—find music, belonging both to the line and to the larger lyric form of her works. Laurie’s free verse is a lyric discourse, made with a musical imagination, just like Galvin’s The Meadow or Laurie’s essay ‘Wind Ensemble.’ I will read it as lyric.
Poetry remains poetry even when it sets many matters of prosody aside, no matter how free its form, no matter how much it looks and sounds like a piece of prose; and prose, if it is lyric, can sound more like poetry, sometimes, than poetry itself. And so, I begin to see what Auden meant: definitions began to elide. Yet I think Voigt is right to point to the difference between lyric and the narrative modes of writing. It is a distinction that is real; it may be experienced; it distinguishes one kind of writing from another, and it matters. The lyric, as Voigt's title implies, is flexible. Is it flexible enough to embrace prose? Voigt is silent on this, and she may object to the use I make of her analysis. How far may we stretch a lyric before it breaks and reorders itself into a narrative? How much music may a narrative sing before it crosses the line and becomes a lyric? But no one polices such lines, and no one should. Like the real world, language and music will not conform to our ideas about them. 'Lyric' and 'narrative' remain abstractions, metaphors—useful just as long as they help us discover something that may have escaped our attention, and not a moment longer.

It is lyric writing that draws me, then—in poetry and prose. So I will break that rule I set at the outset—that's what rules are for—and enter a poet's work.

Walter McDonald, poetry editor at Texas Tech University Press, spotted some of Laurie Kutchins' poems in journals such as Ploughshares, Northern Lights and The Georgia Review and invited her in 1991 to submit a manuscript to the press for the press's First Book Poetry Competition, a rare honour for a young poet. Laurie's manuscript won the competition and was published by the press in 1993 as Between Towns. Her next book of poems The Night Path won the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award in 1996 and was published by BOA Editions in 1997. It was also nominated for the Pulitzer Prize the same year.

She has a third book of poems taking shape now, a sheaf of manuscript pages some of which I read in an early form one November day sitting in the yellow room where most of them were composed.

Laurie Kutchins was born in Casper on the second from last day of May 1956. She was her parents' second child and second daughter. A son came after. 'My father was born in Michigan,' she tells me, 'and raised in a Lutheran family in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The day he graduated college, he left home and went west, without a clear idea of what he might become. He just went west and fell in love with mountains. The first he saw were the Sandias in New Mexico, mountains I know too and love. He ended up in California. He went to school there and became a geologist. It seems he was destined to work with rocks. He loved the west, he cherished its mountains and hard places and its rivers, and when he got a job with Sinclairs, the oil company, in Casper, he fell for Wyoming completely.'
‘My mother, though she still lives there, hated Wyoming really. She just wasn’t at home there, still isn’t. I grew up with a sense of her despising this landscape my father cherished, with his love for it, his deepening into it, and her resisting it. She was in exile there. That’s her story, really: exile in Wyoming.’

Laurie’s mother escaped Hitler’s Germany in 1939 on one of the last boats that made it out before the war. She was a Jewish girl, eight years old at the time. And she grew up a Methodist with foster parents in New York. ‘She met my dad when she was in her late teens, out in California visiting relatives. They fell for each other pretty hard and fast, I think. They were married soon after, and then Dad got the job with Sinclairs up in Casper. It just wasn’t her country up there. And she knew it. She is a European Jewish woman from New York. When she comes to Manhattan and I walk with her there, that’s when I see her where she belongs. So I grew up with this tension all the time and her sense of exile. She didn’t want us to grow up calling a creek a “crick” as they do out there.’

You meet Laurie’s mother, at home in her own childhood country—at least the part of it after Germany—in ‘Floating Poem: Manhattan Morning,’ within the second book of poems, The Night Path.

Displacement and dislocation run in the family. Exile is one of the stories Laurie inherits. So is a passionate belonging among the Wyoming ranges—her father’s story. Laurie’s father used to tell them the Tetons were just in their back yard. She grew up with a sense of them there. The route I travelled, between Jackson and Casper, became a songline for Laurie. She sings it in her writing and her dreams. She knows it by heart. With her family, she drove that way often, her dad talking about the rocks and ranges, all that geology, pointing out synclines and anticlines in the roadcuts, telling them the story of Crow Heart Butte and over and over as they passed, her mum sitting there wishing herself away. From her father, Laurie learned attachment, intimacy; from her mother, detachment, distance.

‘My father was spiritually enlivened by that landscape,’ Laurie says to me. ‘I know he felt its divinity. The mountains were his gods—the mountains and the rivers. He was a pantheist, though he would never have said so—he may not even have known the word. He grew up a Lutheran but fled the church when he fled his family and the plains. When we were growing up, he went out on Sundays to walk the mountains and fish the rivers. Those were his prayers. He didn’t have the language for all that, but I know I got my sense of the divinity of landscape, my feeling for the bones and spirit of the country from him. At the time, of course, I didn’t know I loved it. I didn’t discover that until I left. It took distance to show me how Wyoming lived inside me, and how it pulled me back.’
Until she was five and the family went off to Tucson, Laurie and the family lived in a house on the edge of Casper. 'I grew up,' says Laurie, 'watching the weather coming from far off across the prairie. Not that I thought it was anything special when I was a child. I had no awareness of growing up in the West or in some beautiful, wild place. This was just where I lived.'

There have been many leavings and many returns. When Laurie was five or so, her father went to Tucson and set up a drive-through hamburger place, called Carols, with his brother. One of the very first of the McDonald's outlets set up over the road, and Mr Kutchins was out of business in six months. He tried to get a job with Sinclairs back in Casper, but all they could offer him was a job in Midland, Texas. So the family moved to Texas and spent two years there before Sinclairs came good with another job in Casper. The family moved back, into the house where I stayed a night with Laurie's mum. Laurie was eight then.

Laurie Kutchins left Wyoming when she finished school and went off to college at Stanford. She returned home when she graduated. 'I went through a hard time then,' she says, knowing that her sense of calling as a poet would take her away from her native landscape, possibly forever. 'I didn't know how I could leave all that sky and space,' she says to me. 'I didn't know how I could live without them.' '[T]he path of my life insisted I depart' from this landscape she loved, she writes in her essay 'Wind Ensemble' ('Wind Ensemble,' in Tredinnick, 2003, p. 137). And so she departed, again, torn between her landscape and her life, thinking her exile might last forever.

It took her first, that path, to an MFA at the University of Massachusetts, which she finished in 1988; and then to teaching posts at Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, and James Madison University in Virginia, where she is Associate Professor of English and teaches creative writing and poetry. She has lived outside Harrisonburg, where the university sits, for seven years now with her husband Kevin in an old farmhouse. Here, with Kevin, she has raised the son, Weston, to whom her second book of verse is dedicated, and the daughter, Ava Storm, conceived in the west, born in this house on a cold, star-filled night in December. But all this time, she says, she has kept hoping to move her life and her family back to the west.

This other country has become the place her children think of as home, but for Laurie home is still west in the wind country. In her essay 'Wind Ensemble,' she writes 'I do not love the manicured woods and farmland of the Shenandoah. In truth, I get irritable in these densely fenced glens, lethargic among hollows that fill with the stench of manure used to keep the crops abundant, and claustrophobic among hill-folds that shrink the horizon and prevent me from watching the weather coming a long way off' (ibid).

Talking with me in the sitting room of the house in Singers Glen, she says 'I feel exiled here. I think I am here for a reason that has to do with learning how to hold the place I was born to,
the landscape I am attached to, in my imagination. I am here to learn how to let a beloved
landscape from which I am distanced, for which I long, live inside me.’ Later she adds that she
feels she may be here to learn how to do intimacy, how to stay close and loving when she feels no
flush of love. Intimacy, she says, is the hardest and maybe the most important work we have to do.
‘How do I extend love and find it returned to me in a place that stirs nothing in me?’ she asks.

Here she faces a tough trial of belonging, softened by the presence of her family and their
growing attachment to this place, and her summer returns to a cabin they keep up in the
mountains of Idaho, a cabin her father built. Her late poems are full of questions about her
place here, of conversations with this Virginian valley, such as this.

I still don’t know why I am here.
I still dream of leaving,
holding only the beautiful voweled egg
of your name on my tongue.

—‘Shenandoah,’ Kutchins 2004

Intimacy is one of the lessons the wind teaches; it is one of the arts it practises. Laurie says this
to me in conversation on a walk with her dog Ellie along country lanes littered with deer bones,
leavings of the hunt, lined with sycamore and locust. She means that the wind touches all things,
knows their forms intimately; lingers no longer on one shape or landscape than another.

A year and a half after I stayed with her in Singers Glen, Laurie tells me that she feels like a
migratory creature. ‘I have the rhythm of a bird, a traveller to and fro, inside me.’ Exile has
become migration, that movement back and forth, that annual homing after a winter away. The
family keeps a cabin up behind the Teton in Idaho, and gets out there every summer. When I
speak with her this April of 2002, Laurie has just returned from a week there by herself, trying
to let her new poems find an arrangement that suits them. She says she is just now beginning to
make her peace with migration, to let go of the idea that she is destined to live permanently,
to put down roots, in Wyoming’s ground. ‘It’s taken me all these years to realise that I am not
really separate from that place I love. It’s not lost to me just because I’m not there much. I have
the mountains inside me, where they always were.’

One of the poems in her new collection is called ‘Conversation.’ Its narrator talks with a bird of
the west, engages in wondering with a Mountain Bluebird, a bird, according to my guide book, that
‘inhabits open rangelands, meadows, generally at elevations above 5000 feet; ... highly migratory;
casual in the east during migration and winter.’ It is a conversation about absence and return, about
home and belonging, and it speaks, I think, Kutchins’ migratory rhythm.
I am glad to have the blue of you back again.

Another winter's come and gone.
Our mountain valley passed from green to gold,
from gold to white without us.
And now green June, our month of return.

I wintered where nothing
measures the brief blue of you.
Not the Blue Ridge, not the sky on its best days.

Where did you winter?

—'Conversation,' Kutchins, 2004

Her new collection includes poems of seasonal return to the west, poems like this one—of profound attachment and gratitude for a landscape still hers though it lives most of the year only in her mind:

Has it entered your blood yet?
Great horned owl over the Bull Elk Creek ravine,
sandhills in the long grass just past dusk,
granite breathing more deeply now that the moon
is coming home.

In full darkness I will wait with you,
late into the night to watch it rise
over these mountains I've known since birth...

—'Moonrise,' Kutchins, 2004

I had not read Laurie Kutchins' work before I came to America in October 2000. I met her at Harvard, where she took part in the conference of nature writers, 'The Ecological Imagination,' in the fall. I was struck by the poems she read one night there, by the voice—sweet and tough, intimate and challenging at once—with which she spoke and wrote. At Cambridge and at Walden, we talked about music and words and how place enters a life and a voice. She inscribed a copy of her second book of poems The Night Path to me like this: 'With gratitude that our paths converge here at Cambridge among the falling leaves,' and asked me to come and visit her family in Virginia. So, after finding Peter Matthiessen on his Long Island shore and spending time with a friend
walking woods in Vermont, in mid-November I caught a train from Boston to New York and Washington and another west through fields of civil war memory and corn to Staunton, where Laurie met me at the small rural station.

My train had brought me out of those flat fields of eastern Virginia, into Charlottesville, set in the hilly uplands called the Piedmont, and then into the Blue Ridge Mountains, over them via the Rockfish Gap and down into a wide valley. West, another blue line of mountains, the Alleghenies, rises, running, like the Blue Ridge, southwest to northeast. These mountains are part of the long Appalachian chain that runs for four thousand kilometres like two creases, southwest to northeast, in the fabric of eastern North America. Though all the country about it has changed time and again under the influence of evolution, changing weather, and the influence, most recently, of man; and though the Appalachians themselves have risen and declined three times these past five hundred million years, these are old mountains and they have been here more or less forever. They were here and already old, long, long before there were plants to cover them, animals to roam and humans to hunt and gather, clear and farm among them. The twinned ranges I pass into are mountains now in a long, a slow and gracious decline.

The valley between the two blue lines of mountain, takes the name Shenandoah north of the town of Staunton. The two forks of the river that gives the valley its name run northeast toward the Potomac, either side of a ridge known as Massanutten Mountain, whose spiny back stands seventeen hundred feet, at its highest, out of the valley. Between the southern tip of that ridge and the Allegheny Mountains west, sits the city of Harrisonburg, and just north of it, among dairy pastures and poultry sheds, among the intricate weave of small streams that find their way to the north fork of the Shenandoah, is Singers Glen.

This is fertile ground, well watered, sheltered and mild. When humans first came here, about 9500 BC, the climate was cooler, and coniferous forest and tundra covered the ground. After 8000 BC, deciduous forests, like those of the Blue Ridge and Alleghenies today, took over: oaks, sycamores, locusts, chestnuts (gone now) and so on. This was a good place to live: fish swam the streams; caribou, elk and moose walked the forests and woodlands, and when, around 2500 BC, the Indians began to cultivate local plants, the soil proved apt for agriculture. Two thousand years ago, the valley of the Shenandoah housed tens of thousands of people, many distinct tribes and cultures, in many villages along the major rivers and streams. All of them dissipated—died, declined or fled—fast when Europeans came and settled in the middle 1700s. Most of the founding white settlers were either Scots-Irish Presbyterians or German Lutherans, who became known as
the Valley Dutch. They cleared the land and turned it over to intensive farming, a tradition the valley sustains to this day.77

Laurie Kutchins understands herself as formed out of a place she took in through the pores of her skin, through her mouth and eyes. But it isn’t this landscape she lives in now, through whose plump fields we drive home to her farmhouse. It is Wyoming, way west, utterly different ground to this. ‘Wyoming has marked my life more deeply than any other,’ she writes in ‘Wind Ensemble’ (ibid, p 137). Even though she lives these days in this lusher, milder valley, contained and fertile and cultivated now for thousands of years, it is the landscapes and weather of the west and her past in that geography that ‘keeps carving me,’ she continues (ibid, p 137). Wyoming—this place that has shaped her and goes on shaping her psyche as though it were the wind and the energies of the earth and she were the body of the land—includes the family habits and stories and sorrows that took place there. The landscape that breathes itself into her is not just a physical thing, though it is that too. It is also what happened to her there, the fears and loves, the losses and wounds she learned out there. But, as her writing makes clear, her human and personal experiences are not to be understood separately from the land; one does not cause or construct the other; they are one. They are part of each other. Her life is a microcosm of the land, explained by it, echoed, even embodied in the land, as it is embodied in her.

Many of Kutchins’ poems deal with childhood events, with grandmother, mother, father, sister, teacher, rancher, friend, lover, children. They are not all—they are not even mostly—about cows and buttes and prairies and coyote scat, antelope bones, aspens. But these human events, these pieces of her childhood country, these people and memories, she understands as part of that embodied pattern, Wyoming, part of the matter touched by wind, shaped like everything else by the nature of the windswept space within which they happened.

‘I live in two places, and more than two places live in me,’ she writes in ‘Wind Ensemble.’ One is a hollow among the ‘fertile hills and glens of the Shenandoah Valley’ where she lives because of ‘the blunt logistics that shape a life: work, income, marriage,’ in what feels to her like exile from the other, from the place that nourishes her. Wyoming. ‘My relationship to this place known as Singers Glen,’ she writes, ‘is a loveless, but not a worthless, arrangement. It is based on practical sticks and not a music’ (ibid).

77 I rely, for this natural history of the Shenandoah, on the introduction to Michael Branch and Daniel Philippon’s anthology of Virginian nature writing, *The Height of Our Mountains*, 1998, pp 16–9.
'The other place, Wyoming, lives in me as an elemental force. It is infant and childhood country; between us, some irrevocable symbiosis has transpired ... The past and the particulars of its geography have formed me as deeply as any human love. Wyoming is a literal, living place to which I’ll always come and go. Mysterious and potent as archetype, fierce as any erosional force, it keeps carving me' (ibid).

What am I to make of Laurie's refrain, her conviction, that the wind, that the edgy 'silence in motion,' the memory-filled, elegantly eroded spaces of Wyoming, formed her and feed her poetic voice still? What to say about this 'irrevocable symbiosis'? It is the kind of claim—repeated in all her work and conversation, written, too, into her face (so delicate and weathered, her sage grey eyes full of distance)—no one can prove. You can measure it, weigh it as an idea, by sounding her writing against the place she says gives rise to it and listening for the music of both. If I can hear one in the other, then I will be satisfied that she tells me the truth; that something mutually interdependent holds between her lifework and her childhood country. I don’t think we can ever prove causality here or even isolate the medium or process through which the place and the woman were so bound to, intermingled with, each other. But how can we prove and scientifically identify, regard as real, other causalities we—literary critics, I mean, life scientists such as psychologists and sociologists—are content to accept, such as that we say is exercised by parents or trauma or culture and context (things like religion, class, ethnicity, gender, the nature of one's social world) upon a child, in the making of the woman or the man?

If we can accept that a human love, the influence of a family, a friendship or a love affair, can shape a human life, then Kutchins wants us to know that to the same extent and in a similar way—only more deeply—Wyoming, 'a living place,' has formed her. Only, I think, in an anthropocentric conception of the real world is such a claim unreasonable.

We can find connection, continuity and correlation, between a land and a woman who loves it. It will mostly be, in a poet and her work, of a textural, tonal, musical kind—a resonance of a place's qualities in her own. We will find it in qualities her work and life share with a place; we can then intuit, even imagine, what gave rise to them; but we are not guessing, no more than the geologist is in reconstructing the former lives of a particular place from the fragments he or she finds on the surface; no more than the psychologist, who connects the outer life to the inner of this man or woman, by thinking hard about connections between manifest present behaviour and past events, dreams and memories.

We are recognising patterns, patterns of connection, of cause and effect, of interpenetration, of reciprocity. And if it is true, as I think it is, that one can fully understand a man or woman and their speaking only by understanding their natural history, then let me try to understand hers and see what connections I can find between her words and native place. Let me see then how
true her voice, her writing rings to the places she sings. I will turn later to how her writing now is coloured by her strained relationship with the country that she finds herself in now; how it carries a note of exile.

As for how a place can shape a person, specifically, how it can give rise to a poetic voice—singing that place, singing life itself or anything—Laurie Kutchins has an answer. It is the wind, literally and metaphorically. 'The wind has swept ... voices and cadences into me,' she writes (this is a phrase from an early draft of 'Wind Ensemble') 'I am spun from the wind's loneliness,' she writes in her poem 'Two Dreamers, its longing for bones.' I will explore this idea, her vivid understanding of wind and its spiritual ways, below.

In his foreword to her Between Towns, Neal Bowers notes that the collection is 'unified by weather and landscape, and it is impossible to read [it] without feeling the openness of place and the lovely indifference of elements and animals going about their business ... [T]he narrator of these poems tries to perceive her place in a harsh but beautiful world. Central to her endeavor is an essential humility, a wonderful relinquishment of self to participate in something larger and more important than the individual ego' (Kutchins, 1993, p xii). These elements—the presence of the land; the animation of places; the presence of the particular qualities of Wyoming; the poet's relinquishment of ego; her identification with all life within her home place—mark Laurie Kutchins' first book of poems. The collection opens with her narrator outside, watching hawks and storms, waiting for the day's fifth—'the most elusive, the most charged'—storm, 'the one you wait for. Her first book of poems opens in the open air, with birds of the air, with a storm. It begins with a wish to know how the sky works, the 'immeasurable intelligence of cumulo-nimbi.' And it begins with a picture of herself small within the wild order of the day:

Beneath their voracious shadows, I was a random form,
an uncamouflaged lump,
a mere whistle in their chain of being.
I was the least of their concerns.

—'Still Life with Hawks and Storms,' Between Towns, 1993, p 3

These ideas continue. Wyoming unrolls, and the poet, charged with the place and its weather, unrolls with it. 'I am part of the circular air/ where shadows lengthen along dry creeks,' she writes in 'Shells.' 'The Wind' is a testament to how this force of nature has shaped and guided her: 'All my life I have known the wind, she writes there; 'All my life the wind has been pushing and pulling me/ to and from the cardinal points, bestowing me with indecisions,/ with restlessness and nocturnal wandering.' And it delivered to her, at her very birth, the poet says, 'things I had to know/before my body.' Things about land, about loss, about sadness, about singing itself, one
supposes. ‘I am at home,’ she writes in ‘Weather,’ ‘where weather is a big deal.’ ‘Each evening,’
she writes in ‘Poems to the Quaking Aspen,’ ‘I walk down to you to listen.’ She is a humble, quiet
poet, deeply bedded in her place, attentive to it, part of it, dependent upon it, schooled in and by
it. She listens; it speaks; she sings; it sings out of her as it sang into her at her conception and
birth, at every life’s turning (‘The Wind,’ Between Towns, 1993, pp 7–8).

In The Night Path, the human stands in higher relief from the land, from the rest of creation,
although what Bowers observed still holds. The Night Path is a collection that celebrates
particularly the terrain of the body, the fecund female body, the country of conception,
expectancy and birth, without removing those creative, reproductive, human processes from
the natural order in which they occur. In that sense, these are poems about nature’s fertility,
creativity—and also its insistence on death. For she carries a child through these poems; and
she also carries a father toward his death. These poems turn from the outer world to the one
within the womb, within the woman; they treat particularly the realm of a mother’s care for
her child, a daughter’s grief for her father’s dying. But the book, among other things, is an
insistence upon the animal nature of the human being—the beauty and the tragedy of that
belonging inside the life of the land.

This book, too, begins with the weather: ‘All day long it has snowed and rained and snowed.’
‘Prelude’ marks a kind of retreat, an animal’s retreat, the poet makes into a private world as her
pregnancy enters its seventh month. But it is a withdrawal into the body of the world, into its
womb, its weather—into the great and perpetual ‘listening’ that is the work the day, each day,
each place, accomplishes. ‘I cannot tell you why I love the snow,’ she writes, ‘why I want it to
keep falling all day and night/ for the next two months and fill the world/before you slip into it.’
The mother enters deeper into the life of the animate and mysterious world, so that her child
too may enter it, through her. The world listens; she joins its listening. She confines herself
within a world of snow and silent attention, and waits as the world waits, as the world unfolds and
attends to its unfolding.

‘First Summer’ is a song about becoming a mother, of ‘trying/ to preserve the dissolving shape/ of
my former life.’ In this poem the wind seeks out her infant son as she walks with him in weather:
‘At that moment the wind lunged, a vehement rush,/ forced its way down his thin windpipe.’ The
wind, her maker, here becomes a force from which the mother’s instinct is to protect her son,
when she turns her back to ‘the wind I love, its darkness’ and cupped his hands about his mouth to
keep the beloved wind out and ‘to keep a small flame going’ (First Summer,’ The Night Path, 1997,
p 44). Entering the world, creating a child, complicates one’s sense of place, one’s roles. The wind,
its voice, becomes creator and destroyer at once—she sees this for the first time. It asks her to
choose; it asks her to defend what she, within the womb of the world, has created. It asks her to
find a new voice in relationship with the wind, one that speaks of all she now is—daughter of the
wind, of a man who is dying, of a woman who is not at home where she, the daughter is; mother of this child; the lover of the world and its night silences, a woman whom the silence of midnight still wishes to take ‘into its mouth’ ('Nightfall,' *Night Path*, 1997, p 8).

The poet walks a path in this collection, between motherhood and the world the poet loves and needs still to know all on her own. All the journeys she makes into her pregnancy and birth, into her nursing of her child; into her nursing of her father and her tending of her mother take place under the moon or the sun, in weather, in places alive with their own nature and power all about her. She is in the river; she is in the garden, the meadow, the city; she is somewhere among mountains in November. Among the mothering poems, too, are many reflections on places: ‘Mountain Nocturne,’ 'The Sandhill Crane,' ‘Afternoon Along the Firehole Creek,’ ‘Prayer,’ ‘September First’ and ‘Morning in the Boiling River,’ ‘November.’ This collection negotiates a new and much less simple, less certain, relationship between a woman and the land.

In her third collection, Laurie Kutchins edges closer to a reconciliation of her worlds—the mother's world of family and home, and the woman's world of wild places and wind; the world where she is and the world where she is not, but longs to be; the country of childhood (that realm of memory and origins and that actual place, Wyoming) and the country of adulthood (that realm of the present moment and of the actual place one finds oneself, the Shenandoah). She nears reconciliation; she does not, of course, achieve it. There are unconformities in the geology of her psyche. So these poems are songs of place and displacement, belonging and exile. Where and how am I at home? they ask; and why am I not at home where I am? How can I be at home in this plump eastern valley when I am among mountains in my mind?

In this book, still unpublished as I write, the terrain of her writing remains wide and uncluttered in its feel, in its texture and sound, though its location has changed. These poems are written out of her years in the Shenandoah, years in which the west draws back from her life, becoming the place she summers, the place to which she returns. East is now her children's home. She herself migrates, like the bird. And she finds herself, more than ever, at home on the wing, in the wind. These poems, together, sing in the rhythm of that migration, moving west and east and west and east. The weather of these poems shifts from storms of grief at exile and loss ('The Bedroom,' 'Mount Zion Road,' 'Shenandoah'), to creeping acceptance of her fate as a woman who winters in the east under overcast skies ('The Bedroom' and 'Shenandoah'), to the quiet ecstasy of gratitude for safe return into the west, like moonrise on a clear night ('Moonrise').

In 'The Bedroom' the poet lies awake in her upstairs room in Singers Glen, its walls painted sage by her husband to suggest the west—and 'the color of these walls keep me rooted/ to dry places.' But, she writes, ‘In this room’ I often dream/I can’t find my way home.' That is the fear that stalks this collection. That is its key register. But the poems play about that chord of exile,
excursions into the particularities of life in a dry place and life in a wet place, in major and minor keys. 'Shenandoah,' 'Mount Zion Road,' 'Conversation' and 'The Bedroom' are the poems that dwell on the tension of displacement. 'Moonrise' breathes its sensuous sigh of relief at return to the west. There are other poems that speak of childhood, of motherhood, of New Mexico, of spring and winter and another woman's midwifery in Africa. These poems shift, and their moods and weather and forms alter, searching for the way home.

These are more questioning poems than Kutchins' earlier work. They voice all the elements of her life in the country of adulthood—all the questions I have listed, all the tensions. They are less certain—of what home means, of where the poet's place is, why she is here and not elsewhere. (Between Towns carries a conviction about where a young woman's world is, where she belongs.) The new poems are, perhaps, more satisfying, because of these ambiguities; because, also, of the influence of two geographies. In the new poems, Wyoming's spare, wide nature sounds out, and also that of the more verdant, tucked and folded valley of the east ('The Bedroom'). But these poems grow more intense and crowded, perhaps, under the influence of the tamed and overworked farmland she now inhabits and of her sense of exile there ('Old Windows,' 'The Bedroom' and 'Mount Zion Road').

The influence of Virginia, though, is still slight in Laurie Kutchins' writing. The Shenandoah mostly provides a space for a 'contrapuntal ache of exile' to resound and to enter her works more strongly than ever. It is Wyoming, still, now a place of longing rather than habitation, that shapes the tone and diction of her works. Her poems remain what they have always been—they are washed, in the way that Wyoming is washed, with light and wind; scoured by them as the land is scoured. They are spare terrains, her writings, beset by weather—snow, wind, storm, flood—and ringing with images and sounds both delicate and stark, erotic and pastoral and horrible.

I am at home anywhere men and women are telling weather stories.

The time when a single gust tossed a dog in its doghouse
out of the yard.

The blizzard of '84 when things modern shut down for days,
the livestock stuck under snow,

the storm when a pregnant woman left her car in search of gas,
wasn't found until the clearing, days later,
frozen against a pumping oil pump...

The time when Horse, laying fence, trapped his thumb between wire,
and stood there under the January sun hoping someone would come,
and by dusk whacked his thumb off
to get home before the dark froze him
stiff as a fence post.'

—'Weather,' Between Towns, 1993, pp 13-4

Bodiless, its mission is to delight my body.
On summer afternoons it slips up the sleeves of my blouse, my skirt flares,
it dabbles and plays about the nipples, rouses them into dimpled delirious berries.

—'The Wind,' Between Towns, 1993, p 7

I recognize the smell of thunder gathering
over the scrub sage, the distance I am driving towards.
Beside me my sister flicks the dial off,
not getting anything but static and country.

—'Bloodroot,' Between Towns, 1993, p 35

Has it entered your blood yet?
Great horned owl over the Bull Elk Creek ravine.
sandhills in the long grass just past dusk,
granite breathing more deeply now that the moon is coming home,
in full darkness I will wait with you,
late into the night to watch it rise
over these mountains I've known since birth,
their elk and bear, lupine and balsamroot,
slopes and meadows of snow...

—'Moonrise,' Kutchins, 2004

These poems are composed of vernacular words, place names, landforms, names for plants and animals, parts of the human body. They are plain in their diction, undemonstrative, clear; yet they point to mysteries, and have the tone of a dream somehow. They are familial, parochial, intimate in reference and tone; these are people and places and episodes, known or remembered. This is the country of childhood remembered in the cells of the body and shared quietly with us. To read these poems is to overhear the poet, remembering, listening to her past and her landscape (Voigt, 1999, p 122); it is to be entrusted with these passionately recalled secrets of the country of her
heart. They are sensual too, touching on breast and blood, smell of thunder, static, the feel of darkness ahead of moonrise, bite of axe through thumb. They show us delicate things—meadow flowers and summer breeze—along with macabre—the pregnant woman’s death, the fate of Horse’s thumb.

Laurie Kutchins’ poems explore her place. I mean this two ways. First, they wonder what might be an authentic role for her (or any of us) in the world, in one beloved part of it—including how to be woman, daughter, mourner for a departed father, childbearer, wife and mother, how to care for the places she loves, how to know and love them; how to sing them as a poet; how to live with fear and wounds. Her poems ask the world she knows what it would have her do.

2

Though I do not completely belong,
I meander and bend among your whispers.
I embrace the smell of summer in your house.
You are more alive to me

you who understand things
about fear
I am afraid to learn.

What’s here? ...

4

Until I found you, I could not have told you
I would like to become an eye
in the white bark
where a limb fell.

—‘Poems to the Quaking Aspen,’ Between Towns, 1993, pp 62–4

In this poem and others, the poet understands that other beings live without anxiety about how to be. It is that competence, that entirety she wishes to know, to share. She does not wish to become the tree or the hawk, but to know what they know about living so rightly. To belong.

And most of her search consists of silent listening, waiting, breathing in what places have to offer of themselves. And so this is the second thing I meant by Laurie’s poetic exploration of her places. Her poems explore the landscape itself, familiar places. Those places within this wide orb of home include bedrooms and kitchens, sheds and studies, cattle yards and cabins, meadows and
riverbanks, aspen groves, garden paths, schoolrooms, mornings, motel rooms, phone booths, highways and dreams among places she has known. Hers is a poetry of place—her place in the world, the world's place in her.

Laurie Kutchins' poems feel out her own place, along with those of other living things, within the spacious terrain of a place she has known from birth and carries with her in mind and voice; and now she seeks it, still dragging her feet, in a world in which she finds herself making home. In her conception of the real world it is clear that she belongs equally with those other beings she converses with, listens to. She is neither more nor less than any of them, aspen, hawk, cow, sandhill crane, lupine, owl, child. Her search is for her 'part,' as she calls it in 'Shells.' Her part, as human, as poet, though she does not say it just so, is to witness; to hear the song of the way things are— in country she knows—and utter it as well as she can; or at least utter well her seeking it. Her part is to let the place happen to her and sing it as it does.

But Laurie Kutchins' landscapes are not simple pastorals. They are edgy, disquieting. They contain hints of other worlds within; and troubling memories—hers, the land's—are enfolded in their strata. Even in the poems of Kutchins' first book Between Towns—most of which are written of and in places she loves—there is a feeling that home and belonging, 'this' (as she calls the thing she hungers for inside the moment in the poem 'This') lie far off, out of reach, deeply embedded, lost inside old memory or on the other side of fear; outside the window or over the ridge. There is a desire for the authentic place inside this one, an anxious listening for a frequency just out of range. There is a feeling of being in the wrong place, of arriving just a moment too late; of being on the point of departure; of being small or lost. Her places—immediate and remembered—are haunted. '[T]here was always/ this desire and something/ about leaving something behind,' she puts it, recalling a day in Midland, Texas in 'A White Lie.' That is the feeling in her poems of the childhood country; indeed, of many of her landscapes.

In a way, the theme and feeling of displacement, the note of exile that comes to dominate her writing in her third collection—and in her essay 'Wind Ensemble'—sits in her poems from the beginning, even before her physical exile from the place that formed her. There is, I'm sure, a psychological explanation, something in the poet's life history, that may explain that note, which persists through Laurie Kutchins' work. But no explanation would be complete either that did not take account of the nature of the land itself, in her experience of it, for she has been listening to it, putting her cheek to its cheek, pretty much all of her life, in grief and in contentment. What did the landscape in which her childhood took place teach this poet about the persistence of the past in the present; and the transience of even the toughest rocks in the face of the wind? What tone and pitch did the wind carry into her voice out of the landscape of Wyoming? What did its music have to say about the quality of here? About the inadequacy of what one apprehends to speak for the whole of what has happened here? About the powerful presence of absence? What, for
instance, did Wyoming, her upheaved and eroded landscapes, teach her about the loss embedded in, implied by, every landform?

‘The Wyoming wind is a cadence always beyond me,’ she writes in ‘Wind Ensemble.’ ‘It extracts from the land its ruthless music, dust and grit and a dry clamor of snow ... Its scrambled song is my story ... The wind will cradle itself in the very shapes it destroys’ (‘Wind Ensemble,’ 2003, p 135). It was a landscape to school you in paradox, in the necessity of departure, the impossibility of staying put, the unreliability of all fixed hopes and memories.

I wonder, in other words, if the tone and texture of Kutchins’ writing—this sense of solitude, of smallness within a wide realm dominated by large forces of nature—is not a characteristic of the terrain she loves, of Wyoming itself, and of the kind of life that is possible within it. Of this poet, too, but in the first place of the landscape she feels has given her voice. Wyoming is not ever going to be a place that returns your love assiduously. It is a stern father, demanding a lot of you, including patience and resilience. It is hard to know, difficult to live with. It makes life hell for those who stay with it—snow all winter, wind most of the rest of the time, fire if the snows are light and the summers therefore dry. Perhaps the sense of displacement that marks Laurie’s later writing—while deepened by her living so far from the harsh wellspring of her writing, so far from her tough lover—is part of her experience she learned as a child of what it is to belong most deeply. It is part of what she learned love meant. Belonging in Wyoming means staying close to a landscape that pushes you away, accepting that what you love is always in the process of disappearing on the wind.

Laurie Kutchins begins ‘Wind Ensemble’ with a section that gives exile a sound, a terrain and a wind. It is Wyoming. ‘It begins with a sound the night makes,’ she starts, ‘knowing I will be gone.’ It is the iron sound of a train passing though a dark prairie, and after the train it is ‘the ruthless music of the wind’ and the snow blowing and the sky breathing. And, specifically, it is the sound of wind ‘pushing snow across the bluffs of red-wash sandstone. Wind shaking sage and buckbrush into bristled gnarls. Wind smoothing the rock of names, banishing the human imprint ...’ (ibid, p 139). ‘Exile. Erosion,’ she concludes her opening movement, ‘Sounds that shelter even as they rip open’ (ibid, p 136). The sound of Wyoming—not only for Laurie, and not only the sound, but the dynamic space that it is, always astir with arrival and departure and their clatter—is a sparse symphony of wind and snow and rock; it is the relentless exhumation of the past and the annihilation of the present—their dance. For fossils and old mountains, old oceans are steadily being brought to the surface by erosion; the landscape of the present is travelling rapidly east on the weather; the season just gone is always about to return.

You read Laurie Kutchins’ early poems of that place and feel moved, sad, as though you have got close to the truth and yet missed it, forgotten it, or left it somewhere behind. You overhear the
poet encountering her world that way, and you feel it too. You are afraid, with her, that the place is about to tell you everything, all at once, and that it may not be what you thought it was.

Coming home from the river in the dusk of day, I hear it ...
I hear it in the clipped stars that tumble and catch
in the wings of crickets ...
I come so close but am afraid
to undress it, or have it
undress me:

could not be what I think,
could be, exactly.

—'This,' Between Towns, 1993, p 29

What one loves and yearns for most eludes one, and you are half-glad it does. For you suspect it is harsh and powerful, whatever makes this place so austere and tender all at once. It is still out there in all that space, and we must wait longer, fearfully, hopefully.

The place—Wyoming and its representation in her poems—is full of distance. The distance is not empty, but alive with threat and loveliness, horror and humour embodied in small things and landforms, and people's voices within it. There is an eloquent silence about everything. It is a silence that harbours and manifests tremendous change. Out of it everything comes—snow and fire and wind and heartbreak. Wyoming swarms and her poems swarm with 'sensual distance.' She uses this phrase in 'Alchemy,' a poem in her first collection, and I understand it to point to a quality her poems have and Wyoming, around the Wind River especially, has: open-pored, endless and stark spaciousness, touched sparsely, heartrendingly with a sound or shape or memory or smell, a pile of bones, a cry of coyote, a fall of star, a spin of a bicycle wheel, a kick of boot in gravel, a gruff mumble of male voice, which enlivens the space between the taut membrane of sky and the denser one of ground, and allows us to enter there and hold on. Sensual detail within the wide space articulates something close to the essence of the life of the place, and yet withholds it, so that one must stay longer. The poet never quite sings the thing itself. What the wind is saying, what came to you in the night, is never there in the morning, though it leaves notes in the silence, signs on the ground, of its passing.

Between the trailer and Purple Mountain
I pass the pelvis of an old death
to scan the grass. Up close,
the white blades bend
with the piss left behind by whatever passed here
in the night, each ruled
by the same sun that orders
my nights into days.

Where did they go, those creatures who made
the sounds that woke me in the night?
The shriek that filled the dark
sleep of the mountain,
the stalked elk-throat, the seemingly gleeful
howls, sharp yips, more of them
and again
the crazed throaty scream
I’ve held inside since I was a small child ...

—'Mountain Nocturne,' The Night Path, 1997, P 42

There is that place, Wyoming, its silent spaces sung with spare notes of death and glee; the night grass decorated with death’s pelvis and a trail of piss. There is a night and a small girl, each holding in its belly a scream.

And here, in lyric prose, the poet walks the same landscape, in the wind, this time hunting something the place has taken from her—a hat, but also, perhaps, a home—and finding again, in the breath and body of the place, even in its leavings, the thing that it has given to her: a syntax and diction older than language, older than her body, the thin and untranslatable music of her life:

Here is my body walking in wind and sagebrush, chasing after my brown hat blown off by a muscular gust. The language of this place finds its home on the edge of my elbow, in my earlobe, in the jaw of an antelope nibbling escarpment grass, in hair and fur whirling in the inexhaustible here. In the mild chinook of a late March morning, bent stalks of August, November. Twist of hair and bunch-grass across the hatless eyes of a woman, brain in her heart, syllables happy in her mouth making it palpable:

wyoming I am-home am-home am home wyoming i am ...

... I cross more dried coyote scat. Looking closer, I see bone, hair, grass and juniper embedded in the scat. The drum of the wind pounds beneath my skin, an arid voice. Almost as echo, I hear my own breathing trying to keep pace with the wind. Yes, what the wind tells me is older than my body. Half a life, and how small I am grown. I have always been so. A human speck in this country made out of wind and sky, and filled with dry light, unappeasable space. Boundaries here are permeable. I cannot tell
where the body of this country ends and mine begins, which words belong to me, and which to the wind. This, the only symbiosis I fully trust.

—'Wind Ensemble,' 2003, pp 138-59

Wyoming is this large, scoured space, haunted with signs and sounds, harsh, beautiful and never finished, either with you or with herself. Its aesthetics are yours, and you speak of that place—if you come from it as Laurie does or if you give part of yourself, as she does, to listening to it—whenever you open your mouth, no matter what it is you have to say. That may be what the place wants of you. Its gift to you is itself—its endless, animate distance, its orchestrated silence—out of which you make a language. Its sensual distance becomes your own, by virtue of the wind. The quality of its dance with the land of Wyoming—the rhythm and texture of that—it carries to your ear, to all the pores of your skin; it joins you in the way the place moves, in its relentless song, its whisper and clangour.

'I didn’t know, when I wrote my first and second books,' Laurie says to me one November evening in Virginia, 'that writing, particularly writing place, is really a matter of listening.'

'I think I have come to understand this consciously only in the last couple of years,' she says, 'although I think that all my poems have been written in the unspoken knowledge of the fact that the words come into my ear and I must find a way to utter them. Most of my learning to write has been putting aside learned ideas about constructing the artifact. A poem arrives; the moment gives the language and the thought. Poems are moments of grace we open ourselves to, if we are lucky.' What arrives as a kind of music, she adds later in a note to me, what arrives as an oracle, must be embodied in organic forms, in creatures and occasions, just as revelation is placed and grounded and particular when you come upon it in the land. The poet’s utterance, like the land’s (in wind), must inhabit a body: words and the places they sing and signify.

To sing—that is, to write authentically—is to become the instrument on which the place, the present moment somewhere, crowded with all its stories, plays its music. It is to breathe out what the place breathes into you. It is to let your body receive the wind, to let it delight in your form, your capacity to shape air into sound, into names, phrases and sentences and stanzas. This is how I interpret Laurie’s understanding of the business of writing: from her poems, her conversation and her essay ‘Wind Ensemble,’ which, as we have already seen, articulates and dramatizes this symbiotic relationship between a place and its poet. For her it is clear that, inside the place or away from it, the words arrive from the place to the ear or memory’s ear. We find something in the words’ sounds that we love; and we love them ‘into utterance’ (A Spoken Sketch of the Erotic, 2000, p 54). ‘A word like seed from milkweed,’ she writes in that essay, ‘like stalk,
like lilac, like arroyo, drifts from elsewhere into the ear, is potent, latches. Before it finds its way into utterance, having come to us from elsewhere, from country, 'the mind shakes the fire out of it in an attempt to attach, to signify some meaning, to bring another kind of sense to it.' And in that translation into sense-making human utterance, something, 'the fire,' is always lost. It remains in the land and in the body's response to it.

In Wyoming something is always being lost. It is a landscape of loss composed by wind. The larger part of what you love there has already passed away, or belongs to an earlier era of the earth.

Laurie Kutchins' understanding of the creative, descriptive, evocative act—of listening-into-singing—is the kind of insight a woman from Wyoming might have. For Wyoming is a place animated, made, carried away by wind. It is palpably an auditory realm, a space replete with rhythm. Weather here is everything. To live here is to live inside the dance of weather and ground; it is to resonate with the moving air. It is to be visited, relentlessly, by wind; moved by it—frightened, calmed, stirred, blessed, shaken. 'Wyoming' comes from a Delaware word, and it means 'place where the plains open' (Wind Ensemble,' 2003, p 139). Its name, then, was carried west in the mouths of hunters and exiles from the east, the Delaware, against the prevailing wind, and bestowed by them upon this place of vivid, sometimes desolate, amplitude. Its name speaks a story of exile too. 'As a sound, Wyoming embodies the very vowels and sonic energy of the wind' (ibid, pp 140–41).

In Wyoming, the wind is a relentless breathing that gusts down from the Rockies and whips east onto the high plains where there are so few trees to break its concentration ... To be born and come of age in this place is to have the wind own your eardrum. Even when calm, the wind resounds in the blood and bone of your body. It is absent so rarely that stillness begins to hound almost as much as its presence ... The wind will inhabit you as an animal inhabits a place where it knows how to stay alive. Its authority—both within and without the body—will erupt but also comfort, protect as well as plague.

If I speak of the wind as if it were a presence, a parent, even a lover, this is because it is true. Disembodied, bodiless, the wind's whole mission is to reach for the grounded, sensory body. It caresses, stings, and blows to keep me earthly and awake. Perhaps like so many of us, the wind seeks wholeness in what it does not have. Messenger without a body, it is always ripping the fence between hunger and gratitude.

—'Wind Ensemble,' 2003, pp 140–41

Wind, for her, is ineffable, yet it is a presence, a carrier or voices, a shaper of geologies and weather and of human lives. It is one half of a relationship within a landscape that gives rise to poetic utterance, to song and speech. The listening person is the other half. Wind, Laurie insists, is not for her a metaphor for how language arrives, how poems dawn, how a place is made known
to a person. This is literally how it happens; and it goes on happening even when the wind stops, even when the person goes away east, because it has already lodged in the bloodstream, in the memory sounds and rhythmic relations with the space from which it comes, relations that go on in the cells of the body, the structures of memory. 'The wind in harshly open country,' she writes, 'has swept ... voices and cadences into me' (ibid, p 143).

'I am not convinced,' she adds, 'that the cerebrum is the mother of all language' (ibid, p 138). Country and body make it, aided by brain-cell and culture, of course. But Kutchins' conception of poetic utterance gives primacy not to cognitive, that is not to merely human intellectual, but to natural processes—to land and wind and mind-in-body. What a poet sings comes out of, indeed it is part of, the dance of body with place, the play of air in space; and how that particular energetic field (a landscape somewhere), that rough metrical forum, that amplitude,\(^{78}\) rattles words and phrases from a poet's mouth or pen, language given shape by her body in that wind in that place. Hers is, schooled by Wyoming, an auditory, a spatial, a musical imagination of place—and of poetry's relationship with place.

When the wind is silent in Wyoming, 'it feels like a pause between movements in a great symphony,' Kutchins writes in 'Wind Ensemble' (ibid, p 140). The silence is part of the pattern of the wind's larger musical form. Among other things, this image explains why even the silences are so haunted and animated in Kutchins' poems.

Wind is rhythm and energy, seeking and playing with bodies. It is also, though, an embodiment, or at least an expression, of large invisible forces at play between the spinning earth and the atmosphere. It is, she writes 'the most natural embodiment of spirit, what we cannot see making itself known' to human bodies, to coyote, to escarpment. It animates and quickens and moves us all, and it reminds us of the cycle of interconnection and change in which we all live and move. And it joins us to everything else, so that by breathing, not only are we inspired by the earth, but we become intimate with everything else the air touches.

All the same, the wind does not tell us everything clearly. It does not explain. 'The wind carries only enigmatic directives, like an answered koan out of which break more questions,' she writes in 'Wind Ensemble' (ibid, p 137) So the listening never ceases; and the writing becomes a living out of the questions, a sounding out of the hints of what is real that come on the wind from the world.

Wind—the continuous, unseverable air-touches every place, but it shapes each uniquely according to the way the forms within each geography respond to it. The way the dance of earth

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\(^{78}\) See my discussion of the idea of amplitude and Paul Carter's use of the word in relation to musical apprehension of space in chapter five, 'The silent continent,' pp 102 ff above; and in chapter six, 'The text & the world,' pp 126 ff.
and sky manifest in the weather of each place in turn shapes the nature of each place and the people who dwell in there. The dance of wind and land has a different cadence everywhere. And some of the wind's work of shaping place, making music, stirring life, it performs through human bodies, by giving them breath, by inspiring utterance, by carrying their voices and song, by bringing shock and inspiration and song to others. The voice it inspires in each person in each place will, I sense, be his or hers alone—the gift of the wind, but the product of the way it sets that person's eardrums, limbs and heart resonating.

Wyoming could teach you such a philosophy, if you let it. 'My relationship to the wind, and its country,' Laurie writes in 'Wind Ensemble,' 'was first borne out of prenatal bedrock and childhood' (p 141). She was conceived and born and raised in the wind and its country, Wyoming. It teaches you to watch and listen for the wind and weather, to wait for inspiration to arrive and then, if you can, to honour it. Wyoming weathers you. Its name speaks of spirit and openness; its nature reminds you that the world is big and we are small within it. Wind is the dynamic structure that gives the place its austere and spacious form, and goes on singing it endlessly, even in the silences.

When we are speaking together of wind and utterance in her house in the Shenandoah, the poet Rilke comes to mind for both of us and enters our conversation. In Laurie's study where I am sleeping, in the yellow room she and Kevin have made at the end of an old barn, I find her copy of Rilke's poems and turn to the third of his Orpheus Sonnets. I have read this before, but reading it now, I understand it as I have not understood it before. It is something Laurie learned from Wyoming. 'Singing is being (Dasein),' concludes Rilke. But what is true singing, and therefore true living on earth? It is not, he learns from Orpheus, songs of love or desire, praise, description or conquest. It is not something born inside our body—in the languaging centre of the brain, for instance—and expressed. We do not invent it and project it upon the silent world. It comes to us from the world and speaks through us. It is a gust, breathed in and uttered again, a kind of resonance the listening body makes in response:

True singing is a different breath, about
Nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.

—Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, Part II, number 3, translated by Mitchell

What Rilke describes is the lyric experience, the quintessential poetic encounter.

And there, in Rilke, is the wind again. The song that counts is not so much about anything as from somewhere; is heard and repeated in lines, in notes set vibrating on a lyre, in patterned sounds worthy of the wind that carried them to the poet. The poem is breathed in—inspiration—and breathed out—utterance. Song without utterance by a body is nothing, or at least it is not song;
just as wind without embodiment within a place is unfulfilled; a force seeking a pattern. Singing, then, is listening and witnessing performed by the body, first by silent attention and then by the reshaping of the heard sounds, in language. (Something of the original fire is always lost, Kutchins reminds us, and I noted above, because we cannot speak without bringing syntactical and semantic order to patterns of sounds; we have, and it is part of what we do when we speak, and instinct for meaning-making when we use words. But still, song may survive that process, albeit diminished; and the place from which it came may sound in its rhythms too.) True singing is a kind of breath, then: it arrives from places, where it lives as wind and silence, as the rhythm that moves between lifeforms and landforms and the weather; it moves a man or a woman, shapes cadences inside them; the breath is transcribed into speech, which attempts to express what the place expressed to the listener. And that expression, Laurie says to me in a note she sends, will never be as pure or as accurate or as elemental 'as the language the place embodies.' Language, she writes in 'Conversation' is a 'pittance,' inadequate to express so clearly as the blue bird's flight the 'pattern' of the place, or at least the bird's migratory pulse within it.

Places sing in and out of their perpetual musical natures. They sing in the sounds they make through bird and river and wind-on-rock. They sing sometimes too in the utterances of witnesses like Laurie, inhabited by the cadences and timbres of a particular place, and visited by its notes and musical fragments. But places sing on without us. They have voices—patterns of expression, musical forms—of their own, which sometimes we perceive. Their lyric.

This is what I learn from talking with Laurie, from revisiting Rilke in her yellow room, from reading Laurie's writing and travelling, in her absence, through the Valley of the Wind. Wyoming is where Laurie learned this too, and she has been remembering it, articulating it, through all her writing long since she moved away and became a summer visitor, like the blue bird.

'Kutchins's cast of mind is decidedly metaphysical, and she holds her poise at the point of paradox, celebrating the stark opulence of a western environment,' writes Neal Bowers again in the introduction to Between Towns. 'Hers is a desolate happiness,' he goes on. As Wyoming's is a hard, cruel beauty; I would add; a distance sparsely occupied with blessings.

Hers is 'nothing less than the poetry of epiphany,' Bowers continues. What do these words mean, 'epiphany' and 'metaphysical' as they bear on Laurie's work? Her poetry seeks and sometimes discloses the eternal within the fleeting, the song within the thing, the spirit of the place. It looks for god among the details, knowing that whatever name we give to that experience of divinity we will have it only through truthful presence with the stuff of life and place. If the place is held by a raw beauty that stirs us, that will help, but it might happen too in the company of a pile of coyote scat, the carcass of an old cow. Epiphanies are what I think Laurie has in mind when
she speaks of what the wind stirs. Epiphanies—the poet's and then the readers'—are moments of revelation. They are what she calls 'this' and 'clarity,' 'the pulse,' 'the blue pattern.' They are, perhaps, Rilke's 'gust in the god.' The metaphysical is the eternal story, the pattern of meaning embodied in the physical realm, actualised in alliance with that god, the wind. It takes courage, as Bowers notes, to write epiphanies in a cynical and secular age. It takes courage to look for the larger musical form of a place on earth and to understand one's life as part of it.

'Filled with longing and joy, these poems remind us of a natural and spiritual ecology that can enrich our lives if we will let ourselves acknowledge it,' writes Bowers, wisely. 'Letting ourselves hear the world and 'acknowledging' its animating presence—listening and uttering, in other words singing—this is what Laurie Kutchins' poetry, all of her writing, attempts. '[W]hat I long to forge,' she writes in 'Wind Ensemble,' 'is an intimacy, an ecological symbiosis' (p 141). Her writing is a listening to the world; in it Wyoming sounds, her Wyoming, anyway, or such of it as she is capable of resonating in her voice.

On the desk in Laurie's study, I find a small yellow writing tablet. And on its top sheet in her handwriting I read these words, not meant for me, but lying here, all the same, where Laurie has been working and where she has cleared other things away so that I might work at this desk:

Poetics—the imprint of earth to voice—lived experience taking a shape, becoming an utterance on the page.

This note has an oracular feel. She has written fast out of a thought that arose, most probably, in reading. Her epiphany becomes mine in this moment. This room has a meditative, monkish air. It has two skins and holds the noise of the world at a distance. I can tell that the wind moves outside, though I cannot hear it, because a pattern of shadow and light, playing outside in the white pines, washes across the ash desk and the yellow paper on it, across my arms too. The place speaks silently like this.

Poetics, I am thinking, considering Laurie's note, is what lives inside experiences of place (inside other experiences too); it is what the earth surrenders of itself to human perception just now and then; it is what we shape into an utterance about, and out of, that experience. Poetics is the elusive pattern of things; and the pattern and texture—what is not merely literal—in a piece of writing. It is the lyric of the place continuing sometimes in the writing.

After the note comes a list of writers: 'Walt Whitman (his 1885 preface to Song of Myself); Stafford, Crossing Unmarked Snow, James Wright; Leslie Silko, Ceremony; Jim Galvin, The Meadow; Norman Maclean, A River Runs Through It.' I know from talking with Laurie that these books and writers
are among her influences and inspirations. Her work belongs in their epiphanic company. We speak of other poetic and intellectual influences later, and she mentions Mary Oliver, Rilke, Roethke, Hopkins, Milosz, Frost and Dickinson. These are all poets, as she is, of natural metaphysics, of tough-minded mysticism, of place. Laurie Kutchins has steeped herself in a literature of seriousness, attention, metaphysical relationship with the world. It has influenced her writing as Wyoming has. For we do not learn everything we need to know from—we do not have all our epiphanies in nor pick up our poetics from—places. Some come from books, from poems, and conversations—and notes scribbled on yellow paper in a study painted the colour of yellowing eggshells.

The ranges and basins of Wyoming were lying pretty still the day I cut through them. This is how they are now and have been for a long while—prone beneath a heavy wind, keeping up their slow dance with time, and losing their battle with the wind. But once, this land seethed in revolution. Once and for a longish time, a great and mysterious disturbance broke out among the rocks that compose this ground. It remade the face of Wyoming. Geologists know it as the Laramide Revolution, named for the easternmost of the ranges—the Laramie Range, that were born within it.

This landscape has a rich geological history. It is a story with countless episodes, many of them violent. As the rocks now tell it, its narrative is broken, its storyline is discontinuous, fragmentary. There is coal and bentonite, limestone and sandstone, gas and uranium and oil, buried, scattered about, outcropping here and there, all of it a compressed and broken fragment of a song of one era or another of the earth in this region—of seas and swamps and rivers, of the upwelling of mountains out of the centre of the earth, of an immense assortment of weathers, of ice and humidity and, of course, of wind. There were Precambrian mountain ranges in at least three waves, sheets of lava folded, eroded, reduced and replaced. These mountains gave off sediments that turned slowly to rock and were later altered, under heat and pressure to form quartzite and slate; limestones, made in archetypal seas got turned to marble. And under all that, still far back in time (more than six hundred million years ago) the granite that composes most of the mountains you see these days in Wyoming, formed up underneath all those ancestral ranges. Seas lived here through another four hundred odd-million years, a slowish time in the long life of Wyoming. But in the late Cretaceous and early Tertiary periods, starting some sixty-five million years ago, the geological story suddenly picked up speed. Under the seas and marshes new mountains began to rise. They pushed the seafloor up, and the waters ran off, south to the Gulf of Mexico and

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north to the Arctic Sea. As the Eocene dawned (fifty-five million years ago), the trouble really
started. The revolution broke out. I am going to let John McPhee pick up the tale here. No
knows it better or tells it more elegantly than he:

In westernmost Wyoming, detached crustal sheets came planing eastward—rode fifty, sixty, and
seventy-five miles over younger rock—and piled up like shingles, one overlapping another. In the
four hundred miles east of these overthrust mountains, other mountains began to appear, and in a
very different way. They came right up out of the earth ... Basins flexed between them, filling as they
downwarped—folding, too, especially at their edges. These mountains moved, but not much—five
miles here, eight miles there. They moved in highly miscellaneous and ultimately perplexing directions.
The Wind River Range crept southwest, about five inches for every ten years for a million years. The
Bighorns split. One part went south, the other east. Similarly, the Beartooths went east and southwest.
The Medicine Bow moved east. The Washakies west. The Uintas north. All distances were short,
because the mountains were essentially rooted. The Sierra Madre did not move at all. The spines of the
ranges trended in as many directions as a weathervane. The Laramie Range trended north–south. The
Wind Rivers and Bighorns northwest–southeast. The spectacularly anomalous Owl Creeks and Uintas,
lining themselves up at right angles to the axis of the western cordillera, ran east–west. All these
mountain ranges were coming up out of the craton—heartland of the continent, the Stable Interior
Craton. It was as if mountains had appeared ... like a family of hogs waking up beneath a large blanket.
An authentic enigma on a grand scale, this was one of the oddest occurrences in the tectonic history of
the world.


In ten million years all these ranges rose, slipped one way or the other across Wyoming, and lost
most of their height to erosion. These Wind Rivers that ran along beside me mildly most of that
December day rose in those brief geological years some sixty thousand feet out of the land around
them, and the others did likewise. The Absarokas, out of which the Wind River now rises, were
the children of volcanoes that awoke fifty-two million years ago. Then all the nonsense stopped,
and Pacific winds—warm in those days and free of impediment—set to work, along with rain and
rivers, and, over thirty million years, they wore all those new mountaintops away and filled the
basins between the ranges with the debris, until most of the ranges were lost to view and a plain
ran evenly all the way from what was left visible of the Rockies to the Laramies and onward into
Nebraska.

Wind buried these ranges, and wind exhumed them again. Well, there was a bit of water too, a
network of streams falling eastward with the high plain. But geologists don’t believe that water
alone could have unearthed the Eocene ranges on its own. Wind, according to the preeminent
Wyoming geologist David Love, did most of the work (McPhee, 1986, pp 67–8). So wind scoured
the basins between these ranges, and wind scours them still. The rivers that formed up on the
now eroded plain found courses that bore no relationship to the ranges that now rise above the plain; this is because they found their way across what was once a wide plain of infill, which they gradually helped wear away until the mountains of the Laramide Revolution began to rise from the plain again. So, for instance, the Wind River, falling southeast out of what are now again the Absarokas, found a course tending east that bent north close to the point where what is now called the Wind River Range (to the river’s south) peters out; the river then cut its way seaward through Montana. After a time, erosion exposed the granite back of the Owl Creek Range directly in the river’s northward path. But like the other rivers—the North Platte, which flows into the Medicine Bows and out again in a similar manner, and the Laramie, which splits the Laramie Range—the Wind River had enough power to cut through the mountains as they rose and carry on its way. (The river is called the Bighorn on the north of the Owl Creeks; the mystery of its single identity, the notion that a river could flow through a mountain, escaped even the indigenous human residents of the area (*ibid*, pp 53–4).

So Wyoming now contains and modestly articulates two mysteries, at least: mountains that arose from nowhere, were buried and rose again from the plain; and rivers whose evolutionary story cuts across that of the born-again ranges. This austere land, swept still by the winds that first buried, then resurrected its ranges, tells a long but cryptic tale of violence and loss, return and loss all over again. Wyoming does drama with immaculate restraint. Nothing lasts, is what its landscape knows, except the wind; things do not run according to the usual plan here; and the way things are is never the end of the story—or even the beginning.

Most of what unfolded here has been lost. Yet it is gestured at elegantly by what remains, this worn and put-upon terrain. I am thinking, driving through it, stopping now and then to breathe it in, that Wyoming itself, though its winds are extravagant, speaks in a laconic vernacular rather like its residents and those writers who have spoken for it so well, James Galvin, for example, Gretel Ehrlich, Annie Proulx and Laurie Kutchins. I guess they learned that understatement here; it would seem the only way to capture the essence of this self-effacing landscape, in which so much has happened that you’re going to need to learn compression if you are going to say much about it. The god’s gust comes sharp here. The wind has been coming fiercely out of the southwest since these ranges were born, (*ibid*, p 65) carrying grains of rock, valleys of sediment away to the east, so you had better catch what it has to tell you, get it down once, get it right and get inside before it carries you away with it. Understatement—saying little, implying much—is a geological as well as a literary art in Wyoming, and a habit of speech native to the place. It marks the writing that captures the spirit of this eroded, resilient place.

John McPhee notes another thing about the geology of Wyoming. There are places, one of them in a road cut near Rawlins, in the modest Rawlins Uplift, where the whole history of the American continent, the whole story of the ages of earth, is embedded. Another place where
rocks almost as old as the oldest known on earth—nearly four billion years old—sit with others that arrived only yesterday, geologically speaking, is the Tetons and the Snake River valley, a site of fathomless earth-riddles, of beauty and drama, which drew Laurie’s father like an oracle, and draws and homes his daughter still. No place on earth, probably, has more to say about the history of everything than Wyoming, than Jackson particularly, and no place says it more graciously.

Deep time outcrops in Wyoming, side by side sometimes, with time almost as new as we are, and still ticking. To live among the rocks here is to grow up in within a story of great antiquity and complexity laconically expressed, from Archaean oceans and mountains rising within them, through Cambrian seas and their sediments, Triassic swamps and marshes, Jurassic river systems and forests owned by giant reptiles, Cretaceous seas and their sediment of bone and shell, the Eocene turmoil and the tropical Miocene infill. The rocks here contain all the major plotlines from volcanoes to earthquakes, inundation, erosion by wind and glacier and stream, baffling plate tectonics and long lulls (ibid, pp 24–6). McPhee speculates that a geologist growing up in Wyoming—like his informant and travelling companion David Love (who was born on a ranch very close to the road I took through the Indian Reservation at Riverton)—‘would inherently comprehend the cycles of the earth’ (ibid, p 29). He would have to learn to think through the whole of time, in four dimensions. He would develop a capacity for piecing together fragments, fitting them together and imagining the Big Picture. If that is true for a geologist, perhaps it is true for a writer too.

A writer might learn from Wyoming many truths about life and about poetics: that change is constant; that spare surfaces speak of great depths; that things are never as they seem; that many things can never be explained, just guessed at; that mysteries inhere and persist; that there are patterns to be fathomed among what remains; that some forces, like wind, are primordial; that stories of inconceivable drama are often told (and told most movingly) in simple, plain and unadorned forms; that what remains is the child of what went before; and that the present is an expression of old, old stories, at the same time as it is the stuff from which the future is composing itself. You would come to know how lively and mobile rocks really are; you would sense the immense, eternal and fluctuating rhythms that are always in the process of playing out across time and space in the landscape. You might learn to apprehend a landscape as a dynamic space, a massive musical form. This and much more a writer might learn by opening herself to the land and its god, the wind, in Wyoming.

Laurie Kutchins' father was a geologist in Wyoming. She is his daughter, as she is the daughter of the wind. Among other things, her poetry is geologically literate. She has picked up rock stories from her father. She knows the body of Wyoming—not just its winds, but its bones.
My father knows the earth's past, how its bones become air,
metamorphic slate and raw energy.
High upon the jagged mountain he traces
the spine of a fish.
Deep in the rock he finds carcasses of stars,
the cheekbones of winter, old footprints of wind.
He knows bones turn beneath us, softening
into soupy fuels.
But he has no memory of his own, and I am left looking
for a boy lost among the ministers' voices,
his loneliness among sisters,
the roughage of unlived bones.

—'Bones,' Between Towns, 1993, p 36

Mysteries, enigmas, archetypal forces inhabit Laurie Kutchins' work as they inhabit the geology she grew up in. She turns to land, because she knows the rocks have all the answers; because it will be where everything begins; and she turns to it, just out of instinct. Because to grow up here is not only to know the wind before you know yourself, it is also to know how lately humankind and language have arrived upon a scene already voluble with the syntax and stories of rocks. Her work takes its humility perhaps from that place and the lessons of geology written there. It celebrates it, even when it does not turn to it. In its deceptive, challenging simplicity of style, its vernacular grace and self-effacement, her work celebrates Wyoming, even when it does not address it directly. It recalls Wyoming in its austere but melodic music of loss.

Laurie's poems point at episodes in her history, in her childhood country, in her father's life, her mother's, her inner landscape, without often spelling them out. This is the way of poetry, of course: to compress and let the texture of the particular stand in its affective power for much else merely hinted at.

Her lines of verse are like strata, made out of other lives, laid down long under water, hardened, compressed and articulated within a landscape where erosion reveals them as part of an outcrop. All you see is what time has exposed or a movement of plates, a faulting, thrust to the surface. It is as though all of her history and all her prehistory have composed the lines through time; and she has laid herself open to their slow, slow making, or their sudden upthrust, their burial and exhumation, their final fragmentary expression in the present moment. Did she learn to put down lines like that, I wonder, from her accidental field geology, from a landscape of naked outcrops? From what a landscape like Wyoming's can teach a witness like Laurie about the deep wells from
which story comes; about the coexistence of past, present and future; about the stratification, the
unconformity and dislocation that compose every lifeform and memory; about the richness and the
verisimilitude of discontinuous narrative; about the beauty of large and complex, but elegantly
articulated musical forms?

Whole traumas—her own and those she knows from dreams and journeys in the unconscious
depths of human experience—lie behind lines like these:

This river spins a lost man,
makes him fertile again, runs
the history of liquor from his skin.

The river midwifes us, slick arch of the back,

blood, wrinkles of fingers,

new skin
among the blooms of camus and arnica.

And all morning, as it happens,

the elk drift across,

oblivious,

dropping their necks to take long drinks.

—'Morning in the Boiling River,' The Night Path, 1997, p 56

Which river, which woman, which man, why is he lost, how is he sick, which elk are these and
how are they part of this place from which the poem speaks? Always her poems are grounded in a
moment and a place, but their lines marry fragments of many stories from many times. 'Bones' does
this. So does 'Invertebrate Drift' and 'Shells.' Many others: 'Wind of my Childhood in the Night,'
'Moonrise,' 'Ragweed,' 'Mandala' from her unpublished collection, too, contain sometimes sinister,
sometimes alluring, sometimes erotic or sadly lyrical strata of reference. Geological and domestic
references ('You sound like thrashing, like seedpod splitting,' 'You sound like an endless list,' 'You
sound like you were once all water' and 'I hear your pathetic stumbling in this attic') are worked
together, for instance in 'Wind of my Childhood' to set a painful memory of—is it abuse?—from
childhood beside the work of the wind, as though they were elements of the same rock, lines of
fault running through an escarpment. One way or another all her poems do this and leave you with
questions like those I've listed, in the way that an outcrop will leave a geologist with questions to
ponder for years; in the way that memories from one's past will rise or fall within the plains of
memory, asking questions of you. And some mysteries never resolve themselves, no matter how
many stones you turn and drainages you study; no matter how deep you dig in memory; no matter
how many phrases you try out for fit with the song you have breathed in.
If writing and especially poetry, as has been said, is the art of compression, this is a secret art the earth knows too. This way of writing—Laurie Kutchins—is like the way the landscape speaks of itself, like earth’s own storytelling. All her writing reads like a dream, discontinuous, unconforming sometimes, fragmentary, broken and reassembled in the kind of order Jackson Hole has—hard to piece together, yet evident and elegant despite the confusion of pieces. A study of rocks teaches you to avoid hasty, reductive readings. The story of a terrain is always vastly more intricate and ancient than a cursory look at the surface strata might suggest. The country will always transcend any theory that tries to explain it, will always baffle the interpreter. No interpretation is likely to contain the rock’s full story. In reading text as in reading landscape—as in reading one’s own life story—we need to be wary of hasty and reductive readings. They will not tell the truth.

Field geologists, when you think of it, read terrain as though it were poetry. They ponder hard on small fragments; they search for the structure and chronology of a rock wall. They imagine carefully to conjure a meaningful context for the little they are shown. They are avid for the pattern, but not too hasty to find it. I read Laurie’s poetry, I suppose, as though it were terrain; as though I were a geologist. In her case, in particular, I think this is apt. To read text properly you need to learn the kind of skills field geologists and poets master—patience with uncertainty, pattern recognition, an understanding that the richest elaborations are rarely plain and complete. A little always suggests a lot. And a lot of the detail and even much of the storyline will remain uncertain. Most of the history and meaning of an outcrop lie underneath or behind the lines on the surface, but you can enter into its past if you know a few things, observe closely and train your imagination to go deep. And you need to know that you can never be completely sure of the conclusions you draw. You trust, though, the particular, and follow where it leads you. You let it sing to you. From its song—it is not a song, but snatches of musical phrases—you make your own—of a place, a life, your life within a place; its life within yours. This is the way that Laurie Kutchins writes, as though she walked (perhaps it is a dance) among rocks, so many scattered notes, each of them silent, all of them together capable of singing the history of the world (including her own); and she reads them, patiently feeling out their scattered syntax. Making out their music, and her own.

With all this talk of rocks I wouldn’t want to give anyone the wrong idea about Laurie Kutchins. Her poems and lyric essays are dances, dancers, with the world, full of sensuality and eros. Her moments are rich with sensual experience and phenomenon, her metaphors for land often invoke

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80 This is an aphorism. But see, for instance, Ellen Bryant Voigt, *The Flexible Lyric*, 1999, p 122.
the human body, and some of her metaphors for body invoke land. She celebrates the human body with the same wonder, lightness and seriousness with which she celebrates the land. ‘My body knows it is a landscape,’ she writes in ‘Wind Ensemble,’ ‘capable of invitations and invasions, seduction and violation. Wind pulls across my face, an intricate sandstone threshold. And I know the landscape as a body. Pinnacles and chasms. Vulvus faultlines, breast-round shale, igneous shafts, wrinkled scrotal topsoil. He scatters the seed and the pollen, she bears the world’ (ibid, p 138).

my veins have thickened into blue determined rivers
my ankles and breasts are estuaries of blood
nipples dark as berry juice the cervix
a sleeping bridge
the road down my belly smells the coming mud...

—'Prayer,’ The Night Path, 1997, p 24

Her poems celebrate nipple and breast, scrotum and penis, placenta and suckling child, sex and sleeping. She sits naked waiting on the moon. She invites you to join her, hands in her hair at moonrise. She embraces the world—in care, in desire for intimacy and healing (both ways)—as mother, as friend, as lover, as daughter.

She sings the body of the earth, some of its particular places, lovely and old and wounded and lost and found. And she sings her own body as a thing of earth and therefore holy. ‘This is the body naming itself,’ she writes in ‘Wind Ensemble.’ ‘Mouth, throat, trachea, lungs, iambus of heart pulse, earlobes and lips, so the sounds will have passage, a way to form, to wander in and back out. Canyon-tongue with upper surface rasp-like. Grasp how the body sings its daily, ordinary work, goes about the chores. Clavicle, rib bend, shoulders, elbows, arms, wrists, thumbs, fingers for washing and hanging laundry to flap and dry on the line ...’ (‘Wind Ensemble,’ 2003, p 138).

In this endeavour, in her poems' erotic voice, and their singing of the body within the body of the world, her writing reminds me of Walt Whitman's, though Laurie's, by contrast to Walt's, is a woman's work, aware of the shape and nature of a woman's form, her own body's work and its wonder. Kutchins' erotics of body and language are inseparable from her desire to know and be touched by, to feel with, the earth. We know love and healing—as we know deepest violation and danger too—through the touch of body on body. Her poems show that she knows this. A mother discovers how physical and embodied love can become when she conceives and carries, delivers and suckles a child. Kutchins' poems touch places in the human body like that, they touch places on the body of the earth like that, touch memories and lovers, aspens and rivers, like that; and they ask for such a touch in return.
Look at the images she has chosen for her two published books of poems—two works by Miriam Garcia. The first, *Woman in the Clouds*, floats a woman's naked torso into the sky as a rolling lenticular cloud. The second, *Nude and Landscape no. 8*, shows a blue and pregnant nude reclining in a canvas of meadow grass and distant blue mountain. These are images that speak to the continuity her poems celebrate, between human form and landform; between human voice and land's voice, wind; between human nature and nature.

If the land speaks in Laurie Kutchins' work, so does the human body. If she understands herself as a daughter of Wyoming, she is a woman alive in her own body too. She wants us to know that the two are one—land and human form. Both are embodiments of eros and spirit, of life itself, and made of bone and flesh, memory and mystery, microbes and streams and energy. A good life is lived in the body and in the land. 'How can the body know itself,' she asks in 'Wind Ensemble,' 'except through place?' (p 144). So in this poem, she puts her body into a river:

How I love it when the mind finally shrinks
to its first size, smaller than
a man's scrotum soaking in the pure
cold current. When thinking curls up
like the beautiful shrivel
of the lopped-off umbilical cord,
no longer necessary
for living.

That's when the senses spill the soul.

The body becomes this confluence,
the head a crown of morning—
sounds, smells, tastes,
touches and vision.


A good life is a continuing and shifting enactment of what moves us—grief, nurture, love, hate, wounding, creation, joy, fear, inspiration. It is to live receptive to what comes to one; it is to make a fitting response, in utterance, and the shape of one's silence, and in action. It is to be shaped by weather as the escarpment is shaped, into itself. It is to dance in the wind, to wait for the gust. A good life is a great catalogue of events and former lives, memories, horrors and talents. As the rocks cannot deny what has befallen them—they are, in fact, embodiments of all that has occurred to them—it is not for us to deny what comes our way, but to be the life that results. It is to greet
the wind and let it delight in us; it is to know our bodies and minds as small worlds belonging to places on earth, shaped by them, and shaped as those places are by what befalls them.

This is how I read Laurie's ecological erotic philosophy. There is an elegy in her works, and in this approach to life. We—our bodies anyway—are bound, like all lifeforms, to suffer and die; and like the face of a beloved place, to erode and fall into another form. That fate, though, like the land's, is beautiful in itself, part of something larger, which is a story of enfolded lives and deaths, makings and unmakings. Looked at with enough love and detachment, embodied as story, even trauma and death are beautiful—or, at least, their telling may be. In 'Wind Ensemble,' her childhood self looks down on the landscape around Casper from her uncle's plane. 'With height and distance,' she writes, 'the child learns the past is a remote and beautiful thing. Even its grief is a beauty ... Over time the girl erodes and forms the woman that will speak of wind and of elegy embedded in the earth' (pp 144-45). And an hour above the country she loves, this brief detachment, teaches her what she has not known—how attached she is to this place. She feels a 'ferocity of connection.' She had not known how much she loved it. She had not known how only distance lets one see clearly what is familiar; to know the whole geological picture, sense the musical form. This moment is the birth at once of her attachment and her exile—of her poetry, which, like all poetry, depends on both intimacy and detachment.

Laurie Kutchins has been negotiating between intimacy and distance since she was a girl. Sitting inside a plane, inside the wind, she first learns that what is close at hand, what is home, is at the same time a terrain that can be known from apart, part of a larger landscape that, the further back you stand, you see more clearly as part of the earth itself. And there is nowhere you can stand, or fly, and not be joined by wind to home, for the air travels the whole earth, touches the places you love and returns the touch of you to distant homelands—particularly in your utterance. The wind dissolves distance. It is the lively country in between you and what you love—and it endures, it is real, even when you are not near the place you love. It is a dance that continues, a music that, once begun between you and a place, does not stop. The moving air heals wounds of separation because it teaches you how everything is connected; and because it shows you that the most enduring reality is not things of body, but the invisible, ineffable things—air, wind, spirit, imagination, words that sound out in air, mind, story, music—that play between and within those bodies, making them what they are. It follows, then, that Wyoming lives with Laurie Kutchins in the Shenandoah, because it is alive in her mind and memory; it is embedded in the layers of her psyche, and perhaps its music plays in the characteristic structure of her thoughts, the texture of her emotional life. It returns to her in the kind of words, the kind of musical expression she is drawn to in her work.
The challenge of intimacy is how to be a part, to be present, how to stay even where one is unsettled; and the challenge of distance is how to be apart, absent, how to stay away even from where one feels most nourished. Good living, good poetry, service to place and people call for both intimacy and distance; that is, engagement and detachment, touch and withholding touch. Laurie grew up inside a family story in which passionate connection and passionate exile both played. She grew up in country that invited and resisted love, whose great distances contained delicate embodiments—meadow flowers, sage, mule deer, bones, moon. She grew up in a landscape always in the process of blowing away. She has lived more than half her life now apart from a place she loves. Wyoming’s distances taught her intimacy and touch; her life’s sustained distance from Wyoming has taught her detachment, patience, poise. She grew up in the body of Wyoming and has lived as a woman mostly in the air of distance. Now, in her and in her work, one delights in the other: the present in the body of the past, imagination in the bones of memory, dreams of Wyoming in the body of her words.

Place, I learn from her and her writing, is a thing of mind as well as a thing of matter. Or, to say it plainer, place is the play of wind on body; it is what that intercourse utters in its joy and pain; it is the rhythm of that encounter over time. It is a song, a gust envoiced. Its sound (rhythm, tone, timbre, pitch, structure and all that makes its particular vibration what it is)—some of it lived, some of it intuited and shared from other lives and from the history of the rocks—enters the body of the poet and lives there somehow, thereafter. Laurie Kutchins expresses the place, the rhythm of her connection to it, in words she utters all her life, each of which, born of the lively space that plays above a beloved landscape, borne to her by air and borne back to it also by the air, is a gift to the place that made it. And even when the poet is no longer in that place, still she may sing it, for it lives in her body, remembered there in every cell and limb, in bone and finger, nipple, clavicle and tongue.

What of that other place, then, the Shenandoah Valley? After Wyoming, it is a place that clothes its body modestly in folds of field and forest. Laurie has grown up among naked mysteries. She finds herself set down now like an exile in a place of closely held secrets of what seem, to her at least, like much less momentous events of the earth. The history of these mountains is as grand as any, as it happens. There was orogeny—revolution—here too. The ground has thrown itself about in the Appalachians, and as long ago as four hundred million years. Many people are stirred by these ancient and ground down mountains as much as by the Tetons or the Wind Rivers. But it is true that the blue mountains, though easy to see, are harder to experience for themselves, particularly if you are used to being able to see naked geology and weather coming from miles away. The Shenandoah and its mountains are much more dressed up in the uses people make of them. The place smells more often of chickens and fertiliser than of rock and weather. What
matters here is not the milder weather and the terrain itself, but the history of human presence, imposed—in its European phase anyway—upon the fertile valley, complete with its earnest Christian pieties and dogged agricultural lore. And after settlement came civil war, the internecine strife of a young nation of immigrants. Now it is hard to smell the ground for the blood lost in it, the sweat of farming, the earnestness of pious faiths.

I am being unfair to beautiful country. Laurie is too, and she knows it. Annie Dillard made a wonderful poem of a place not far south of Singers Glen—Tinker Creek near Roanoke. If the land here has not spoken to Laurie in quite the same way, though, it seems to me it is not just because of the place that Wyoming takes in her heart and mouth and dreams. It is because the Shenandoah’s natural history is subtler, greener, softer, and its geology is wrapped more tightly (than Wyoming’s) in its vegetation and its social history.

‘One of the lessons I am having to learn in recent years,’ Laurie says to me, ‘is to let go a little of place as the ground of my being.’ She means, I think, the idea she has carried like the memory of a lost lover, of Wyoming. She means she is schooling herself to let go of her attachment to that place she loves; to surrender her desire to be with its physical forms. ‘Our dreams and desires can blind us,’ she says. Dreams of leaving Shenandoah, she means. She has sustained through all her years of living there, a desire to return with her family and her poetry to the west. Such a dream—of being somewhere else—can blind us, I take her to mean, to the world about us and to the other things that ground us—family, work, neighbours, the truth of where we are now; and even to the reality of the place we dream of.

I think that Laurie Kutchins will come to know the music of the Shenandoah and that it will have, in time, a song of her. But the lyric of the Wyoming wind—the quality of the air vibrating above the weathered mountains and grasslands of the west, the stark music the wind stirs from the body of the that landscape—will always register in the lyric of Laurie’s poetry and prose. For she will always fall for syllables, for words and phrases, one suspects, that resonate with the lyric of that landscape; that seem to her the gifts of its harsh music; that shine in it. Such words, when they find her, when she wakes with them on her lips, will always set her own eardrum, heart, throat, fingers vibrating to a pitch and melody she loves. All her utterance will have its birth in the soundscape of Wyoming in this way. She will listen for it, move to it, sound with it and sound it out, wherever she is, all her life. For she is tuned to it. Her work is an enacted listening to that place.

The valley of the wind, I have discovered, is not only the lovely and unaccountable course of the Wind River. It is the canyons of inner ear and throat and mouth and tongue. It is the way the landscape’s lyric enters the poet, and the way it is returned, in utterance, to the air.
12. The real world

James Galvin

Boulder Ridge and Sheep Creek, Wyoming–Colorado line;

Iowa City, Iowa

Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there...
We are here to witness.
—Annie Dillard

Some people never stop wanting to disappear into the mountains.
—James Galvin, 'They Haven't Heard the West Is Over'

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea

A poem should not mean
But be.
—Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica'

It is early spring 2002, and I hang twenty thousand feet above the real world. Well, if you count the sky, as one ought to here, I'm moving inside the real world already.

Wyoming and northern Colorado lie stretched and buckled below me. Snow pack holds the higher peaks of the Wind Rivers, the Uintas and the Neversummers; it dusts the tops of the entire ragged front range behind Denver. It is Denver we're making for, descending now into air shaped by the mountains. This country is scarped and hogbacked, bluffed and bouldered, lined and weathered, its basins scoured, its rivers braided and gestural, its ranges bunched chaotically and articulated sparsely among all this tawny ground. Dark standing timber decorates the folds where gullies run, where high ground picks up from the grassy flats, and they reach, these dark lean trees, right to the ridgetops.
I sit within the most overwhelming element of this landscape—the open blue sky above it. And as we draw close to Denver airport, the plane is set upon by that other element for which this part of the world is rightly known, the wind. It touches us in motions as random and forceful as those slower, larger rhythms of mountain building evident in the ranges below, whose peaks are, of course, the reason any approach by sky to Denver is bound to be rocky.

Set within shallow depressions, between the fingers, as it were, of the granite ridges close below me now, I am able to make out, ringed by black-green pines and spruce, high meadows, some drifted still with snow, others pale green with the start of spring. It is a meadow that brings me here—the meadow on Sheep Creek, below Boulder Ridge.

I am coming back to Wyoming because of a meadow and its book. Eighteen months ago, in the Shenandoah, the poet Laurie Kutchins put that book, The Meadow, into my hands. It was a book I hadn't known till then, and when I read it I was changed. I have come to find the hands, and the places, that made so fine a thing as this, James Galvin's book—his spare and heartbreakingly beautiful work of prose about the life of the haymeadow on Sheep Creek, a place he has know since he was four or five years old. Reading it led me to his novel, Fencing the Sky, set among these meadows, parks, prairies and ranges below me; and then to the poems that have been most of his life's work. They are fashioned, all of these works, out of the country of Larimer County, Colorado, and of Albany County, Wyoming—mostly out of Boulder Ridge and Sheep Creek and the Snowy Range.

Laurie pulled Galvin's book from her shelf in the yellow study in Singers Glen. 'You need to read this,' she said. 'I wonder what you will think of it as a piece of place writing.' I didn't read it, in fact, until I was home again in the blue plateau, when, maybe, I was ready for it, but when it was too late to go and find its source. Laurie was right: reading The Meadow in a highland winter altered my sense of what a literature of place might be. What I learned in it, and in Galvin's poetry and fiction, about form and composition, about the wild music of places and the capacity of words to find and sound them out again, has made me rethink and recast my own book The Blue Plateau. I have learned from Galvin's writing about the power, in a text, I mean, of orderly chaos; about the musical arrangement of apparently—but only apparently—random fragments of text; and how well such an arrangement seems suited, in his hands anyway, to the task of transcending the human habit of linear and narrative, largely visual, perception; how well it seems given to the business of witnessing the larger order of time and space in which land goes about its life.

From Galvin's writing, I learn another thing. The lives of men and women might pass, as he puts it to me when we meet later, like so much weather through a place—and through a book of that place—and yet we can love them, those men and women, as though they were family, as though they were weather we have been longing for; and we can love and write the place more truly the
more care we take with its human meteorology. I learn from James Galvin’s writing that a writer may best find the place he seeks to sing—all its life and landforms—in the lives of the people who love that place, who belong there and have worked and known it long and deep; and a writer might express the place most truthfully when he writes of the lives of the people in the land, the lives of locals steeped in country. So if it is the country we want to render, one way—maybe the best way—to do it is to write some pieces of the history of some human lives that have passed through the place, as Galvin has done with Lyle and App, Ray and Frank and Clay. Through writing the work of men’s hands and the turning of their souls within a landscape, a place may live more truly on the page than if we spent more time evoking its forms directly. Art sometimes renders the real world most truthfully when it looks at it askance, in this way, when it comes at it indirectly.

Like weather, people in their passage may do good or they may do harm, may come like welcome rain or like a hundred year drought; but viewed in landscape terms, all of it passes, all of it shapes the place, and while it remains, may be said to be part of the place. Landscapes make no judgments; they simply receive what comes; they accept it and go on. So, if we imagine like a meadow or a plateau, we can even love, or at least render, those who pass like locusts through it or set in like a drought, just as we can speak of those who live like a blessing in the land, as Lyle did on Sheep Creek.

I learn that from James Galvin’s books. One more thing I learn from him: how an author may be absent most of the time from a narrative and yet write a book that describes his soul, without meaning to, embodied in a meadow and a range. In his country.

A chance has come to me now, after a stay in Alaska, to visit this place and this man. And so I return to the country on the Colorado and Wyoming border. Its pale spring sky; its high winds; its unbearable lines of fault and uplift; its pared-back, planed and scoured poetry, bring Laurie Kutchins’ work to my mind, and the traverse I made across Wyoming, a little north of here, in the winter of another year. Ten thousand feet above all this now, buffeted by wind, I find myself longing for the ground, and for a meadow.

The country encompassed by two rivers—the Laramie and the Cache la Poudre—that rise in the Neversummer Mountains has given rise also to nearly every word James Galvin has written. Sitting across a table from me, when I meet him in Iowa City, Galvin imagines the map of Larimer County, Colorado, and Albany County, Wyoming, blackened with the paths he has walked, the contours he has ridden, since he was a boy. He has known it, and it has known him, since he was two. More than most writers, more than any of those whose work I have considered here, James Galvin is steeped in one place on earth—this high and arid landscape and the sky from which it
fell. His life and all his writing have their centre here, their roots sunk into its meagre soil and deeper, into the thirty dense miles of granite beneath. This is his subject—all his writing speaks of it. And this is his home—his whole life expresses it and what it’s taught him.

Here is that country in his words. This is how The Meadow opens:

The real world goes like this: The Neversummer Mountains like a jumble of broken glass. Snowfields weep slowly down. Chambers Lake, ringed by trees, gratefully catches the drip in its tin cup, and gives the mountains their own reflection in return...

The real world goes like this: Coming down from the high lake, timbered ridges in slow green waves suddenly stop and bunch up like patiently disappointed refugees, waiting for permission to start walking out across the open prairie toward Nebraska, where the waters come together and form an enormous inland island, large parts of three large states surrounded by water. The island never heard of states; the real world is the island.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 3

This makes a bold beginning, ‘annunciatory’ and musical, as Franklin Burroughs put it in a review of the book (Burroughs, 1994, p 9). This passage—the whole opening section—is a recitation of metaphor for one place on earth, a chant of ‘dicta about the real world,’ a liturgy; and it is a sustained challenge. What is real? Why is it real? Why is it real here? The opening section, just a page and a bit, rises and falls against those questions, sketching at the same time the country of the story, its themes and players.

Within that realm, that tract of river-enclosed range and prairie land, there is an island, which is the meadow, ‘the highest cultivated ground in this spur of the Medicine Bow,’ ‘offered up among the ridges, wearing a necklace of waterways, concentrically nested inside the darker green of pines, and then the gray-green of sage and the yellow-green of prairie grass.’ This is Lyle’s meadow—Lyle van Waning. He is not named yet, but the meadow turns out to have belonged to him, in every sense of the word, and he to it, longer and more closely than anyone. The book, like the meadow, is more his than anybody’s too; but it is clear to Lyle and to Galvin, and to all of us by the end, that neither a stretch of level terrain nor a book of ordered sentences may belong to anybody really.

James Galvin has known that meadow since 1953, when his father bought a cabin up on Boulder Ridge, which rises behind Lyle’s place. Jim was two then. In his poem ‘What Holds Them Apart’

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81 'Who ever doubted that the earth fell from the sky?' Galvin writes in his poem 'Misericord,' God's Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 101.
from God’s Mistress (1984), Galvin writes, ‘Long/ afternoons I fished in the creek that runs through Lyle’s/ meadow. I knew that water down to the bottom stones’ (Resurrection Update, 1997, p 140). And he knew—he knows still and better than he knows anything—all the country that rims the meadow round with spruce and pine and granite mounds, and the wide, gaunt grassland of the Laramie Basin, all the way north to the Laramie Range, and all the way west to the Snowy Range astride the Medicine Bow. For this is the landscape the Galvin cabin looked upon, and looks upon still. Lyle and the meadow, down on that good ground along Sheep Creek to the south, were his neighbours all his life. Galvin, like Lyle, is part of the meadow’s story.

The story of the meadow is a litany of loosely patterned weather, a chronicle of circular succession ...

It’s the highest cultivated ground in this spur of the Medicine Bow, no other level terrain in sight.

There have been four names on the deed to it, starting just a hundred years back.

The history of the meadow goes like this: No one owns it, no one ever will. The people, all ghosts now, were ghosts even then; they drifted through, drifted away, thinking they were not moving. They learned the recitations of seasons and the repetitive work that seasons require.

Only one of them succeeded in making a life here, for almost fifty years. He weathered. Before a backdrop of natural beauty, he lived a life from which everything was taken but a place. He lived so close to the real world it almost let him in.

—The Meadow, 1992, pp 3-4

This is the story, the story of the meadow, that Galvin’s book The Meadow tells. ‘You can’t fit a whole meadow inside the covers of a book,’ he says to me later on a street in Iowa City. So it is not the whole story—nothing ever is. It is what he remembers, what the writing unearthed and insisted upon. ‘But I had to leave a lot of it out, and now I am beginning to forget,’ he says with sadness. The real world, I am thinking, always escapes us—our memories, our eyes, our books. All the same, there is a world, a real one, inside The Meadow, a song of a place. It is a story, as all Galvin’s writing is, of how the real world runs here.

The real world is not, for him, an unpeopled, pastoral, antique realm. It is, in a sense, the landscape, free of our ideas of it, but not free of us. It is what is actual, what can be encountered through the senses, absorbed into one’s life through the body’s long encounter with the body of the land—in his case, the Neversummer Mountains, the Snowy Range, two rivers, a lake, a meadow, the litany of seasons there.

I suspect Galvin means by ‘the real world’ also the first principles, the pattern of true notes, made manifest in the forms we encounter on earth. When we meet, later, he says to me, ‘I write about what I don’t know about what I do know. That is the realm of literature, of poetry.’ The mysterious within the familiar; the ineffable embodied in the material, he means. The French poet Paul
Éluard once wrote, 'There is another world, and it is in this one' (see Hirsch, 1999, p 9). That divine, essential realm, of angels and dream and frozen music, of familiar mystery, may be what Galvin means by 'the real world'—the reality that explains the world we see, the world that escapes our apprehension, even when we are looking, but which is expressed by that phenomenal world; the order to which long slow attention and moments of grace sometimes give us entry—the real world that almost let Lyle in. 'The meadow's a dream I'm working to wake to,' Galvin writes in 'Against the Rest of the Year,' a poem he wrote as Lyle lay dying, a poem that locates the real world within this one, the real river below and above the river we see—the secret they suggest (in Elements in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 147). And so The Meadow is less about one high mountain grassland than it is about the miracles, the dreams of the earth, made manifest there. The real world, the province of literature, is the mysteries that hold, the world that is suggested, within the forms with which you grow intimate—if you work at it—somewhere.

But I am guessing. Galvin is not going to give such a secret away easily. Nor is any place. What he means, what any place really is, moves under and over the words on the page, the landforms on the ground. You have to learn to see it—you hear it, really—by staying put. This much, though, is clear as spring water from his writing, particularly The Meadow: the real world includes all the lives that start and stop within the body of a place, within its reach, that pass through it like Lyle's and App's and James Galvin's and even mine, that rise and fall within it like mountains and rivers, rock walls and hay barns and beaver dams and trout, fast and slow. Whatever they may signify, it is all of those particular things nowhere else but here. It is ibis corner of creation, never mind who created it. 'The real world goes like this,' his book begins. The real world goes like this book goes, like this place goes. 'This is the real world, indifferent, unburdened' (The Meadow, 1992, p 3).

James Galvin does not say, beyond that, what the real world is made of. He tries to show us and to sound it out. It is made of works and days of men and women and a place. It is made of weather, and the way men and women differ little from it, in their wildness, their seasonal patterns and their fast passage. Each of his poems, each of his works of prose, fronts that real world, tries to set forth a witness of what is real. Galvin leaves that 'real' there—right at the beginning—as a challenge, I suspect, to conventional wisdom, which uses 'real' to mean politics, human society, the state of affairs, the state of the economy, the interest rate, the grind of making a living and feeding a family—the human things, in other words; the things that matter; the things the news is full of; the things you can count. Those things too are part of the real world, for sure, Galvin implies, but only part, and only fleeting; but they are not real apart from us and our obsessions, our needs, as we understand them just now. Something much older and deeper enfolds them. That is the real world. The real world begins with land and sky; it is the mystery embodied in a place.
Seven hundred miles of prairie lie between Tie Siding and Iowa City, and James Galvin told me he thought it was insane to drive all that way just to talk with someone (himself) not very interesting. I told him I'd come anyway. 'You might be right about my own insanity, the madness of the journey,' I replied, 'but I'm guessing you're wrong about the man I am wanting to talk with when I get there.' 'Come on over then,' he replied. 'Drive safe.'

Just past Aurora, Nebraska, four hundred miles into the journey, I am beginning to think James Galvin was right. Not that there is anything wrong with this fertile country, or the day, which is sweet and warm, just that seven hundred miles, no matter what the speed, is a hell of a long way to travel anywhere. But I press on at seventy-five miles an hour on the interstate. This is a pilgrimage made in the company of semitrailers and SUVs, recreational vehicles and Buicks; but mostly of semitrailers. The prairie, thoroughly tamed, husbanded intensely, rolls all around me, green with young crop, brown with ploughed field, contoured with strips of grass meant to stay the erosion that has carried away ten feet or more of this rich soil in one hundred and fifty years—soil, most of it, brought here in the first place out of Wyoming on the wind. It is on a pilgrimage too. Nothing stays still for long, though everything about these waisted barns and cottonwoods, this industry of tractors and irrigation gantries, suggests it should. The orderly fields, the dignified and workmanlike barns, the sometimes beautiful timber houses, are trying to button down—to button up—the prairie and hold this cultivated territory in place and time. But everything is travelling east faster than any of us would like—everything but me, that is. I would be there faster, if I could. But the real world goes like this.

Every pilgrimage begins in insanity and depends upon grace. You don't get to choose your company, and you go where you have to go. I am glad, despite its madness, to be on it.

'If I could draw you a picture of my soul it would be the Snowy Range,' James Galvin says to me. By now, I have sat, myself, in the meadow; I've driven Boulder Ridge and stood and watched the Snowy Range sitting very still in the wind; I've driven my pilgrimage to Iowa City; and here is James Galvin drawing me a picture of his soul in The Prairie Lights bookshop.

He means the Snowy Range, a tough but tender-toned line of quartzite upon which the Galvin cabin looks out. He means the qualities of the landscape that became his home—became indistinguishable from his sense of self—from a very early age. 'The Snowy Range' is a synecdoche for all the country of home: that particular bit of geology, that particular outlook, but also the larger geography it is part of—Boulder Ridge, the meadow behind, the oceanic Laramie Basin lapping against the ridge, the whole long Medicine Bow, which makes the horizon to the northwest, and Laramie Peak one hundred and twenty miles away in the northeast. He means, I think, a certain stringency, angularity, toughness; the tenderness and improbability of white
quartzite atop darker granite; the everyday miracle of soft red soil beneath prairie grass, of snowdrift among lodgepole pines. He means qualities of sternness and delicacy, brokenness and endurance you will find there. The ground of that place is the ground of his being. Understanding the place you will understand the man.

'If I could draw you a picture,' Galvin says to me, 'of my soul.' He uses words carefully, so let me take care with them too. The landscape of home, the one he has spent his life looking and looking at, coming to know better than anything, than anyone—he would draw his life's essential story, the ground of his being, in its image, rendering its form to represent the poem of his life. This is no simplistic identification of self with place, no confusion of one with the other. He is telling me that the form that expresses most truthfully the nature of his life is the landscape of the Snowy Range and the Medicine Bow. He is telling me something else, not unconnected: that his idea of who he is includes the lands he grew in; he is telling me that he is who he is because he has grown attached to a place.

Galvin says to me in that same conversation, 'You know the writer Wallace Stegner? Okay, well he's got this great little aphorism, which I sort of live by. "You can't know who you are, if you don't know where you are."' We are talking, as it happens, about wolves, just then. But it is no different for wolves than it is for men and women, he is saying. We know what to do, we find our calling, we live rightly—like the wolf, we know what and how much to take from the land, where to roam, whose stock to leave alone, how to stay alive—when we know our terrain as part of ourselves.

If, then, James Galvin knows his terrain in that way; if he has grown akin to this place of mountain, meadow and prairie; if he is made in its image; if it has (almost) let him in; if it turned him into who he has become—how did this happen?

'I became attached to that landscape,' he says, 'I just looked at it my whole life.' Just looking is no slight thing for James Galvin, not if you do it properly. Done properly, it is witness—and it changes you. Witness is the real work of poetry, he says to me. It is largely a kind of staying present; it is looking hard and long and letting the language arrive out of, well, the real world. He wrote about that landscape because that is where he was, that was a thing he knew, which had about it a mysterious reality that called for poetry, for a fitting, a dignified, response. He was no different than the wolf, and his poetry, all his writing, is no different than the Lyle's work, caring for the meadow or building a barn there. It all depends on looking well—on learning to know a place (or any fit subject), how it works, what it demands of you, how you are to see it for what it really is. But it is a skill for life, really. Learning to see, he says, has been the art he's spent most of his life pursuing; and it was, it is still, through art, through poetry, that he schools himself in that kind of apprehension of the world—in witness. Just looking constitutes a good part of a good
life; it is a practice, an ethic, a discipline of belonging. Lyle, the man, in Galvin's experience, who gets closer than most of us to the real world, does a lot of looking, for instance. *The Meadow*, among other things, is the story of the vigil Lyle kept—though Lyle wouldn't have put it so fancily. For Lyle, seeing was a more prosaic matter, though essential.

The way people watch television while they eat—looking up to the TV and down to take a bite and back up—that's how Lyle watches the meadow out the south window while he eats his breakfast. He's hooked on the plot, doesn't want to miss anything. He looks out over the rim of his cup as he sips.

—*The Meadow*, 1992, p 5

And like all spiritual pursuits, witness yields revelation parsimoniously, though it breeds an unfakable kind of familiarity with the ground of one's practice of attention. The place itself seems doomed to elude us, though we ourselves are changed by the looking.

... this morning the cold air hangs still down in the meadow, and there is enough haze in the air to filter the sunlight so Lyle can lean on his elbows over a cup of steaming instant and smoke a Prince Albert and gaze out the picture window he now spends most of his life perched in like a hunched up old raven...

'I've been staring at that confounded meadow and those idiot hills and lodgepole stands for over forty years now. I'm about done for and I'm still not sure I've ever seen any of it. All I know is I'm damned tired of looking at the sonofabitch.'

He thinks about how completely the meadow changes with respective seasons, how much it can change under light and clouds between two times he raises his eyes from his book and looks over the top of his half-lens reading glasses.

—*The Meadow*, 1992, p 53

You see in Galvin's writing how the meadow has, in fact, revealed its subtle nature—some small secrets—to this old man, hunched near his death, in the passage I have quoted, like a raven, the meadow's gruff, grave witness. You sense in this moment, the end of a lifetime's watching, what Galvin means by these words from his poem 'Rintrah Roars':

Another friend said, 'I am chained to the earth to pay for the freedom of my eyes.

—*Lethal Frequencies in Resurrection Update*, 1997, p 241

The toll exacted—and the reward surrendered—for such close noticing is a kind of attachment that approaches inclusion. It is connection, authentic and reciprocal. It is a kind of transparency
you accomplish (Misericord,’ God’s Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 101); a successful disappearance into the mountains, such as App Worster aspires to, nears in life, as Lyle does, and accomplishes only fully in death (The Meadow, 1992, p 159; and ‘They Haven’t Heard the West Is Over,’ God’s Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 136).

Lyle’s accomplishment, the outcome of all that looking at those idiot hills, is to ‘raise his consciousness almost up to coyote level,’ so that those artful creatures give him their respect and friendship (The Meadow, 1992, p 14); to achieve a touching and remarkably tender acquaintance with the barn swallows (ibid, pp 5–7, and passim) and the snow (ibid, p 43 and passim); to have the weather inside him and know it as exactly and rawly as the meadow does (ibid, p 224); to hear the stars singing, each one in its own pitch, on cold nights (ibid, p 221); to feel the wind just once or twice cut right through him among timber as though he were not there at all (ibid, p 221). To know a place is to intrude so little in it you are as natural as weather; you do not get in its way; you haunt and are haunted by it. It is to be allowed odd glimpses of its reality—the way it is when our backs are turned (Getting a Word In,’ Imaginary Timber in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 59); in which moments we do not recognise it as the place we have been looking at all these years at all, but as itself:

Lyle hoists the rafter to his shoulder and climbs the ladder with it and sets it in place, driving in one tenpenny nail to hold it. He climbs back down and sits on a sawhorse. He fishes out his tobacco. As he lights up, the sun is setting, turning the sky as many pastels as you see on the side of a rainbow trout. The reddest clouds are the fish cut open. Aspen trees are peaking with yellow ... Up over the opposing hill he sees the snow on mountains west of Laramie. Another breath of wind comes up and starts the aspens chattering like nervous girls, and they catch the last low-angling rays of sun and flare. The dark tops of evergreens are red, almost bloody, and for a good thirty seconds he knows that the world is something altogether other than what it appears to be.

—The Meadow, 1992, pp 121–22

This view, as it happens, is the one from James Galvin’s place. In the scene from which I quote, Galvin imagines Lyle at the work he did there in October 1963, extending the old cabin Galvin’s father had bought ten years before that, up on Boulder Ridge. That looking and seeing the sun’s fall change everything might be James Galvin’s; but in the book it is Lyle’s. And it is the ambiguous reward for his hard work (that day and everyday of his life) and his dignified attention to the world. It is also what a poet, what a writer, hopes for, and sometimes finds.

The end of all this watching, Galvin implies, is to know a stretch of land as well—and as little—as you know your own soul, and know that both of them will elude and transcend you, survive you. In the end, each of them will resemble the other, so much does the land change and inform its witness. In the end, it is possible to feel, as Galvin writes of a woman he calls Sara, and who sounds
a lot like Lyle’s sister Clara, how ‘the valley can’t imagine itself without her’ (Sara, God’s Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 127). It is possible to sense how the meadow, when he died, was unable to imagine itself without Lyle. It is possible to sense, reading The Meadow, how the meadow changed Lyle—the more he looked and the more it seemed beyond him—into another true expression of itself, all the while making him more truly the man he was born to be. And it is possible to sense how the Snowy Range, the timber, and the weather over the prairie have changed James Galvin, their witness, into the man he is, the writer he is—vernacular, brutally mystical, smart and delicate and sage.

Just who each of us really is, and what this place that grounds and becomes us really is, will escape us most of the time, and so it should. It is the work of poetry, of art, of a good life like Lyle’s, of hard work at the forge like Lyle’s, to seek and express what is real, what is true, without ever capturing it exactly or defining it. Witness—practised in poetry, in farming a meadow or simple attention—is ‘a conversation with the way things are’ (Homesteader, Imaginary Timber in Resurrection Update, p 34). To witness is to lean toward the real world quietly, and wonder hard; and it shapes a man’s soul.

If we can imagine place as all those interconnected stories, relationships, energies, forms of life at play somewhere, including one’s own being there, one’s memories, dreams and desires shared with that place; and if it is true, as the philosopher of place John Malpas has argued (Malpas, 1999, p 152), that it is those complex structures of place that make an experience of self, that make any human experience, possible at all, and if it is then true, as Malpas continues, that ‘[t]o have a sense of one’s identity ... is to have a sense, not of some simple underlying self that is one’s own, but rather of a particular place in the world’—then to witness one’s place, to articulate something of some few pieces of the complex structure that composes that place, is to draw a picture of one’s soul. To attempt to express one’s nature apart from—that is, abstracted from—the ground of one’s identity (a remembered and experienced place) would also, it follows, be to miss one’s self, to sing a false song of identity. To lose sight of one’s place is to lose sight of one’s self, as John Cameron has put it (Cameron, 2003, p 33). One of the lessons I have learned from The Meadow, indeed, is just how truthfully and clearly a writer may make a memoir of himself—may, to use the term again, adéquate or give an impression of himself—by witnessing largely the place of his attachment, and barely mentioning himself.

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83 Malpas seems to have largely the human-generated attributes, such as memory, desire, connection, and so on, in mind when he speaks of ‘complex structures,’ so I may be putting his writing to use it does not invite. Let me use his elegant phrase to include the many interconnecting pieces of narrative, human and nonhuman, that compose a place.
James Galvin does not exaggerate when he says he has looked at this spare high country all of his life. He has known it since he was two. He has grown up close to it. He has learned it the hardest way it is possible to imagine. He knows its stories, its people, and its other kinds of weather.

'I was born in the airforce in 1951, right after my father got back from Germany. What he was doing over there, you don't really want to know. Well, he was working in counterintelligence. I have an older sister born in Germany and a younger sister born six years after me. Anyhow, the first two years of my life were spent bouncing around airforce bases, and then my dad quit the military and took a job out west. He was a physician. He was supposed to go out to Denver where his job was and find a place for our family to live. So he drove out there in his convertible Hudson Hornet—he looks at me and adds, in boyish enthusiasm, "great car"—and he got the classified ads and somehow his eye fell on this piece of property, six-hundred-and-forty acres (that's a section, one square mile) sitting on the Colorado–Wyoming border. Twelve thousand dollars. And he bought it. As a result we also had to rent a bungalow in down in Denver. My mother was, to say the least, not pleased.

'You know, it's two and a half hours from Denver to Boulder Ridge. We did a lot of driving. And back then in the early fifties that country was extremely remote. That Cherokee Park Road you drove up the other day to Lyle's, that was a two-track back then. But my dad had this vision of that place—he wanted to be Ernest Hemingway. He wanted to kill everything that moved. Fishing, hunting, the whole thing. And so I was raised from a very young age to kill whatever moved too.'

This was the section Pat Sudeck from New Hampshire homesteaded in 1923, 'half timber, half pasture, with five springs, but no bottomland,' (The Meadow, 1992, p 127) and a side view of prairie and range. The section borders the three-hundred-and-twenty acres—"that almost imaginary thatch of peat bog surrounded by low hills and tall stands of lodgepole pine, with its own ocean of sage-gray prairie lapping at its shores and the whole Medicine Bow Range to drink in every day' (The Meadow, 1992, p 139)—that Lyle van Waning's mother Hazel bought in 1938 and where she still lived in 1953 with her two surviving children Clara and Lyle. Pat was the Van Waning's neighbour until he sold the place to James Galvin senior in 1953 and moved away to Fort Collins, then down to Arizona. It was then that James Galvin, aged two, became Lyle's neighbour. Lyle has died, but James Galvin, now aged fifty-two, lives there still, right by the meadow, which is still trying to imagine itself without Lyle.

'I killed my first antelope when I was eleven, first deer when I was twelve, first elk when I was thirteen. That's a child, right? And during the summers, starting from the age of eight, when my father had to go back to work during the week, he took my mother and my sisters and left me up
there. That first summer he left me up there from one weekend to the next with a juvenile delinquent to look after me, and after that it was just me.

"There isn't anything I can't tell you about loneliness. I know all about it, have known it from the age of eight. But I can't tell you what it was like to be nine and ten and eleven and to watch my family drive away on Sunday. I had no telephone, I just had a twenty-two. The nearest neighbour was Lyle. If a tree fell on me or something, you know, no one would have known for a week. What I was doing up there was working for my dad. I was putting up his fire wood. I was painting his house. I was building retaining walls. And he was paying me every time he showed up with a cardboard box full of powdered milk and spam. My supplies. He thought he was making a man out of me.

"The only communication I had with the outside world was the radio. There was this station out of Laramie, KOBW, Cowboy Radio, and it would have this thing at noon every day, the ranchers' party line. Mostly it was stuff like "Slim, your chickens are in. Come get 'em." But sometimes it was something for me like "We're not coming up this week."

'So I survived, and I thought it was making me strong, and it probably was. And in my childhood I idolised my father, as most children do. You don't question anything. You just go, okay, so this is what is happening."

And it went on happening like that until James Galvin reached his late teenage years. Apart from getting him used, in a very raw way, to the litany of weather and the cycle of repetitive work, all that time up there by himself threw James Galvin into Lyle's company and kindness. And it gave him to the mountains and the meadow, which was, in the days Lyle cared for it with his network of timber irrigation flumes and his haying in the fall, 'a kind of Eden,' Galvin says to me. The meadow, downstream from the reservoir, looked, I guess, like this:

Full, the reservoir looks all right: a mirror Sheep Creek dies in, timber straight and still along the edge, and sky swimming through its face...

Just below the outlet Sheep Creek resurrects itself in an instant. It leaps from the outlet into boulders, tangled willows, and tall grasses. Below the gunsight rock outcrops that pinch the valley into a waist, Lyle’s haymeadow opens like a proper afterlife.

In spring the new grass grows in standing water. At sunset the white mirror-light shines through the grass. That’s when the beaver ponds light up, too, and the rising trout make bull’s eyes on the surface.
A doe that has been drinking lifts her head to listen. Done irrigating, Lyle heads home across the shining field. He has a shovel on his shoulder that looks like a single wing.

_The Meadow_, 1992, p 142

And there's Lyle, a tough kind of angel, at work in the field, hardly disturbing a doe for long, so much is he a part of the place. 'He was so completely moral, noble, you know,' Galvin says to me. In the 1984 poem 'What Holds Them Apart' (God's Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 140) you can see them together, young Jimmy Galvin and Lyle, building a retaining wall. Lyle is teaching the boy that even a mountain is just 'a slower kind of river,' that a wall is 'a puzzle with one ideal order that doesn't make a picture, and whose puzzle-parts weigh fifty pounds each,' teaching the boy that the hawk in the sky who seems to the boy to have the easier lot is working hard, like them, at the life and death business of staying alive.

With Lyle and without, Galvin's education in the world was had in this way—bodily, emotionally. It was performed with his hands and eyes. It was suffered. It was grounded.

'All the hunting, the massacring, and everything—I finally just got sick of it,' he says. 'That coincided with the time when rebellion naturally sets in anyway.' Vietnam was on by then, and his father, who still worked for the military, pressed his son to enlist. Young Galvin refused, and there was 'a falling out.' 'At the same time I decided I was done with killing things, and that broke his heart. And we never really did come back together.'

Galvin's father had a stroke when he was fifty and could no longer work. He became destitute, and lives now with Jim's sister. He is ageing without much grace. The property, which Galvin never stopped knowing as home, even in the years he went away to college, passed into his hands some years after his father's health failed. He found the money to buy it himself from the Inland Revenue, who had taken hold of it in lieu of the taxes his father had failed to pay.

And so a piece of land, surrendered by a father, returned to a son who'd never left it. When Jim Galvin tells me this, I am struck by a coincidence I am sure is not lost on him. Among the stories _The Meadow_ tells is one about how the upper part of the meadow, once App Worster's, dear to him but lost to hard times and debt, found its way back to App's son Ray. (App's is one of the four names on the title to the meadow.) And so, two pieces of neighbouring land lost by two fathers are returned, in time, to their sons, whose souls were formed there. As though the meadow could not imagine itself without them.

Galvin, who had already earned the right to the place, you would have thought, through work and loneliness, had to pay for it a second time in cash. Galvin's father almost lost the place through
the misfortune of his illness and the arrogance of his believing he could cheat the taxman. Ray’s father lost the meadow because he lost a wife he’d loved, and had to pay for the medicines that had failed to keep her living. Ray grew up, after that, down the bottom of Boulder Ridge, the northern side of what became the Galvin place, on the edge of the prairie that rolls on into Tie Siding. Ray went off swamping on ranches and ended up getting married to a girl called Margie and working in her father’s plastering business in Laramie, until in 1972, out of the blue, he got a call from a man who worked for the company that ran the reservoir on Sheep Creek. Ray’s father App had dreamed up that reservoir. Another man, whose name it still bears, had stymied App’s plans with the bankers and decision-makers down in Fort Collins and then bought the top half of the meadow from App when App was desperate for money, and built the dam himself. There it still was, in need of a new manager, and there was Ray, news of whose knowledge of that country had somehow reached the Divide Ditch and Water Company. Ray took the job and returned to live ‘on his father’s homeplace, his father’s dream, which was now half-drowned and half-owned by some fellow named Lyle Van Waning.’ ‘So Ray became a water engineer, my neighbor, and Lyle’s’ (The Meadow, 1992, p 96).

Land, in the real world, there along Sheep Creek and up on the ridge, is hard-won and hard-kept. It makes you work hard for it, for the right to stay. And it makes its own claims, tough and deep and not easy to forget, on those men who grow up within it.

James Galvin did not return to the place his father had dreamed of; that is, he returned to the same place, but not to the same dream. He returned to a place without which his own life’s story was incomprehensible, without which he would not have become the man and the poet he already was. James senior had imagined the section on the ridge as a hunting paradise, and possessed it in that spirit. His son, by his father’s own doing, had found himself apprenticed to the land and now, returning to it as a man, he had to find a way, as Lyle and App had to find a way down in the meadow, to live with it, to draw a living from it, while as far as possible letting it be.

Working that country exacts a tough-minded love for it. It went this way with the younger Galvin, and it went that way for the other men his writing tells of. They express that love without sentiment, and mostly by just looking. Lyle expresses it like a surly father in his grudging affection for coyotes in the field; in his caring for the birds; in his knowledge of the weather; in his staying put through every storm. This is the way it is with all the (good) men in Galvin’s writing. The relationship those men, and Galvin junior, arrive at with the meadow and the ridge is both robust and tender. It is stoic and dignified—and I would say sacramental, if that were not altogether too pious a word for those men. For their love for the place and their life within it is sometimes cryptically, even meanly expressed, as though fondness were too vulnerable a thing to feel, affection too untrustworthy an emotion to express. The men are parsimonious with their affection as the place is parsimonious with water; their hard words are not meant to hurt, they just
come out that way. The place delivers a heavy snow in winter, almost enough to kill a man like Lyle whom it loves, when all it means is to guarantee water for the summer. The place and its men are contrary, short-tempered, unfair, democratic. There is no place among them for pity but plenty for respect. In this place you persevere. No one prospers here.

Galvin writes this in his poem ‘Three Sonnets’:

There is no philosophy of death where I live
Only philosophies of suffering

—God’s Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 88

A sequence in The Meadow nicely demonstrates the rugged-tender love the men of this country show each other and the place itself. Ray and Lyle are working together cleaning out the irrigation ditches and arguing over the intelligence of beavers—arguing, though they both agree with that thesis; they both respect the beavers for the work they do raising the level of the creek and keeping more water in the meadow, and they both work pretty hard to deter them from the kind of excesses that plug the ditches and wash out the roads. They both know how smart the beavers are, yet ‘Lyle hates it when Ray says things he agrees with.’ So he says,

Sure they’re smart, Ray, but that don’t mean I have to like the sonsofbitches. Being smart just makes it worse. Makes them better at being a pain in the ass. Makes you feel guilty for trapping them. Hell, Ray, people are smart.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 99

And then follows a scene where Ray sits in the back of his truck weeping over a beaver he has had to trap to spare the road. The beaver’s body lies in the truck beside him when James Galvin comes up.

Ray didn’t look up. He said, ‘There’s a whole mountain back there with streams and springs to plug no end. If I could’ve scared her, but she wouldn’t scare.’ When he looked at me his tears made freshets down his cheeks. We walked to the house for coffee before skinning her out.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 100

The place itself—which is both gentle and harsh, benign in the warm months and deadly in the cold—models the kind of love Galvin’s men show. The men embody and express the perversity and contradiction, the gentleness and the meanness that characterise the country. Through them we know it.
These men know the place they are in as an earthly paradise. When he got back to the meadow, Ray 'reckoned he couldn't die now since he was already in heaven;' and I get the feeling from James Galvin he thinks he is already living out, in that country, whatever afterlife there may be. His prayers are all thankful—except for those that wish for rain. His father's paradise was rather less considerate and humble, much less prayerful. He wasn't listening, and he wasn't praying. He was dreaming of more animals to kill, as many men have done in the west, and continue to do, metaphorically and actually, everywhere.

It was through his father's misguided impulses, his regimen for making young James a man, that Galvin, as he puts it, 'got seduced into loving that place.' Then, as a man, he found he loved it for real, and knew it as if it were a property of his mind, as if it were a place that lived inside his imagination, as if he were made on the same design as it was. 'I had to leave home to discover that I had been raised in an unforgiving paradise,' he writes. And once that place was also, in the worldly sense, his property, 'when I got grown up enough to know what I wanted, I turned it from being a hunting paradise into an agricultural entity.' He summered cattle on it and ran horses. He learned to rope so he could help his friends drive and manage cattle. He still does these things. He's not turning a profit on it. He earns his money teaching poetry at a university, and a little from his books. No one could make a living from such a parcel anymore, he says to me. 'But I can almost pay the taxes, and I can keep it.' As it keeps him. 'There's a forest lost in me,' he writes in 'Left-Handed Poem' (Elements in Resurrection Update, 1997, p 159)—the lodgepoles and spruce of Boulder Ridge. And there is a man lost in them.

He built himself a log cabin there, using trees from the site, others Lyle gave him. 'I didn't want to use living trees if I could help it. So I spent a lot of time walking around my timber looking up for straight dead trees. What I discovered then is that there is no such thing as a straight tree. And in the end I had to fell some, just to get enough wood. I spent two summers and two falls dropping and skidding timber, and two more summers and falls building that house.' He lives inside his own timber, worked by his own hands into a house; and the timber, worked by the wind and time, lives inside him.

Galvin has a feeling for timber, the trees of the ridge, in particular. His first book of poems, written in graduate school in Iowa City was named for them: Imaginary Timber (1980). The trees stand for home. They stand for endurance. They are holy and humble. They live and they die. They are real.

82 I found these words in the reading guide to The Meadow on the Henry Holt website.
The pines never stop praying.  
They pray best in a drizzle.  

The pines pray up a drought.  
They pray snowdrifts and sheet lightning.  

They get everything they pray for...  

Here in pines under ashen sky  
I am.  Reason is  
To join my prayers  
With theirs.  

—'More Like It,' _Lethal Frequencies_ in _Resurrection Update_, 1997, pp 206–07

These lines tell me that presence is prayer. This is what the pines do—they stay. They relate with and articulate every kind of weather, and the relationships they form are holy because they are enough in themselves and are always welcome among the trees. Drought and snowdrift, for trees, are not a disaster, not a matter of regret. They are answers to prayers: they come in time, if you stay put. This is the stoicism Galvin reads in the trees. He joins them. To be present, that is 'here,' is to be. To be is reason enough. And to stay put and suffer the conditions that make a place what it is: this is a kind of prayer that gets you everything you could ask for, since you ask for nothing other than what is true, what patterns the place. Acceptance is belonging, is prayer, is the ethic of the place that James Galvin calls home. Places last; people and trees pass. To accept this is to come to belong and to find the only comfort one can find. This is the way Lyle lives; it is the way he has learned from the meadow. It is what you learn from witness, I suppose. It is what the timber says to Galvin, the timber lost in him, the timber he used to make a home among the trees, upon the ridge, above the meadow, in sight of the range.

In the early eighties, Galvin brought a wife, the poet Jorie Graham, to live there with him here, in pines. Until recently, when they split, the two of them spent part of each year on Boulder Ridge, working the land and writing poems; the other months they spent teaching in Iowa City. On Boulder Ridge (and in Iowa City) they raised a child together—Emily, for whom James Galvin wrote _The Meadow_.

There was an education Galvin had beyond the timber and the meadow of course, and it culminated at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he met Jorie Graham. But there were years of it before that. He went to prep school and high school in Colorado. It was cruel in a way
nothing in the meadow—except perhaps for his father's dreams and ambition—was cruel. 'I had seen cruelty to animals but never child to child. It was very Lord of the Flies.' He had one fine teacher at high school who introduced him to literature, to *Moby-Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*, in particular; and another teacher, one of the founders of Outward Bound, who was also a mythic figure in mountaineering, who led him into alpine climbing, an enduring passion of Galvin's about which he has scarcely written. 'So the two good things that happened to me in high school were getting into alpinism and getting into literature.'

But if one teacher at least helped him read and climb, no one yet had suggested that he make a poem, that he witness anything in lines on paper. Not yet. 'You can grow up as a male child in the American West,' he says, 'and you can live your whole life and no one is ever going to ask you to write a poem. They'll ask you to kill things. They'll ask you to get into fights. But they won't ask you to create anything.' He went to Antioch College in Ohio, a Quaker school, and there he was encouraged to learn, through the arts, to see; he was asked to create, and found that he could. 'I was astonished to meet people who had bearing, who were not sissies, but they were making art. They were painting and drawing, making sculpture and photographs and poems.' He got seduced by Zen Buddhism 'for a while there,' he tells me, and saw how his spiritual development required him to learn to see the world with the kind of detachment and discipline, with the kind of attention the arts could teach. At college, under these influences, he explored photography and drawing and lithography. Painting frightened him because he was (and is still, of course) 'partly colorblind, and I was just overwhelmed by the idea of color.' He found, in time, he worked better in black and white, in word and sound.

Antioch asked its students to find themselves work while they studied, and Galvin found a job as an apprentice to a man who made guitars. He got good at the craft, loved the making, and grew quire good at playing the instrument. But there, too, he reached a plateau, 'and it was a pretty low plateau.' Galvin has a good strong voice that would be good for singing. He admits he loves to sing and play guitar—this passion, this pastime, plays in a minor key through *The Meadow*. But he realised making music was not where his artistic calling lay either.

So, as he tells it, he ended up with poetry and found that he could do it. He had spent his life reading, and he says he wound up writing, 'by process of elimination.' He also says to me that if he could play any better he would much sooner be a musician than a writer. I'm not sure he means it. Music matters to Galvin; he writes about it, uses it as metaphor, often in his poems. But would he really rather be composing and playing? Perhaps, in his writing, that is really what he is doing anyway—I will say more about this. His point, I think, is that writing is tough. 'For one thing, a writer needs a new idea every line,' while the other arts can make a single idea go a long, long way—one chord, one image, one technique with clay or marble. Anyway, Galvin got good enough at poetry, he found enough new ideas line after line, to get into Iowa, the best graduate writing
program in the country (then as now). I sense that, though the ridge and the meadow, the years with Lyle, made Galvin the man he is, fashioned his soul, attached him in kinship to that country, something more than that living and that looking was necessary to make him the kind of witness to it in words that he is. He found that extra quality—the mortar to hold its puzzle-pieces apart, the craft to shape it in sound and image—at Antioch and Iowa. He found there, as we all might if we are lucky and hardworking, skills that a wolf, for instance, will never get hold of; not that we could ever learn what a wolf knows about song and secrecy and stealth.

*Imaginary Timber* (1985) came out of his graduate years at Iowa. The poems in it are witnesses of home, for the most part, sometimes youthful, but astonishingly accomplished works. Out of those years and that poetry came a job teaching poetry at the university, something he has done ever since. So did his marriage to Jorie Graham, whom he met at the workshop and who went on to teach there too. ‘Our souls recognised each other,’ he says to me. ‘I recognised destiny when I saw it. And it wasn’t until twenty-five years later that I realised I was wrong about everything.’

His recent divorce from Jorie Graham is hurting Galvin still when I see him. He is sad about everything that is over. He is wounded by having been forced by the split to fight again to keep hold of the place on Boulder Ridge. He is anxious about losing his daughter, who has gone to study now in Harvard, where Jorie is also teaching. (These anxieties, along with the consolations of sky and country, flood his latest book of poems, *X*, which appeared in May 2003.) Through this hard season of his life, his work and a place sustain him: poetry sustains him, a new colt to practise care and attention upon, and a home place that goes on and on through every kind of weather—the weather, indeed, is part of the place; it is among the things the pines pray up.

Shortly after my time with him, Galvin published a poem called ‘Depending on the Wind’ about his loss and about the ultimate consolation of places—of timber and wind, which last. It is a poem again about timber and a timber home, about the relationship of wind and wood and window. It understands that there is little comfort to be had from these things, from the real world, for the kind of grief a man (or a woman) can suffer, but there is a truth they speak of, among themselves, upon which one can depend, a truth that is ‘chaotic, senseless, wise’ as he put it in an earlier poem (*A Portrait of My Roof,* *Lethal Frequencies* in *Resurrection Update*, 1997, p 203). Here is part of ‘Depending on the Wind,’ as it appeared in *The New Yorker*. (He included it in *X*, 2003, with some small changes. I quote from *X*.) Its lines are long, a lilting elegy, their sound stunned, barely accepting, quietly raging:

> A score of years ago I felled a hundred pines to build a house.
>
> Two stories, seven rooms in all.
>
> I built my love a home...
Where once I was not alone, now each
closed door is panic, and spaces grow immense with memory, like
shadows at dusk.

Gone that arrangement of allegiances called family
we never really know before it ends.

Like love itself, it isn't true till
then...

Wind still blows through open
windows like it always used to do.

What did I love that made me
believe it would last?

—James Galvin 'Depending on the Wind,' The New Yorker,
May 2002; X, 2003, p 46

Think of his life’s trajectory to this point. Alone among those trees, he began the life that has
made him this man. His life was, among other things, an often lonely deepening into the body
of that ridge, into a deepening of love for it—for the real world expressed there, the elusive
indubitable truth. And then, later, after learning to write, learning another love (of poetry), he
brought to his beloved place a wife, with whom he learned that one might have a place and yet
not be alone within it. It was for Jorie and their love, it was the for their daughter Emily, but
it was also for this transcendent love of life itself—the kind the pines understand, the place
embodies—that he built that house of timber. And now, feeling abandoned, recalling how bad
abandonment used to feel, even in the bosom of that place, when he was a boy, all that boy who
is now this man has is the house, the trees, the wind; and it is enough, though barely. Everything
is barely enough on that ridge near that meadow and that range. Yet it lasts; it is true; it is
dependable. Two things are dependable, in fact, and they bear each other the same kind of
relationship the wind bears to the windows—place and poetry. Windows frame the real world;
they let us see it; they let it inside. Poetry frames the real world and lets its chaos, its
senselessness, its wisdom speak.

I am sitting in the meadow now. The wind is coming down hard from Little Bald Mountain and
Deadman Hill on its way to Lyle’s house. It’s rattling the rusty willows and the yellow reeds,
distressing the dark mirror faces of the beaver ponds along Sheep Creek in its hurry to get there.
It doesn’t seem to know that he lives there no more. Or perhaps it just keeps on coming anyway.
I’m having trouble, too, imagining this meadow without Lyle. He died in 1988. He’s lying down
beneath a taciturn headstone in the Fort Collins Cemetery, beside his mother and his sister, who lived here too and knew this wind. I've plucked a bit of sage from the ground beside me, and tomorrow I will take it down to them and leave it where they lie.

On the snow fences Lyle made to keep winter from burying the small township of timber buildings he put up over the years around the house—workshop, timber shed, garage, barn—the Sheep Creek Ranch has posted a sign: Keep Out—you will be prosecuted. They've strung a wire fence along the county road, too, to keep Lyle's meadow in; and they've hung more signs along its length to keep the people out—pilgrims like me, and fishermen, like the guy just downriver, waving a shining line above the beaver dams. I am sitting squat on the pink-brown earth among the grey meadow grasses and the sage. I am sitting in the wind between the road and the fence, on a bit of the meadow that got out and is also on its way to Lyle's place. My truck sits behind me, just off the county road, which is made of this same red earth. It slumps here and there, this track, the county road that runs west off Cherokee Park Road; it gives way a little beneath you—patches of soft and waterlogged gumbo (Bentonite, geologists call it) that grab at your tyres as you pass over them on the dirt. Stay, says the ground, now and then, hold here a little. There is something hidden here. And beyond the road sits Lyle's place, not hidden but daily lost a little more to its past.

Winter is over. It is the last day of April, and the grasslands look dry as old parchment. Up on the ridges, there's no sign of snowpack. Winter brought little snow, and April brought no rain. The pines have prayed up a drought. But see if the wind cares. In the Fort Collins paper a weather historian says that the winter moisture levels are way below average. 'I guarantee the grass and trees know it,' he says.

So I am witnessing Lyle's meadow in a lean season, as he did, I suppose, plenty of times. Upstream the Elton Reservoir—which App imagined and Ray came back to manage—is standing bereft of water, or almost. It is a gash in the heart of the meadow App fell in love with—he fell for the whole length of it, waisted by granite outcrops, before the reservoir divided it and Sheep Creek in two. I was up there above those rocks, that granite waist on Boulder Ridge Road a while back, looking down on the blond haymeadow and the empty reservoir from among Engelmann spruce, lodgepole pine, white fir, and some red cedars, I think—which I can only tell apart because I have a pocket guide to the trees and plants of the Rockies—until the wind blew me down here. The trees encircle the meadow, but it is the kind of jagged, uncertain circle trees tend to make, and the pines encroach upon the grassland down the line of some of the streambeds that fall toward Sheep Creek, out of the ridge to its south, down from Deadman. The meadow is the place where everyone wants to be—water, wind, fisherman, student and tree—but even if they make it, few can stand here for long.
A number of Galvin’s poems explore this shifting border between forest and grass (‘Three Sonnets’ and ‘Navigation,’ for example). Just why mountain meadows like Lyle’s keep themselves free of trees remains a lively mystery. You’d probably have to live and work here thirty years to begin to know for certain. Fine-textured soils seem to travel to such bowls in the high country as this and pool there. These soils drain all wrong for evergreens—some say they stay too wet too long into summer to give hope to conifer seedlings; others say they are too dry for trees. The soils—like this soft red ground I sit on—give more encouragement to grasses and herbaceous plants, which out compete the slower trees. Meadows form, and trees stand clear of them, in bowls like the shallow valley along Sheep Creek, where snow drifts deep and stays (memorizing the landscape,’ as Galvin puts it in *The Meadow*) much longer than it does on the ridges. And then there is, of course, the wind, which rushes too hard across flat stretches of ground for anything taller and less supple than sedge and grass, sage and willow, to hang on. Beavers may have something to do with it too, where they build dams that inundate wide areas and drown the roots of trees. The ecology of mountain meadows is deceptively complex. If there is one thing that makes them just what they are, one thing that deters the trees, the ecologists have not yet decided what it is (Knight, *Mountains and Plains*, 1994, pp 193 ff). That’s how it goes in the real world.

No doubt the real reason meadows are meadows only the landscape knows. It is one of the things we don’t fully know about the things we do know. There is no single cause: there is the complex history of the land itself, its provenance and alliance to certain kinds of weather. Galvin puts it down to the wind:

> Evergreens have reasons  
> For stopping where they do,  
> At timberline or the clean edge  
> Of sage and prairie grass.  
> There are quantities of wind  
> They know they cannot cross.


Out of the wind, the day is mild in the meadow. Some fair weather cumulus sails in from the south. Close to the ground and out of the wind in the meadow, some white flowers, stemless daisies and phlox, try their luck among the sagebrush and fescue. The sage has already flowered. Spent flower heads droop about me. The whistle of a bird rises above the thrum of the wind. I saw mountain bluebirds, a Steller’s jay, swallows and a kestrel on my ride up here, but I miss the bird that makes this sound, sweet and pitiless. I wonder about Lyle’s swallows and sparrows. Where are they? Is this one?
When I drove up here late this morning I recognised Lyle's house, sitting so close to the road, by the bay window facing south. Before that, I knew I was getting close when I noticed the beaver dams on the creek. I had passed the old sagging barn beyond the creek. Then ahead, south of the road, I saw the big barn Lyle built, as though it were a cathedral, late in his days, the creek's course marked by orange willows flaring from the grasses behind it. The barn looks as new as yesterday. I knew from *The Meadow* what skill and care and persistence Lyle had exercised upon it, and the real thing stopped me dead. It was then I saw I had pulled up in front of Lyle's window. Boulder Ridge rises, timbered, behind the empty house. Granite outcrops among the conifers. Small creeks run off the shoulder of the ridge both sides of the Van Waning place on their way to join Sheep Creek. One is Trout; the other has no name on my map. These are the creeks the beavers got into and washed out the road, I guess.

Later in the day, I make my way around Green Mountain, east of Lyle's and up to Boulder Ridge where the Galvin place hides, then down to Tie Siding on the prairie to the north. And back to Fort Collins in the last light. I have travelled fast around country Lyle and the others lived long and slowly in. I can understand how they fell for it and why they stayed, and why one's hold on it is always tenuous, its hold on you tenacious. It is the kind of country I love too—simple, austere, lightly timbered, grassed, arid yet discretely watered. I can't know it as Lyle did, closely and steadily witnessing it and disappearing into it. Nor, of course, can I see its human-sized stories unroll through time, the stories Galvin's neighbours and their ancestors enacted and recalled in this sweet, spare country, stories Galvin grew up with, inherited or collected like the fallen timber—none of it straight—he turned into a house for his love. A place includes the memories and storylines of the people—perhaps those of the other beings too—who have lived and been formed there. It includes the stories of the place itself beyond its human beings, stories of weather and geology and water that we find by witness. As he made a house from found and felled pieces of native timber, Galvin made *The Meadow*, another house of love, from the many told and untold pieces of narrative, bits of life story and weather he knew there, and from them, too, he has fashioned most of his many poems. These works of Galvin's, made of found pieces of this place, stand apart from, and yet also are a part of, the meadow, just as Lyle's outbuildings stand here before me. Galvin's works are works fashioned from and for, expressive of, a place; and in this they are like the boxes, tools, guns and spurs, and the odd bits of jewellery Lyle made. Lyle made them because he needed them, or simply because he liked to make elegant and enduring things that worked or looked well. The jewellery he made without anyone particular in mind (no girl, for instance). And so it should be with poems; so it is with Galvin's fragments of story. The turning of those stories to works of words—if it is done with the kind of humility that knows that they are just the smallest pieces of what makes this place real—is part of what wakes the poet, and, I guess, the reader, to the dream of the place. Without them, without its poems, its fragments of song in 'ordinary language,' ('Navigation,' *Imaginary Timber* in *Resurrection Update*, 1997, p 71) the
place will sleep on, and we may not enter its dream. Works like Lyle’s barn, like Galvin’s book, let us in. They stand for it, anyway. The rest is up to us.

The place does not manifest the episodes and anecdotes—nor does the poet make the work—for anyone or any good purpose: just for the sake, in the poet’s case, of the beauty of the work itself and in some kind of service of the real world. To have been brought into existence and to be entire—that is what a place or a moment, an event or a song, is for. That is why it is a joy simply to witness one such poem, flower, pine, beaver, moment, or piece of jewellery. Galvin has made a home, a dwelling, of such found and made things.

I’m thinking of Lyle making a pair of silver and agate earrings with no girl in mind to give them to.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 222

If a writer had any ambition for a work, it would be that it end up feeling as beautiful as those earrings, made for no one, as each day is made for no one.

The way Galvin tells it, he never set out to write The Meadow. This is true, in one sense, of all writing—for all literature—in his conception. No work is the child of intention; no work, if it is any good, is merely the product of one man or woman’s skill and desire. ‘None of us is smart enough to write a poem,’ he says to me. ‘The language is smart though, smarter than any of us. We need to tap into it. That is what form does. It is the wall socket. We plug in, and, sometimes, the language writes itself through us.’ Form is the shape of some idea or poetic structure—sonnet, blank verse, certain prose forms, too. Like a pair of earrings, like a barn.

But in the case of The Meadow even the form was lost to its author. Galvin did not sit down to make anything. He meant to write something, of course, when he sat down to bang out the stories of the meadow and ridge onto sheets of white paper in his typewriter. He knew it was not poetry, that much was certain. ‘I had no idea at the outset of this thing as a book in any genre, that anyone else might read,’ he says. It was an exercise with two purposes.

One was to put some of those stories down, the ones he’d grown up with, the ones he felt someone should record before they sank out of memory. Ray was dead, and Lyle was dying. Hazel and Clara were gone, of course, and App was already an old ghost in the meadow. More recently, Frank Lilley had passed away down on the Chimney Rock Ranch, and the old places were steadily falling to corporations or being divided up into ranchettes. The West was slipping through their hands. He thought he should write down the stories, the tales he could remember, so that they would not disappear with the place he had so long known—not all of them, anyway—and so that Emily, his young daughter, might know the ground out of which his poetry grew, the valley walls
against which it resonated. So that the place would be real for her. Lyle himself died in the
middle of his writing it, which 'played hell with my verb tenses,' he says. 'I figured I should
get these stories down while there was still someone here who could remember them.

'I wrote this book for Emily,' he writes, simply, at the head of the acknowledgments page. (So he
did, this time, and unlike Lyle, have a particular girl in mind.)

The second reason Galvin wrote what became _The Meadow_ was to kickstart his poetry. 'I have
always known that poetry is a conversation with silence,' he says to me, 'and the silence was
winning. I was at a hard place with my poetry.' This was around 1990, between the volumes
_Elements_ (1988) and _Lethal Frequencies_ (1995). 'I wanted to try something different to get my
poetry going again.'

'I was at the house I used to share with Jorie in Italy,' he goes on. 'Each morning I woke and had
three cups of coffee. And then, wired, I put one sheet of white paper in the typewriter, set it so
there were no margins at all and rolled the paper in so that I began right at the top. My idea was
that the white paper was the silence and I would just write it out. So I covered whole sheets in
black type, and when I was through with one page, I turned it right over and did the same on the
other side. I was making all these blackened pages, writing out the stories I had of the place, of
Lyle and the other people I knew there.

'Well, after four months I had eighty pages covered in black type in this way, and I was done. My
wife was looking in on what I was doing, and when I was done, she commented, sensibly enough,
that no one, not even Emily, could possibly read what I had written in that shape. So I began on a
second draft, this time with margins and double spacing, and typed on one side only.

'While I was working on that, Jorie would read bits of it, and she got interested and said to me,
"You know, you should see about publishing that." I didn't think anyone would be interested in it
at all. It was so personal. But she spoke to some folks here and there and nagged me about working
it up and sending it to someone. And then one day I had a call from an agent in New York, who
said she loved my poetry and had heard I was working on a kind of novel. It was Abigail Thomas,
Lewis Thomas's daughter. She asked if I would send it to her when I was finished. Well, I told
her it wasn't a novel and it was not for publication and definitely was not the kind of book that
would make anyone any money. "Now you really have me interested," she said. And so, in the end,
she seduced it out of me.'

Before he sent it, though, he had to convince himself that it was indeed a book anyone would read.
So he sent it to two writers he knew, very different men and stylists, William Kittredge and Allan
Gurganus. Both told him it was working, and so he sent it off to Abigail Thomas. 'She shopped it
to Knopf, first,' he tells me, 'whose editor wanted less of what made it strange. An editor at Holt,
[William Strachan], on the other hand, wanted me to include more of what was weird about it. So I guess I had found my editor.

He set out not knowing where he was going, or what he was making, intending nothing except to tell some true stories truthfully. Some ideas of form, important ones, emerged, though, out of the writing itself. And as he wrote, he realised how those ideas of form served well what he now discovered as the true subject of the writing: the landscape itself. ‘I realised that the landscape was the main character,’ he says. ‘But how do you speak for the landscape? You can’t. But I wanted it to be there.’ The main challenge of writing narrative about landscape, says Galvin, is that the landscape does not run to human time—our short attention span, roughly the length of a human life; our sense of a human life as a long time; our very linear sense of causality and our hunting for cause and effect, for meaning itself, within the narrow compass of a hundred years or so. ‘There is not the same passage of time,’ he says, ‘for the meadow. And I realised that, looked at from the landscape’s point of view, people are just another kind of weather passing through it.’

He tried to write the landscape—to give it lines and shape, to be true to its antiquity and slowness—by his choice of form and structure. His form (that is, the shape of his work and the shape of its parts; the body of the thing) was a conglomerate of fragments of text, prose poems. His structure (that is, the way those parts get arranged, the skeleton that holds the body together, the network of blood vessels and synapses that make it lively; the pattern of the work’s articulation) was discontinuous sequence, spliced fragments, mosaic.

So after the first writing frenzy, a kind of exorcism, he worked his prose fragments into an ordered chaos. He begins with the meadow—no accident, that—and splashes landscape pieces throughout, juxtaposing episodes of weather and landscape memoir with tales of people’s fates and fortunes, deliberately not allowing any human story to run on from beginning to end. He disturbs the passage of human time, running back and forth from Lyle to App to Ray to Pat Sudeck to Frank and so on. He breaks their stories up and scatters them about the meadow, the ridge and the prairie, trying in this way to be true to the life of the landscape, and the human lives within it—as though each story were just an event, like the weather’s passage, in the real world,’ he says. As though each human life, each story, were ‘just one of the points of view, among many, in a place.’ This arrangement attempts to catch the complex patterning, interconnected narratives that are that place, that landscape; and it moves his narrative forward in approximation of place-time, not human time—broken, many-tempoed, neverending.

So Galvin tried to imagine ecologically the human lives and the life of the place that contained them, expressed them. He tried to write, though he does not say so in just these words, like a meadow. ‘Lately I have come to think that the landscape may be nothing but a bunch of points of view,’ he says. He confesses this idea remains mysterious to him, but he senses its truth. To write
a book of lives—human and nonhuman—from a dozen points of view, including his own as Jim Galvin, his own as author, from Lyle's, App's, Ray's, the coyote's, the snow's and so on; and to write it from many points of time, all out of (human) sequence, was his way of writing a book in which the landscape played, in which it was present, for this was to be, above all, its own story.

In a poem in *God's Mistress* (1984) James Galvin expresses, in another form, a closely related thought about landscape, imagination and point of view. This poem speaks of the need to go down deep (into the earth, in this case), to leave your own fixed position, in order to imagine the world right (in this particular case, the stars, which are there all the time, but hidden to us in the daylight)—in order to see the real world:

You have to go down
in a deep mineshaft or a well,

down where you can imagine the incomparable
piety of the schoolbus,
the wherewithal of bees,

down where you can be a drawer full of dust
as night comes on under full sail,

and the smooth rain,
in its beautiful armor,
stands by forever.

—'To See the Stars in Daylight;' *God's Mistress* in *Resurrection Update*, 1997, p 110

Form, then, (a book of fractured prose) and structure (this kaleidoscopic arrangement)—artistic choices, which were part accident, part design—were Galvin's writerly devices for finding the language to express the place. But bear in mind, he intended nothing creative. He did not mean to make a (publishable) book. He intended to tell some stories right and to set them in a context—the place—in which they belonged, which they seemed to express. Without meaning to, though, he was writing a book that sings a place. He set out, I guess, mostly to bear witness. True witness—if it is to be more than the articulation of an author's argument, of his personal conclusions about a subject, a study really of himself and his attitudes, his discourse upon a topic—may work best in such a (half-accidental, half-chosen) mosaic fashion; in such a wild motion, never fixed, though always attentive. Particularly where what it witnesses is something so complicated and neverending, so far transcending our sense of time and order, as a place on earth.
The poem, whose beginning I quoted just now, goes on to express something like a personal ontology and aesthetics, in which the poet imagines the real world as just such a musical mosaic, scattered and hard to fathom:

I believe there's a fiddle in the wings whose music is full of holes and principles beyond reason. It binds our baleful human hearts to wristwatches and planets, it breaks into fragments which are not random.

—'To See the Stars in Daylight,' *ibid*

These fragments of music, full of holes, and resounding with meaning beyond reason—are these the scattered points of view and time, including our own (to which we are bound, thinking it, wristwatch time, to be the only real tempo), that compose a landscape, compose the real world? Is the real world made of music, fragments of which speak in lives and landforms, seeming random and without meaning, and yet composing, if you can imagine their connection, the order we long to join? I don't want to reduce a poem to a theorem here. But I am taken by the resonance between this poetic idea and the thoughts about the representation of land and life Galvin spoke of when we met, and which he embodies in his nonfiction (in his novel, too, where narrative line is broken up into fragments not quite random). He has come upon a structure of prose that is beautifully apt for matching and serving, for hearing and speaking, for singing with, perhaps, a real world made of broken music. Music here may mean not just patterned sounds, but chaotic, multiple and dissonant interconnections of lives, energies and so on. It is well made, this arrangement of parts, for bearing musical witness. As we have seen, there is a strange, beautiful order at work behind the apparently random mosaic of Galvin's book of place; just as, in his conception, the world we experience here or there, in fragments meaning nothing, is in fact run through with a strange music, or a set of musics, that makes sense of it all. Getting the world right, getting the place right, honouring the land's logic, would, in this conception be mostly a matter of catching its lyric and somehow rendering it in your work. Simple, huh?

I mentioned, before, Galvin's notion of the province of literature as the mysterious truth inside the part of the world that is familiar to us. Poetry and the nonfiction of witness, but also novels with a similar concern for this realm, attempt, for Galvin then, the same kind of musical expression of which the real world—the actual world lying all about us, including our own lives, if only we could learn to hear it right—is composed; in which, I guess you could say, the world
really sings. That fragmentary and elusive music is what literature tries to witness—first to apprehend and then to give voice to. Most of a work’s success in giving us, its readers, the place or the moment itself, the sense of being-there, it will achieve through its musicality—its pattern of sounds, its characteristic voice, its syntactical rhythms, its arrangement of phrase, sentence and paragraph, its codas and reprises, its tone. Phrasing, which prose manages through the arrangement of words, the arrangement therefore of meaningful sounds in sentences and then in paragraphs, through the shape of those paragraphs, and which ‘pure’ music achieves through what are called ‘markers’—dynamics, harmony, melodic line, variations in meter and instrumentation (Bryant Voigt, 2003, p 146; and Jourdain, 1997, p 130)—is the rhythmic system,’ according to poet Ellen Bryant Voigt (relying on music theorist Robert Jourdain), ‘that builds “large-scale musical objects and thereby induc[es] large-scale musical perceptions”’ (Voigt, 2003, p 152). Prose shares with poetry the rhythm that comes from syntax, though it does not have the capacity for meter that poetry takes from the line. But prose, as I have suggested, may make music if it is attentive to the patterned sounds it makes in its sentence structures. The voice that is expressed in those patterns will be the writer’s own, and, if he or she has attended to the other metrics and tempos at play all about, it will be the voice, perhaps, of the place, fragmentary, incomplete but truthful. But more of this later. 

Galvin resists fiercely being seen as a poet, a witness, of the West. That is because the West is a fabrication. ‘It’s not a subject,’ he says. Not a fit subject, for him anyway, being an abstraction. He also resists, though, being seen narrowly as a writer of landscape, a writer of meadows and prairies. Like Lopez and all the other nature writers, he insists that his places and people are just what he knows, and writing of them is his way of engaging in the enterprise of literature. ‘I don’t think Robert Frost writes about Vermont,’ he says to me. ‘I don’t think Melville writes about whales. It is a way of writing something we might recognise as literature.’ It is what is mysterious, musical, strange about those places and lives that concerns him. It is what is real he seeks. It is that he goes after in poem and prose—in musical fragments.

Galvin does not see himself merely as a writer of place, as the poet of the meadow. Nor should we see him that way either. Yet a place and the lives that pass within it are his subject, because he knows them and because he loves them. And from attention to this place, perhaps, he has learned something that he works hard at expressing in his writing—the idea that the landscape encompasses and subsumes human lives, and it runs by a different order, plumbing which we may

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84 I introduced these ideas, of course, in my chapter ‘The essential prose of things’ and said more about them in ‘The valley of the Wind.’ Below, when I turn to the lyric essay, I say more about the differences between poetry and prose, the capacity of prose to make music and the importance of that musical work for the witness of place. See pp 378 ff and pp 384–88 below.
strum the mysterious strings of existence itself. The strumming better be good, and it had better
catch the strange and particular music of the place, or else the work will not succeed in singing
its small part of the poem of reality. You can only write truly from somewhere.

Only work that is grounded somewhere in particular can express part of what is real. Writing that
speaks out of 'no place,' as Galvin puts it to me, 'is actually a kind of antirealism.' So Galvin writes
his strange, fragmented realism, a musical and linguistic articulation of the context of all human
experience—place. The real world needs to be known somewhere on earth, and it will have a
certain weather, and a certain music. The meadow participates in it; so did Lyle; so might a poem
or a book of broken prose; so might a reader, if the real is witnessed well in the work's music.

'There is a line from Heidegger,' says Galvin, when we are talking about the business of witness
and reality. 'He uses the word work—I think he's talking about art. He says this, or something
like it: 'The work lets the world be a world.' He was a pretty smart guy. He takes things so far
and he's so smart, of course, that in the end, all you can do is change the subject.'

Which we do, after letting Heidegger's adage sit with us a bit. The words come from an essay of
Heidegger's, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935). In fact the better translation is 'the work lets
the Earth be an Earth.' Heidegger makes a distinction between Earth and World, but my sense is
that his idea of Earth includes both the physicality and complexity of the places of the world and
also the mystery inherent in them. In this sense, his meaning is close to Galvin's usage of real
world—the place itself, as we see it and as it eludes us; the fragmented music that plays inside the
familiar; along with the familiar, human and nonhuman realm we live in and which runs on an
altogether other pattern than we do.

The German phenomenologist has been taken to mean by these words, and others like them, that
the rest of the living world has no being until it is apprehended and sung by the poet, expressed in
a work of art. In Being and Time Heidegger says that it is by language that we draw things into
being by bringing them into the articulated world. 'Only the word grants being to a thing,' wrote
Heidegger in Underway to Language (1979). Jonathan Bate concludes from Heidegger that poetry
saves the world by the poet's dwelling in it and his or her singing that world forth. The 'human
racism' implied in this thesis, the sense that the poet is the god who conjures the world in song,
that the rest of creation depends upon humankind for its real life, is not what Galvin has in mind

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85 Jonathan Bate, The Song of the Earth, 2000, p 283. I rely here on a reading of Bate and Heidegger by Kate
Rigby in her paper 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis,' delivered at a conference, Ecology,
Community, Culture at the University of Queensland in July 2002. Her discussion of Bate begins on p 2 of this
(so far) unpublished paper.
at all, even if it was what Heidegger imagined. Quite the contrary. The world is always much larger and more actual, more truthful even, than the work—which is a transcription of a small piece of it into music a guitar can play; into music a reader can share; or into, perhaps, a barn. Some of the real world is sometimes transcribed through work that, in the case of a poem or a painting of a barn, intends nothing other than to see itself well made and worthy, perhaps of its subject matter. ‘Work’ in the sense Galvin means it, I think, whatever Heidegger meant, is just a humble act of witness—not of creation by invocation. It is just a conversation with silence conducted in darkness and confusion.

For Galvin, the poet’s role is humble in the face of the world’s unfathomable mystery. Indeed it is more like the modest business of listening, learning to hear the strange music playing within the body of the world, within its places and lives, and then finding forms that speak of it and in which it seems to speak itself. Nor does it take a work only of poetry to express the real world. Anyone might do it, if they, like Lyle, have the patience, and if they learn to practise the disciplines of good, hard work. Indeed, one might live in such a way that one’s life articulates what is real, until one almost disappears into that work and into that apprehended world, being no longer at odds, or out of tune with it. Or, if one is a poet or a literary witness working in another style, one might make written works in which the real world to which they refer, out of which they are suggested, seems to live a second time.

The Australian ecocritic Kate Rigby has suggested a reading of Heidegger’s writing on the artistic work and the nonhuman world that would allow us to understand the German phenomenologist as saying something like this: that the role of the poet is so closely to attend to the world, to the experience of being here (Dasein) in it, that when the poet renders their witness artistically, that work sings with—in tune with—that piece of the apprehended world (Rigby, 2002b, p 9). It might be apt, Rigby argues, to understand the poet’s work as a ‘singing with’ the world. The poet sings with the world, she does not sing it up, he does not sing it into being. It is even possible, she argues, Heidegger meant something like that. Or that if he didn’t, perhaps he should have. The material earth and the pattern that runs through it like a song don’t need us poets to make them real, to let them sing. But we need them, and we may sing with them, joining their chorus, and disclosing something true about them in our singing.

The real world—the fragmented music—is finally unsayable, so Heidegger thought (ibid, p 11). Heidegger felt that what distinguishes poetry from technical creations such as a barn is that the poetry concedes the unsayability, the mystery, of the world and preserves it intact. A poem sings with a world that will always elude it, Rigby suggests, by being, avowedly, as a thing made of words, separate from the world to which it refers. It is not a new embodiment or even an embodiment for the first time of the essence of a place. A work or art lets the world be, Rigby suggests, by acknowledging that the world cannot be formed into words, by knowing and avowing
that reality escapes us, by expressing its understanding that the world goes on without the poem; and by seeing that it, the work, falls short always of embodying or recreating the world and of being the world (ibid., pp 11–2). In that heroic seeking and falling short of the world lies the beauty of a work of art such as Galvin's; its power to return our eyes to the world itself that lies beyond the page; and its capacity to witness the autonomy of creation with which we ourselves, like the poet, need to go and seek intimacy (ibid., p 14). 'There is no substitute,' writes Rigby, 'for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human world in those places where we ourselves stray, tarry and reside' (ibid., p 14). The work celebrates and articulates an act of witness and calls on us, by its example, to go witness, go re-inhabit the world ourselves.

Galvin speaks much of the form and structure of works, of their lines and paragraphs. He knows his works are made things. He concedes, as we have seen, that the world is not at all what he and Lyle, or any of us, have thought it was, and that its reality mostly and largely escapes us. Even a man so present and full of witnessing as Lyle is only 'almost' inducted into its mysteries. It is clear, in other words, that Galvin understands that his work remains a thing separate from the world to which it refers. He knows that there is a real world that lies beyond the page.

But I'm not quite satisfied by Rigby's elegant exposition of the relationship of work to world. It misses something; and what it misses counts. She forgets, I think, the music words make—the quality of texts, of words, and of words (if we read 'music' generously to include the poetic or lyric essence of a place) to make patterned sound, to chant and swing, literally to sing. She overemphasises, as much theory does, the physicality and form of poems. Rigby mentions singing, but does not 'tarry' to reflect on what that might mean, that singing with. It is not just a referring back, not a pointing to, not even just a response in letter and poetic form. Though a piece of prose or poetry is material, what it makes, that form, that set of forms, is music—patterns of sound—and it is through its music that it works upon a reader. All meaning comes to us out of the sound that words make—imagined sound, if we read a text without voicing it, and yet real sound, actually heard, without which a word means nothing. The rhythm of the syntax of a sentence speaks to us just as the meaning of the words a sentence carries does. Patterns of sound, phrasing, prepare a reader for meaning to arrive (Voigt, 2003, p 147). Out of patterned sound meaning is made. Music, in prose and poetry, precedes meaning, then, and precipitates it. More than that even, works of words make music, and it is through that music that they touch us and carry to us, shape again in mind, what is more than merely meaningful, what is not merely material, in places and people they speak of—that is, the music of the place.

Music is ineffable and will elude us, just as the placeness of a particular place is ineffable and beyond our grasp. Yet it is that musicality, I think, of both the work and the world that touches us and stays with us longest—the pattern of them, under the skin, their rhyme and rhythm and reason. But where does the music of The Meadow reside? Is it in the words? Is it on the page? Is
it in the meadow? Is it in the reader’s ear? Nowhere and everywhere between. It is a quality of music that it may belong to many places, bodies, forms at once. And so a rhythm of notes or words, suggested by a meadow or a plateau, shaped into a work, sings that place or person, sings its body, and sings in ours, who read it or hear it, and in the body of the work that expresses them. Music has no body, but, like the wind, it seeks body to make itself real; and it suggests always the kind of body that might have made and housed it.

In their lyric element, some works of poetry and prose may be said to sound like, to sing in tune with, even to resemble the unsayable quality of a place on earth. That music of the place—the quality that makes it what it is and yet, like music, has no form we can hold, since music passes in time, and does not coagulate into space—is what I think the place writer listens for and hopes most to express in her words. Never will a writer find words equal to, let alone create, that essence of the world. The song of the text will never be the song of the earth. Yet perhaps it may echo it, ring true to it, always in a human voice, always shaped by letters on a page, while letting the fragmented music of the real world sound on, out of the poet’s ultimate hearing. The work of art—poem or essay, barn or irrigation ditch, rifle or earring—may stand apart and sing in tune with the place from which it arises, to which it looks, whose soul it shares, whose chant it is a response to—call and response, call and response, making one song.

‘[I]n music,’ wrote Viktor Zuckerkandl in his classic *Music and the External World*, in 1956, ‘what is inmost in the world is turned outward’ (Zuckerkandl, 1956, p 348). ‘[W]hat, elsewhere, can be made accessible only by laborious speculation,’ he goes on, ‘and then only uncertainly and insecurely—so that it always remains open to doubt, opposition, and rejection—music brings us patently.’ *Talking about the essence of a place, arguing about what makes it what it is will have less force and remain more contestable than setting whatever that is to music—including the music of one’s words. Lyric works faster and deeper than argument or even image to express the nature of a place, some piece of the real world.*

The words from which that music sings may be said to partake of a life and form separate from the place to which they refer—but what of their music? Is that separate? Who can prove that is not as much of the world as it is of the word? If it gives outward expression to that inmost quality of a place, at least as it seemed to one witness; and if it seems to a reader/listener that that is what the writer is about, does it not in some way articulate that part of the world? It voices some true thing that had no actual voice, no audible pattern of sounds, till then. My sense of it, though, is that, while of course there is no literal music in a place, there is, as Galvin writes in his poem (‘To See the Stars in Daylight’), a music in the wings, a musical order giving shape to this silence, and it is that fragmentarily manifest order that my writing—or yours or anyone’s—in its sound as much as its image and thought, is making some sort of a guess at, some sort of an approximate articulation of. The work attempts, if you like, a conversation, a call and response, with what
Zuckerkandl calls the 'tonal world' of this place—the musical order at work in it in silence (and also in sound). It is not that the writer gives the place a voice, but that he or she responds to its music, its tonal world, what is inmost in it, with his own, with her own.

Perhaps the poem or the work of prose is, as Laurie Kutchins suggested to me, less a singing than a listening. Emily Dickinson observed once that places speak, and the poet learns to listen. A poem or a lyric essay of place is an attunement to place. It tries to discern the soul of, the music of, a place on earth; and in the work, if it has listened well, we (readers, I mean) hear the place, or hear it as it manifested itself to the poet, listening. The listening and the witnessed place then become ours. The poem or the piece of prose, at its best, is a choreography in words of an act of careful listening; and through that listening we may hear the place express itself. We may catch the lyric of the country. We may catch the tonal world, the metrical quality, of that place. Or we may not—depending on how well the poem, the essay, listens, and how tunefully we read.

'Tyle taught me,' Galvin has written, 'that the principal character in our life’s drama is the land. He was properly humbled by his surroundings. He knew the land to be un-ownable, that, indeed, it owns us. He lived in harmonious and reverent conversation with his surroundings' (Galvin in Holt, 1998). Lyle's whole life was a listening, an attunement to place, a silent conversation with it. A work of prose like The Meadow may be another such conversation. It listens humbly to a piece of the world, knowing that it has the melody of which one's own life is a small expression, and then it offers some reverent and harmonious sounds in response: a conversation, a joining in song, a witness.

The work listens then; and perhaps we hear what it listens to, perhaps we hear the listened-to place. Syntax and tone and rhythm and voice and all that might best be understood as the pattern, the music, of the listening, which becomes ours, and so the place reaches us too, through and in those rhythms of silent conversation. Perhaps what the writing enacts in its patterns is largely the listening. It then makes us the listener; and what we hear is what the witness heard: the place; its music.

But—whether only as listening or also as soundings forth—works do sound, and maybe sometimes they sound like a place. Through its music, a work of prose and poetry may form what is essential, yet unsayable and unhearable in the world, into a song—a thing still ineffable, but which a human ear may experience. Work in words does not only point to, enframe, disclose the world and take its own tangible form. It also sings—it makes something we know as music. But what about the world? Does it sing? The more-than-human world has no voice as we have voices; and yet there is something in it we hear, something we might call music (Galvin hears it, as we have seen, in pieces; Éluard spoke of the world within this one; Tuan writes of the invisible landscape, Lopez
dwell on landscape's coherence, poetry, harmony, musical form; Zuckerkandl speaks of the innmostness of the actual world. Human-made music, as I have said before (in my chapter on the work of Lopez), has a way of evoking landscape fast and with great truth. Is this because it is the art closest in its nature to the real world (that is, to the mysterious character of a place, its definitive and elusive character, to what makes it unique)—because music, like that defining thrum of a place, is intangible, yet actual; formless, yet dependent on forms for its expression; mysterious, yet precise, unique, authentic, real; incorporeal, yet undeniable?

Music, having no body, exists in space, lies between forms; and its sound is shaped by the space it inhabits as it sounds out—cello, room, human chest, ear, canyon, cathedral. And music has a way of implying space—the nature of the space in which it seems to move, from which it seems to come. Music gestures spatial volume and the texture, depth and history of the space in which it exists, or in which we can imagine such a music living. For we seem to know that music needs a body in order to reach us, to become real; and that it is the music in the body—instrument or place or person—that is the quality we most desire to find and know and share. And so when we hear music played, say by an orchestra or on a cd, composed by a woman or a man and made on instruments, perhaps we imagine the kind of body that is fit to be expressed by it. That may or may not be so. I think it is so for me. And just as such music seems to imply a quality of space in which it might live, so the music of a piece of writing—the particular pattern and quality of its sounds and rhythms, its musical forms and structure, its voice—always implies a quality of space from which it might have been born, to which it belongs; and that space will not only be the character of the author's mind. The voice and syntactical rhythms, the music, that is, of a work of words shape a world—they enact a particular kind of tonal world in the mind of the reader, a form of space, perhaps rather like the place to which they respond. In any event, the work shapes an imaginal world, and often it will imply in its tonality, in its music, the kind of space from which it arose.

So in a sense the music of a symphony or a chant, and the music of a work of prose or a poem enact a tonal world and place the listener within it. Music implies place. And in a sense the opposite is true: places imply a music of which they are an enactment. Each landscape implies, it silently sounds, a music that expresses its nature; in which we might recall and remember the true form of that place. And if this is true, then this would be the thing the witness—Lyle or Galvin or I—listens for and wants to find rhythms and tones of written speech apt to express. So it may be that the kind of space a book like The Meadow makes through its form and structure, the shape and pattern of its sentences, bears a qualitative resemblance to the space at play in the place it bears witness to. One of the elements of a landscape I would expect to enter the imagination and memory of a writer—particularly a writer bearing witness, like Galvin, to a place, and having about him a feeling for music—is the kind of music that landscape implies. And I would expect it to find expression in his words and phrases. It is that music, silently dreamed by
a landscape, that a place writer's work may intuit and express in its own lyric, in how that work sounds—more than in what it describes—and so it may catch the lyric of the country.

A play of form and formlessness, substance and absence, recurs like a dance through Galvin's poetry. In one, the afternoon's light tries to become tangible. In 'Misericord,' striking its note of lovely sadness, a man wakes with his lover spent sleeping in the snow, and he wants to tell her that 'small frogs were singing from the lake as if/ we had become transparent in our sleep.' Lack of separate human form would be a sign, would be a way, of belonging in a place, of belonging even in its song—frog song here. The sky, in 'Against the Rest of the Year,' is 'cut out for accepting prayers': as though the land longs for the space above it. The music of the place may be the sound, we cannot hear, of that longing of form for complementary space, and of space for complementary form. Again, in 'Misericord,' the poet writes

Who ever doubted that the earth fell from the sky?
As though it had traveled a great distance to reach us

and still could not reach us,

though we held our hands out to it,
some vague intention, some apprehension
occurred between us.


In this imagining, earth is the child of the shapeless sky, still and always falling, its dream of form sent like a prayer—to us, this time. We cannot hold the sky's wish; what earth really is does not quite reach us. All we pick up is a sense of the longing of a void for a form. This 'vague intention' is the sound we apprehend. In the poem, the lovers hear not only the frogs: 'We heard the earth cloud over, clear again./ the low voltage of granite and ice.'

That metaphorical yet transcribable music arises from the play of form and space in landscape. For places are dynamic spaces, as I have suggested, following Carter; they are networks of interactive forms and frequencies and actions, of time registers as slow as the life story of a mountain range and as fast as the beating of the wings of a sparrow. A landscape's music, then, might be understood as what I have called in the introduction 'the dance of relationships we might call a place.' We can perceive it. We can participate in it by listening and making a work of art; and that work of words, in its metrical, in its musical characteristics, might continue the place, reenact that dynamic space.
Music is the one thing that a landscape does not, literally or materially, make or contain, outside wind and birdsong; and yet getting that musical quality right is the object of our witness of them. Music of a place is that which it expresses, without saying anything, that which is implied by but not literally embodied in its forms. It is also that which gives it meaning—its patterns of interconnection. The music of a written work too, is what is not literal about it; but it is what its forms (letters and sentences and paragraphs) express, the pattern of sound that arises from it without which it, too, has no meaning.

And so to return to Heidegger and Rigby, to the relationship of work to world—my rumination upon the work of James Galvin and those words of his in conversation, which set that rumination off, leads me to this point: in its singing (and in its listening), a work does more than gesture at—that is, point to—the world. It accompanies it; it transposes it. In its music, a work of prose or a poem draws closer to the world than Rigby (along with other critics) allows the work to do when she imagines it as an artifact (though, I note that Rigby, following Michael Haar, herself gently proposes what she calls a Rilkean poetics in which 'poetry sings the sayable world' (Rigby, 2002b, p 11)). What makes a work a work is what makes a world a world—not the materiality of each, so much as the unique song (the defining and intangible quality, the pattern) at play within, and expressed by, its material form. Each is really a process—endless, while ever there is life and listening, but with a characteristic pattern. And it is in their lyric quality—their inner life that each expresses, that arises from each—that both may sometimes be said to express the same vernacular truth, the same reality. The work sings what is sung in a place on earth—at least as one poet hears and transcribes it. The work does not make the world's music; it makes its own. Yet it seeks, if it is a work of witness, to form into syllables stressed and unstressed, into patterns of sound, what the writer has discerned in the world. The song of a work takes a reader as close to the world itself—to what is distinctive about it—as any work of human hands and mind can take us. A reader might even sense, though she could never prove it—it being a matter not susceptible of proof, only witness—that a quality of the place is also a quality of the work, and present in the way the work's song unravels in her head.

Something arises from the work—it sings. Something arises from a place—it 'sings.' Perhaps they make the same music, though the work responds to a music that is already there, trying to catch its phrases and fragments as we try to recall and then voice a melody we have heard on a CD or on the street; the work sets what the writer has heard somewhere in another key and musical form for a reader, who has not heard the original, to hear.

If the work sings in a lyric that is faithful to the music of the place, then it serves the place by calling attention to what is truest about it. It serves the place, while letting it be, by resounding
the place's genius in our minds, by transposing what may not be merely said about that piece of world, may not even be apprehended in any other way, into music that can play in human time, may be apprehended by the body. The work makes the music, perhaps, that the place makes through an act of human witness, though each of us will hear and sing it slightly differently, just as a piece of music sounds uniquely in each of our heads. It is in this sense the music both of the place and of the work. They sing the same thing together.

This is its truest and humblest adéquation, its best service to man and to place. The place is there in the work's music—as the tune is there in our head—while remaining exactly where it always was—itself, complete, mysterious and entire.

This is close to the (lyric) project Galvin imagines for the poet, I think. You stand and pay attention to the world somewhere. You let it dawn on you. You let it change you. What you write should ring with what it was you learned in that encounter; and it should ring with the quality of change wrought upon you. Your job is to hear the music that runs through the place you stand in, and to sing it as best you can, in your voice, in your forms. You do that by choosing forms apt to what you heard, apt to let that music—all those scattered notes and voices—sing again out of the body of your work. Your job is not to interpret or to offer too many conclusions. Your job is to let the world be what it really is; to let it occur to you as it chooses; and then express the pattern of its being in the form and sound, the shape and of course the ideation and the imagery of your work. Then your glimpse of reality might also live for a reader through your work—though you must help them also understand, through the humility of your voice, that what they see and hear in your writing is not the meadow (or whatever) itself, but just an image of it, an image of the truth; as the meadow itself or any is just an image of a larger truth.

The point is to tune your writing to the music of the place, that community or lively subjects (including oneself). When you do, you leave the place alone—you let the world be what it is, in one sense of Heidegger's phrase. You do not colonise it, take possession of it, imitate or sample it. You do not compete with it. You let it be. And you also allow it—some tiny phrases of it, implying the whole musical form—to sing itself, or appear, first to yourself and then through your work to others, by virtue of your honest witness of it, your careful musical rendering of your own experience of it. Your work then lets the world, the real world, be what it is, free of your narrow take upon it, free of your assessment of its merits. Although what it is at heart will always be beyond you and beyond your work, even that will somehow be suggested between the notes in the lyric such a work expresses. As the real meadow is sung and present in The Meadow.

So, here I sit, in the meadow, making notes in pencil in the blank pages at the end of James Galvin's book. In my hands I have one of the songs this place has sung. Though I hear nothing in
this amphitheatre of weather but this wind and this bird, I know that I sit inside the meadow’s recitation of itself. I look up from my own writing and from Galvin’s, and I wonder if The Meadow lets the meadow be the meadow.

The book, one man’s act of witness of this place, has led me from a text to the very place, the one place on earth, to which it bears witness. I didn’t have to come here to know that its music would be true to the place itself, and I find that it is. I am not thinking of music though, as I sit here; I am thinking that much of what this place really is would be lost on me if I sat here without the book’s fragments of story and, yes, its cadences and the mood they make, the imaginal, dynamic space, lodged in my body. The book wakes the meadow to me; wakes me to it. I see the grasses Lyle hayed, the treeline he contemplated, the road the beavers ruined, the creek’s afterlife where it emerges from the reservoir that Ray managed and his father imagined. The work has storied the place, made it mythic, has made it rhythmic, metric, has articulated its truest patterns (some of them). It has given it a life in my mind independent of its real life. And, yes, I recognise it as though I have been here before, as though I return to a meadow.

But the more I sit here, the more the place grows around me, into its geological past, into its present season of drought, into the shape it has taken since Lyle left. It grows into the place it seems to me. The book stops and the place starts, all on its own. I see how much of the meadow escaped the book’s covers. The book fell short, and the meadow is, I see, doing just fine without its poet, Galvin. His book, his witness, gave me the meadow and let it be. ‘This is the real world,’ in front of me, ‘indifferent, unburdened’ (The Meadow, 1992, p. 3).

Each—work and world; The Meadow and the meadow—is made of the same vernacular: a spare, austere, angular and broken ground, with a creek, now hidden by willow, now mirroring sky, now running, now dammed, coursing softly, haltingly, something like a libretto, through the middle of it. Each is an image of the same set of stoic truths, each is the product of weather and work, a song of endurance chanted over and over beneath a miraculous sky. To read the book or to sit here in the meadow is to occupy two spaces, fragmented and full of holes, in which the same kind of aesthetic runs, the same wind moves, the same kind of music plays—true and sad like that bird I heard or played well on a handmade guitar.

The Meadow was—still is—a prayer. Like the prayers Galvin imagines the pines send up to the sky, it expects nothing, attempts nothing but presence, asks for nothing except for what is real to go on being real. It gets the meadow. Its reward is to express the place as unselfconsciously as the pines do. It is a sustained act of love for a place that has led me not only to this place but deeper into my own. And it schools me in a kind of witness that occasionally can do the kind of justice to a place that Galvin’s book does; the kind of justice that transforms a place into a work of art.
without changing a thing. Not only the meadow but the whole world is better and more enchanted somehow because of *The Meadow*, Galvin's prayer, one of his works.

In *The Meadow*, James Galvin may have found his way, without even trying, to the literary form most apt for the work he was attempting—showing what a small piece of the real world looked like, letting us hear how the meadow sounded, charting its weather, giving us episodes in a few of its lives, washing us a while in its light. For it is a lyric essay. And lyric essays are well made for work like that—for making music of the actual world. Not that Galvin had ever heard of such a thing when he began. Indeed, he didn't hear about it until the book was out in the world, finding readers, and mystifying booksellers, who didn't know whether it was novel or prose poem or natural history or what. They had never heard of lyric essays either. Few of us still have. The term came into use only in 1997, though it is an attempt to give a name to a kind of writing that, as a strand of essay writing, had a history in that great and overlooked tradition, stretching back to the Greeks and Romans.

It was a student of Galvin's who conceived the name and gave it to *The Meadow*.

John D'Agata, now associate editor (for lyric essays) at *Seneca Review*, got himself two MFAs at Iowa, one in poetry and one in nonfiction. His dissatisfaction with the narrowing of creative nonfiction to memoir and personal essay along with his own poetry practice led him to think hard about other kinds of factual prose; and his meditations and his own writing led him to the form he called the lyric essay. The name has been adopted now by *Seneca Review* and celebrated in two special issues (vol xxvii, no 2; and vol xxx, no 1). D'Agata has now published his own collection of lyric essays, *Hall of Fame* (2000) and an anthology of lyric essays, *The Next American Essay* (2003), which traces the lyric essay back to Cicero and gives special mention to Emerson, but also argues that it is an emerging contemporary form.

While he was a student at Iowa, D'Agata told Galvin he thought *The Meadow* was a lyric essay. 'I thought about that,' says Galvin. 'Because you know, when I go into bookshops, I never know where I am going to find it. I find it in fiction, and it is not that. (He tells me later that the book has the ISBN of a novel.) I find it in nonfiction, and it isn't entirely that. I find it in memoir. I find it in biography, and it isn't either of those. I find it in natural history, and it's not that. There are so many things it isn't—but what is it? Well, it's a book. But I was drawn to that idea of the lyric essay.'

He toyed with this idea for a time. As I have explained, he thinks and writes a lot about music. It occurred to him that what we call the lyric in music is the words; and what we call the lyric in writing is its musical quality. 'So I thought that maybe all lyric means is something that is trying
to be what it is not; or something that is trying not to be what it is.’ He went back to D’Agata, the way he tells it, and reminded him that an essay—from the French, essai, to try—is an attempt, a try. ‘So I asked John, “Do you mean that The Meadow is an essay that is not trying?” And he looked at me and he said, “Yes. That’s what it is.”

But both Galvin and the book were trying. ‘I was trying very hard to do certain things writing that book: to be precise, to be truthful, to get it right, to get the landscape in. But I guess I wasn’t trying to write an essay or to say anything or persuade anybody of anything. I was just writing.’

As the editors of *Seneca Review* have come to think of the lyric essay, one thing that is true of it is that it does not try to explain, to confess or convince. It does not make an argument—not deliberately. ‘It elucidates through the dance of its own delving,’ write the editors, John D’Agata and Deborah Tall in their introduction to the Fall 1997 special issue on the lyric essay (D’Agata and Tall, 1997, p 7). ‘The lyric essay does not expound. It may merely mention. As Helen Vendler says of the lyric poem, “It depends on gaps ... It is suggestive rather than exhaustive” (ibid).

‘While it is ruminative,’ D’Agata and Tall go on, ‘it leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader’s participatory interpretation. Its voice, spoken from a privacy that we overhear and enter, has the intimacy we have come to expect of the personal essay. Yet in the lyric essay the voice is often more reticent, almost coy, aware of the compliment it pays the reader by dint of understatement’ (ibid, pp 7–8). It does not have the voice or rhetorical techniques of declamation and persuasion. Very largely this is true of The Meadow. It offers up fragments of weather and story and dream, smaller and larger prose poems, and leaves them for a reader to sew into a narrative, if she chooses. It puts the reader on a horse and lets him ride through thoughts as shapely and lean as conifers, past stories like beaver dams in which a hundred conclusions lie. But it makes no pitch. It does not even try to be complete or neatly made.

Lyric essays work hard at singing, at letting worlds be worlds, not at telling; they work hard at looking like they are trying nothing. This is their art, and it is a poet’s art. ‘They forsake narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation,’ the editors of *Seneca Review* go on (ibid, p 7). Like the essay—and unlike the novel—they cleave to the world of fact. But unlike the essay—and most like the poem—in their exploration of the actual, in their exposition, in their wondering, they proceed in rhythmic fragments, shapely phrases and distilled, enacted ideas; they unfold in riffs and what may sound like improvisations. Their logic is a poetic logic; they are shaped by cadence not argument, by breath not reason. To use Mary Oliver’s words again, the lyric essay, like a poem, ‘is a pattern made with sound just as much as it is a statement made through sound’ (Oliver, 1998, p 6). It is a dance more than an oration. It depends, as a poem does, on particularity and texture. The lyric essay is an utterance, a song, a chant, even a liturgy. It is voiced, particular, strange, alive. What chiefly defines it is its ‘musicality of language,’
according to D’Agata and Tall. The lyric essay, in its witness, responds to and embodies ‘principles beyond reason,’ to use Galvin’s poetic phrase—music.

Galvin says nothing about his own prose’s music, but there is no question that it is written for its cadence and voice as much as for its story. His poetry is strewn with musical references—viols, in ‘Getting a Word In,’ that crack from trying to ‘exist,’ and the sound of a fretless guitar his neighbour made him, in ‘Hell to Breakfast,’ for instance. He reads for the music in other books—the books he loves ring with music, as different as Moby-Dick’s Shakespearian meter is from Faulkner’s dirt music and Cormac McCarthy’s brutal cantillations. We speak together about some music we both love, including the cello and the tenor voice, their restrained raw emotional power and edge, and he says to me, ‘And one wants to write that way too. There’s form reining everything in, but as well as the reins, there’s a whole horse there.’ It is now we speak more about his musical training and his singing and playing, the plateau he reached with that. ‘So it might be partly out of frustration that I am so obsessed with the music of poetry,’ he says in typical self-effacement, typical, too, of the lyric essay, ‘because I can’t do the music of music.’

So music matters to him in writing as it matters to him in place. And it occurs to me that the lyric essay is a way of writing that suits the project of the musical apprehension of a landscape and it people. ‘We turn to the lyric essay,’ write D’Agata and Tall, ‘to give us a fresh way to make music of the world’ (ibid, p 8). Galvin stumbled into it, schooled as he already was in poetry, when he looked for a way to get the landscape into his book. The lyric essay asks a writer to ration his commentary, his explanations and interpretations. It calls on her to let the subject speak; it asks her to step to the back of the narrative, to give ground to what she witnesses, to its musical form and structure. It asks her to apprehend, in other words, lyrically and to write out of the heart of her experience, not to write about it or shape it into tale. It allows him, if he chooses, to order a narrative by the kind of logic that runs through a geography, to disrupt the flow and arc, the dominion, of human time. It does not even have to tell a story as we understand a story—focusing on a human life or the course of an event, starting at its start, building to a climax, falling to a denouement and ending at its end.

Because of all this, the lyric essay suits places, which don’t run along the narrative lines with which we tend to make sense of human lives. Places are concatenated, entangled storylines, intersecting causalities, a thousand plots on the edge of denouement, always falling short of resolution. They are always in the process of writing and rewriting themselves, making themselves up out of pieces of the past and the future, the earth and the sky, the plants and the animals. Forsaking narrative line, as it does, taking off on excursions, meditating idiosyncratically, depending on (and therefore supplying) gaps as it does, the lyric essay is well-made for landscapes, those complex, multilayered, eclectic yet coherent entities. Emphasising musicality, they are well made for divining and joining the music of places.
Though it is made of prose, and its lines are not metrically broken like a poem’s, the lyric essay is like poetry in its concern for shape and structure. A lyric essay is often made of pieces, each composed with the same care for its shape and structure as a poet dedicates to a stanza or a line of a poem. There is plenty of space in it. ‘[T]he lyric essay often accretes by fragments,’ say the editors of *Seneca Review*, ‘taking shape mosaically—its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole’ (*ibid*, p. 7). This is a perfect description of the form of *The Meadow* and of my experience of reading it. It is made of fragments of text, few of them more than one to two pages long, some of them a single paragraph. The book’s discontinuities struck me first—its gaps, its jumps in time and place and character, in point of view. But the larger whole that these saturated sediments implied is what I was left with. The meadow, it turns out, was in the spaces between—in the gaps. And later, reading it again, and again, its elegant sequencing struck me.

Landscapes accrete by fragments too, of course. At first it is the pieces that we see or think we see. The story is never neatly told. A place is a mosaic of weather and geology and culture and fire and flood and birdsong. It requires a certain kind of standing still, a steady reading and rereading, to apprehend (a suggestion of) the whole that is made of the pieces—and it is a whole that lives through all time, and goes on each moment remaking itself. It accretes by fragments, and never stops doing so; it plays in many timezones all at once, fast and slow, ancient and modern; and it comes to us in snatches. This may be why the form of the lyric essay serves so well the task of witnessing landscape: its pieces are not so randomly scattered as they seem, and each of them carries the pattern of the whole, being a part of that whole. In the gaps between the jumbled fragments the place itself may arise; and the lyric essay, in its mosaic quality, its irregular accretion, resembles the nature of a place. In both, storylines stop and start and intergrade.

Take, for example, a sequence that runs from page 69 to page 80 in *The Meadow*. First we see Lyle, lighting a smoke with his enormous hands and watching the meadow all the way to the creek, wondering about the coyote pup he saw yesterday down there by the beaver dams. Then we get a dream the author had, set in the meadow. In this Galvin visits Lyle and sits with him at his kitchen table, looking out onto the meadow, and then discovers, on his way home, a team of oldfashioned wagons and slips, pulled by mules and horse, making a new reservoir (where no water runs) between Lyle’s house and his own on the ridge. Clay, his friend, arrives in the dream and reassures him. Then we find a scene from Lyle’s memory, in which he and his sister Clara snowshoe over the meadow and skate on the rough ice of the beaver dam. Next we are back with Lyle in some kind of present, more or less now. He stubs a cigarette and shakes his head in grudging admiration, seeing the young coyote turn on his way toward the timber to let Lyle see that he, the coyote, has fished a muskrat from the creek by falling through the ice on its surface. In this section, too, is a humble reflection, given to Lyle, on seeing a place narratively, as a coyote does by smelling tracks and knowing how the past is written large in the present, within a place. Then we are with App, as a boy, back in the age of wagons—App, who later imagined the reservoir
that got built across the creek in the meadow—on the first morning he woke, under his father's wagon, in the meadow. He fishes a trout from the creek with his hand, with as much guile and skill as the coyote. He falls in love with the meadow. And finally, we are with James Galvin and his friend Clay, at the end of a day's cold roundup at Frank and Shirley's place. James is about to leave for home on the ridge above the meadow. Frank is dying as Lyle is dying.

This sequence jumps in time and point of view; it moves from the waking world to memory to dream to waking world, from human to animal and back again. What unifies it all is a creek and a meadow. It is a mosaic, a discontinuous, melodic narrative, about change and loss and continuity and narrative, about seeing like a landscape—though the author never once stands and addresses those topics in so many words.

The links in this sequence are invisible, unsaid. It is strung through with order and pattern, most of it lost on us yet calling to us—like the musical order that unifies a place. In this way, mirroring country, the book is an ecology patterned with music; and the place it refers to and echoes is ecologically imagined, seen from many points of view, in time and space and species.

How deliberate is this effect, I ask Galvin, speaking of this sequence. 'Did that just happen? Probably,' he responds. 'I thought I was jumping around and then ...' He trails off. However it gets there, though, its effect is to suggest a world much larger than the sum of the parts. This writing happens without elaboration. More is distilled in each word and image than you realise at first. Only later do you hear the echoes of each in the other and sense the whole. These trim and discontinuous pieces have a way of suggesting the long passage of time and the slow, deep history of the place with elegance and power. In its laconic phrasing, its lack of elaboration, its artful compression of image and meaning, it is fit for a landscape of quiet understatement and sudden drama. You sense that if the place could write, this is the diction, this is the style of composition it would use.

James Galvin includes in *The Meadow* a selection of entries from the journal of Lyle's sister Clara from the year 1949. Later he does the same with Lyle's jottings for 1974. Galvin tells me that he transcribed these entries verbatim into the book, though not all of them. Clara kept a journal all her life. Lyle took to writing one in the year after his mother died and then left off. He hid the journal in the toe of an old boot. Lyle never threw anything out. He used the tongues of worn out boots to resole newer ones, but at his death, Jim and the relatives found a pile of leather carcasses, and among them this one, with the journal hidden in it. 'I don't think we were meant to find that journal,' Galvin comments. And yet, having found it, by some miracle, he felt that it had found him.
The two journal sequences, Clara’s for 1949 and Lyle’s for 1974, struck Galvin’s editor as too strange to include, but they stayed in the end. Their witness, Galvin, insisted upon them. Each is a plainspoken, clipped recital of weather and work, of comings and goings.

Here is Clara:

1/1 I started two new pictures. Lyle put up his stove in the cabin.

1/2 I cleaned up around the house. Tried to fix hole where packrat got in. Lyle went to ditch camp AM, worked in shop PM. It’s cold and snowing all day.

1/3 Woke up this AM still blizzarding, 10 below. Willis won’t get home today.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 44

Here is Lyle:

12/6 Snowing today—worked on grindstone shaft bearings.

12/7 Still snowing—have about 6” Jimmy Galvin and Julie came over in afternoon.

12/8 J. Galvin Sr. came today with his woman. Forgot her name.

12/9 Cleaned chicken house—shut off Marie’s spring—put new wire glass on south side bay window—washed outside windows—charged light batteries.

12/10 Went to town then res for supper. Nice day but cold—74 in morning.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 156

And so on. These belong well in a lyric essay. They are fragments of a place, two voices and two lives within it. And they are there for their cadence and rhythm more than for their content. ‘I don’t even know what makes a person keep such records,’ Galvin says to me. ‘But you can hear a rhythm in them, a music,’ he adds. That is why he put them in. They make the rhythm of daily life and work, of solitude and community, of wind and snow, of continuity and persistence.

They are part of the fragmentary music this lyric essay makes of the meadow. This is the vernacular of the meadow; this is the vernacular of two people native to it. In the entries, the cycle, pace and meter of the place are transcribed. In them also are lodged the voices of two people—each voice formed in part by the place and their humble obedience to that place, their service and observance of it. Like the music of the place the book gives voice to, the music of
these fragments is found, not made. Unlike the 'music' of the meadow itself—of beaver dam and grasses—the music of Clara and Lyle's texts is sampled, quoted, not imagined. But these passages speak as just two among the many points of view that compose a landscape, and compose, also, this lyric essay.

Although he has written this book of prose—and a novel, to which I will come—James Galvin thinks of himself as a poet. It is important to him. It is a matter of temperament, he says. He doesn't feel prose is up to the tasks to which he wants to put language on the page. 'Poetry has a kind of a snap to it,' he says. 'Getting back to horse terminology, poetry steps out so smart.'

Prose, according to Galvin, is tethered to time and ordered by reason, whereas poetry, ruled as it is by line breaks, shot through as it is with gaps, runs to a beat, and is organised spatially not temporally. It moves outside time—it is lyric. 'If you sit down to write a prose work,' Galvin says, 'before you even touch the pen to the paper you have already addressed the idea of the passage of time. And if you sit down to write something that's in lines, you have already decided to resist that passage.' A sentence disregards space, by its very nature; whereas a line of poetry depends on it. A line of poetry sets out to fill out a set space in a particular pattern of beats. A sentence is not defined by or constrained by space. It sets out to name something and to say something about it: subject and predicate—there is your sentence, no matter how long or short, regardless of its syllable count. Sentences and paragraphs are defined as units of thought. Of thought, you see, not of music, not of space.

I take Galvin to mean also that a work of prose, made of sentences, sets out to tell some stories, and those stories have to move through time, human time, to make any sense. Narrative, steeped in and moving through time, from start to finish—that is the business, normally, of prose.66 Lyric, transcending time, existing in space—lively, auditory space, as Paul Carter imagines it—that is the work of poetry, and much of it, according to Galvin, depends upon the line, which disregards time's passage. 'You can have a kind of simultaneity, a kind of suspension of time, at least for a little time, in poetry that you can't in prose,' he says.

Oddly, despite his emphasis upon the musical work of the poem, Galvin's own poems are marked by their ideation, their play with ideas, their shapely and economical aphorisms. They are prose-like in some ways. They are products of thought as much as of sound, I think. They are rhythmic thought as much as they are rhythmic song. Critics remark on the philosophical bent, as well as

66 Ellen Bryant Voigt argues that prose does narrative and poetry does lyric, in her book The Flexible Lyric. See my discussion of this in 'The valley of the wind,' where I argued that lyric essays (being lyric, not narrative) are really more like poems than prose.
the swing and song, of his poems—'they dare to say what they mean,' writes the Virginia Quarterly Review in its review of Resurrection Update (Autumn 1997, p 136); 'Galvin sets the transcendentalism of Thoreau to the music of the lonely, magnificent, and taunting expanses of the West,' comments Donna Seaman in Booklist (April 1997, p 1277); the poems are 'relentlessly gnomic' according to a less sympathetic reader, Thomas Merrill, in Library Journal (February 1997, p 84). In his review of The Meadow, Franklin Burroughs finds 'a self-protective quality of cleverness' about the poems; it is the absence of that quality, interestingly, Burroughs so admires in the prose of The Meadow (Burroughs, 1994, p 153).

Some of Galvin's poems, such as 'Small Countries' from Lethal Frequencies (1995), which appears also in The Meadow, and a number of the poems from Imaginary Timber (1980), actually take the form of prose paragraphs. They still step out pretty smart. They are still poems.

And if his poems are sometimes like prose, his prose is always like a poem. As James Galvin speaks to me, with the same kind of grace of phrase he uses in essay and poem, and I hear in his voice his love of the poem, I am thinking of The Meadow too—of the sequence, for example, I just related—and of his novel, and how, despite the absence of line breaks, time is dislocated there, music of a loose kind (though not so far from that which plays in his poems) plays, mystery is present. If prose is lyric, as Galvin's is, and if its storylines are discontinuous, if it is made of fragments, much like a poem, then I think time may well be suspended, and space—made lively, dynamic and musical—may prevail. Large-scale musical perceptions may be induced, just as though we were reading a poem. Franklin Burroughs, for one, isn't buying the argument for the superiority of the poem. 'The choice [of literary form] isn't absolute,' he writes in his review of The Meadow. 'It is a question of what takes the writer through the looking glass of self, to where worlds can be perceived and created.' As though he reads my thoughts, Galvin picks up the copy of The Meadow that sits between us on the table, flicks through its pages and makes a small concession to prose. 'Well,' he says, referring to the business of getting outside time's clutches, 'you can try, by using these little vignettes and tableaux. But you can't pull it off.'

As I mentioned in 'The essential prose of things,' Ellen Bryant Voigt's essay 'Syntax: Rhythm of Thought, Rhythm of Song' reminds us that, though prose, like poetry, makes the music of syntax, makes that kind of patterned sound, there is another kind of rhythm prose cannot make—the rhythm of the line. This is the point Galvin is making. Line brings meter to a work of words. Meter, Voigt writes, works in a poem like beat in a piece of music; and therefore it is music—and, through music, space—that orders poetry. Meter is pulse; a pattern of accentuated beats. In music, she quotes Robert Jourdain as saying, meter 'provides a sort of grid upon which music is drawn ... Meter organizes musical time on the small scale while phrasing organizes it on the large scale' (Jourdain, 1997, pp 123–24). Prose, Voigt reminds us, has what Jourdain calls phrasing—the patterns of sound a writer must use in order to say anything. Prose does not have the music of
meter—a product of line breaks in poetry—but it does have the music of phrasing. And, as Jourdain affirms, such phrasing 'builds large-scale musical objects and thereby induc[es] large-scale musical perceptions.' He means in music, but the same may be true in prose, which has the rhythm of syntax to induce such large-scale 'musical perception.' Moreover, even without meter, prose has voice, writes Jourdain, because phrasing is vocal, arising as it does from song; but it does not have instrumentation—meter, in music, derives not from the way we sing, but from the way we play musical instruments. Prose, then, can be song, though always human (through voice); but poetry, by virtue of its organising beat, may be said (almost) to transcend the human realm. Prose, though, will have what Voigt calls the rhythm of thought and the rhythm of voice. Through its phrasing and its structure, prose can even be something like a large-scale choral work of loose form, capable of inspiring in a reader a perception of the musical order of the text and of the world it alludes to, even if it is not strung across a musical grid.

What Galvin says of prose—its being tethered to time, to the merely human realm—may be true of the novel, perhaps, because the novel, dealing as it does with human life, operating as it must in narrative, telling stories of human lives and times, is premised upon the arc of human life, which moves forward through time. The novel is grounded in human time. Its dramas and comedies, its ironies and tragedies and farces, its moral tales, depend on the notion that life runs forward; that the world of men and women orders the narrative, shapes the world. Galvin mentions William Faulkner, his favourite prose writer—specifically his book of interlaced stories, Big Woods. 'He does everything he can to keep the story from ending,' Galvin says. 'All his weird forms and extreme formal structures I believe are intended to resist the passage of time—which passes anyway because he is writing a novel.' In The Meadow, Galvin notes that Lyle, who read a lot, hated Faulkner. Of him, Lyle said, 'If that sumbitch wants to tell me a story why don't he start it at the beginning and tell it through to the end?' (ibid, p 167).

But if we put aside the intention to narrate a story set in human time; if we work in prose but aim neither to expound nor to tell but just to delve; just to make a mosaic; if we write story as Faulkner did, or if we sat down to write a lyric essay, a book like The Meadow—what then? We are stuck with sentences, of course, which are disrespectful of space. But what if we pay attention to their rhythm and their tone, their sound effect? What if we shape paragraphs with the kind of care for the pattern of sound, for the arrangements of their cadences—the kind of care Galvin takes in The Meadow—what then? I think we might manage, by these means, these lyric modes, to slough off most of the difficulties of time and logic almost as well as in a poem. For no form, not even a poem, escapes completely a career in time and logic. Music gets closest, but music in

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87 See also my chapter 'The essential prose of things' above, where I speak about all this. See also Voigt, 2003, p 159.)
writing does not belong only belong to the poem. And, since all writing, including poetry, is made by words, it is never pure music—and so it cannot escape time.  

Writing will always fall short of expressing the real world because, even as a poem, it carries not just notes but words, signifying something that lives only in the human realm. Why work in words then, at all, I find myself wondering? If language ties us to the human and material realms, in a way that music does not, why write at all, why bother with logic and ideas? Why not make music, which speaks without words?

I mentioned that I don’t think Galvin means it when he says that he would make music instead if he could. He loves the work of the poets and novelists too well. He values literature. He cares deeply about the kind of witness we can manage only with words.

There is a particular value in the hard, the near impossible, work of rendering meaning lyrically, in speaking musically, perhaps singing—but singing in words—of the world. It is a struggle worth entering into precisely because words are not just notes and syllables. They are vehicles of thought; they harbour ideas; they speak, they sing, as humans do. They count doubly, even though they are an impure, a lesser kind of music—they carry beat and music; and they express humanity. These are the sounds humans make in conversation with the real world. In song.

Literature matters because great works of poetry and prose embody thoughts worth spending time with; because they show how beautiful sentences can be; because they set ideas to music, they make abstractions lyric; because they are, sometimes, the very best work human beings are capable of—no one but our fellow men and women could have made them. Poetry and prose matter because they make patterns of sound and through those patterns they make statements. They work in human time, gesturing at eternity, admitted to it—and admitting their readers to it—only for odd moments in the music that their phrases make, despite themselves. We hear human voices in them—because words are what we think and speak in—no matter what other music we hear. And that matters. ‘I tell you,’ says James Galvin, ‘if I couldn’t hear a human voice when I read, I wouldn’t read.’

Literature is human, transcendentally human. It lives in sacred time and in ordinary time, as we do; and it reminds us, in its falling short of timelessness, that we fall short too. Language belongs in the actual world as we do. It tries, knowing it will fail, to defeat time. It does not give in to the

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88 Pointing at one of the hallmarks of the lyric essay, Galvin says that it is in the ways in which a piece of prose is not perfect, in its irregularities, its life of forms, that the body of the writer speaks and the reader’s body listens. There, he says, in the work’s voice, lie any literary qualities it has—and any capacity, such as music has, to transcend the realm of human time, of the merely personal.
merely human, though, or to the merely temporal; and it reminds us that we need not surrender either.

For James Galvin, a poem does all this best. In my experience, too, poems work a particular kind of magic, being more like song and partaking of song’s enchantment. But, for me, too, there is something in the best of (lyric) prose—maybe it is its very want of grace, its humility, its plainness, its improvisations, its larger-scale musical forms, its democracy, its workmanlike nature, its looseness of fit, its essential humanity, the fact that it shapes itself according to no fixed scheme—that cuts it out so well for wondering about landscape and people.

In 1999 James Galvin, ‘the author of The Meadow, an unconventional memoir, and three highly praised books of poetry,’ as the flyleaf puts it, published a novel called Fencing the Sky, dedicated to Lyle Van Waning. It has a plotline its author does everything he can think of to stop from running straight toward its end. It is another book of shining pieces. This is a book artfully made, its sentences beautifully turned, its paragraphs laconically lyric like the best of his poetry and nonfiction.

The country it moves in is the same, only there’s more of it than we meet in the pages of The Meadow. The book is made, Galvin confesses to me, of horse stories, veterinarian catastrophes, personal experiences, local folklore and current events, reshaped and recostumed for fiction. Nearly every piece of it really happened. Yet it works as fiction—as a tale of human drama and destiny, a modern cowboy fable. Lyle and his meadow appear, but not for long. Pat Sudeck, the man who homesteaded the Galvin property, gets a mention. A vet named Oscar in this novel, a man very like the real life Clay whom we met in The Meadow, plays a supporting role to the book’s hero. In Dr Adkisson Trent there is more than a little of James Galvin, mixed perhaps with a little of a neighbour or two on the ridge; and the outlook from Ad’s verandah all the way to the Snowy Range sounds pretty close to home as well. This is a novel made, like many novels, like Moby-Dick for instance, out of a world the author knows well. And the spine of the novel is made of an escape on horseback, which runs through country intimately observed and named as it appears on a good topographic map. That journey grounds the novel in the actual world—you can follow the route, as James Galvin did with his daughter in a four wheel drive when he was writing the book (and as I did, for most of its length in my hired car on a snowy day in May). But while the book is set down in the material realm; while it explores real landuse issues at play right now in this country; and while this story runs in real time, the past keeps intruding, memories, myths, anecdotes and landscape break the narrative line, and complicate the journey, without diluting the suspense. They surround it with a context within which the drama of the rider and his friends
becomes both small and mythic, as fleeting and moving as every event looks when seen in geologic time.

The novel starts with a murder and runs forward through time with Mike Arans, a fat and endearing cowboy with a ponytail and a radical past, making away on Potatoes Browning toward the Great Divide Basin and the Wind Range beyond, toward a place and a possible afterlife the author keeps dark until it happens near the end. We start at the scene of the crime and spend the novel moving slowly, with Mike, away from it; at the same time wandering among the fractured lines of causality that led to it. The novel’s pieces, each dated, come from a thirty-year period. Some of them—bits of folklore, mythology, episodes in the recent life of the rangelands—are called ‘Once.’ Out of these fragments, Mike, even as he rides out of his life, he thinks, deepens into his past. We come to understand the anger, the grief and the principles that led him to throw that deed and fatal loop at the start—or is it the end?—of it all, back on page four. We get to know Oscar and Ad and the three men’s friendship, their bond to this place, their care for it. We learn steadily more about the man Snipes, whom Mike kills right at the start, more about his schemes and devices. It is one of the small triumphs of the book that Snipes does not become a mere caricature of evil, even though we cheer at his downfall. And in poetic grasps, the place itself—its geological past, its pastoral traditions, its current dissection into marketable if unsustainable portions—grows around Mike’s crime and flight. The more the book’s multiple timezones and storylines spin toward order, the more its action spins out of control. The form of the work spins like a gyre toward order, while the human action—which starts with a bad man roped and a good man riding and riding away—spins toward chaos. ‘I was thinking about Yeats’s gyre, you know,’ explains Galvin. ‘So that is my high fallutin’ explanation.’

_Fencing the Sky_ is novel of a place and its people—in that order. Not that the people don’t count, but that their stories are folded into, are expressions of, the long life of the ranges and high valleys, the sinuous streams and rangelands that run like scar tissue—the Continental Divide—across Wyoming from Fort Collins in Colorado toward Jackson. The fates of the men and women of this kaleidoscopic tale come to matter deeply, but they are inseparable from the fate of the lands they love. They will go the way the land goes—they will be saved to carry on a tough and compromised but loving stewardship of this country and to carry on the traditions that have sustained them, or they will go with the land, broken up and diminished. The land and these lives rest on a divide—to run one way or another in the end. The novel’s story holds your interest, but in the end, I think, it is the storied life of the place itself, its fate, that concerns you most. What is happening to Mike, what may become of him, becomes a part of a wider tragedy befalling land; it becomes a part of the great cycles of the earth that make and remake places like this one; and it becomes an emblem of the edge the West that these men and women have loved teeters upon.
The men you meet here—this is a book mostly of men—seem made of this high country, possessed by it, already grieving for the loss of this land that has loved them. For it is falling to smaller dreams of it than theirs—real estate dreams that diminish the land and parcel it out to consumers to possess—it is falling, and they know it, yet they stay.

It is a novel about land and land use, in which the land itself breathes and plays its part. It carries Mike away, delivers him to his afterlife, in the end. Its draws and willows, prairies and sky, its national forests and wide Red Desert are as intimately present and as lively in this book as the ridge and hay meadow of The Meadow.

And then there are moments where Oscar, Mike or Ad reflects on the land about, wonders, thinks wryly about its form and habits, like this:

Oscar riding behind his three bulls. After sky the thing we have most of here is grass, he thought. Sweet flag, cattail, timothy—it pulls the horizon away with it—bottlebrush, tickle grass, panic grass. Oceans of it, waves of wind spelling themselves out onto the prairie.

To be grazed or burned. Grass has two fates, both of which it survives.

He thought about the Wyoming grass dinosaurs ate, in a Wyoming we wouldn't recognize. How after the last ice age, woolly mammoths turned these prairies into themselves. Then the bison; now a commensurate number of cattle, sharing grasses with elk, deer, antelope, rabbits, chipmunks, blind moles, and sundry insects, transforming the blades into flesh, grooming it green.

For ten thousand years, people torched vast prairies to attract the herds when the grass came back anew.

If there's nothing to eat it and no Indians around to burn the big beige lawn, lightning is waiting in the wings.

—Fencing the Sky, 1999, p 78

Or this, at the book's close—Ad looking out at the Snowy Range, thinking:

Something pushed the Rockies up, but at first they weren't real mountains. It was just a big hill, six hundred miles of incline. Erosion made the granite faces, the river valleys, and left topsoil thirty feet deep in Iowa. 'Nobody likes erosion anymore,' mused Ad, 'now that all the scenery is made.'

—Fencing the Sky, 1999, p 258

At the centre of the book is a scene in which a man called Marty addresses a small crowd of ranchers, environmentalists, bleeding hearts and developers in Laramie. His address is called 'Losing It All' and it rehearses the ideas that the rest of the novel enacts—what the West is at risk of losing, with the coming of men like Snipes and their values, is two things at once: 'its
distinctive horse-based, non-progress-oriented culture, and its natural history' (Fencing the Sky, 1999, p 100). Both. Farmers like Lyle and Ranchers like Oscar's family, like Mike, have loved the land—changed it, sometimes damaged it, sometimes, inadvertently improved its health—and husbanded it. Though stockmen and greenies have seen each other as enemies, they share the same idealism and love for these lands. They both speak for the land. The land's real enemies, the enemies also of the good, tough life the locals have managed upon it, are the corporations, who run acreage without living from it, and developers like Snipes, who reduce the West to a parody of itself and sell it off in small lots.

'Marty,' writes Galvin, 'had belonged to every green group there was from the Sierra Club to earth First! until, one by one, they all made him gag. Now he worked alone. He wrote books' (ibid, p 101). Marty, of course, is Galvin himself, who for a time went out and spoke like this and got the kind of conversation going among the locals that follows in the book.

There is more argument and ideology in this scene and in this novel than there is in all of The Meadow. This is at odds with conventional understandings about fiction and nonfiction. Novels are supposed to show, nonfiction is supposed to tell. As we have seen, Galvin's nonfiction elaborates mostly through music and image; here, his fiction, though always reined-in and economical, speaks out its philosophy. Elsewhere it enacts his anger—chiefly in the death of Snipes, of course.

When I ask Galvin why he wrote Fencing the Sky as a novel, he replies that he used fiction because he wanted to 'place some blame.' Fiction is better for pointing the blame. It has always been a moral enterprise. 'In nonfiction,' Galvin says, 'you are saying that you were there and saw these things. It is a work of witness. And it is dull when it is about you and your thoughts about things. Who wants to know about what you think about those things?' Fiction lets the author hide, and it allows him to make plain exactly what he thinks of what is going on, even to exact revenge. Galvin confesses that only two parts of the novel are entirely made up—the killing of Snipes at the beginning and the deliverance of Mike Arans at the end. He invented nothing else. And as for the murder, 'I sure as hell wanted to rope the guy who became Snipes in the book.'

'The Meadow was an elegy,' says Galvin; 'the novel is a pure lament. I wanted to say that bad things are happening.' Some reviewers of the novel, notably Timothy Foote in The New York Times Book Review, felt it worked less well as a story, as a piece of literature, than it did as a polemic. 'Polemically speaking, this is a very successful novel,' Foote wrote (31 October 1999, p 22). Foote pokes fun at the cowboying while noting the 'beautiful descriptive writing,' missing the larger role of the landscape in the book. For him, though, none of the book's characters 'can carry the freight of affection and significance that Galvin wants them to.' That may be true for some readers, if not for me. Certainly a hint of east coast and progressive liberal bias is discernible in Foote's critique.
The Meadow, I should note though, free as it was of any polemic, and made with the same music, met with almost universal praise.

Apart from placing the blame, Galvin wrote Fencing the Sky as a novel because it was what his publishers wanted next. He signed up to a two-book deal with Henry Holt when they took on The Meadow. And they wanted a novel next. People understand what novels are. Booksellers know which shelf to put them on. They can sell in quantities that put ‘an unconventional memoir’ in the shade. So he wrote it as fiction.

‘Fiction is a way of dealing with the problem of your own involvement,’ Galvin says. He has been talking about how hard it is to write not only about his own actions—particularly when they are things of some accomplishment like roping cattle and climbing mountains, or, perhaps, doing so well the kind of work that Marty does in the novel. It is usually horrible to read such stuff, he thinks. He is a man schooled by his father, by Lyle and his landscape in modesty. In that landscape of sudden, deep snow and the summer risk of fire, and all manner of other interesting ways to die, you would learn pretty early the price of hubris or bravado. That land is a tough teacher, and humbling.

I agree that writing about the good things one has done is one of the chief challenges of nonfiction writing. But I am aware too that this is a man eager to keep himself—at least in the role of hero—off the page. He will open up his soul, lay bare his grief, in the mythic time and space a poem creates; but he won’t put down his triumphs and tragedies, his private thoughts and personal history in ordinary time—in prose. That would sound like boasting or complaining, and neither has its place in the stoic ethic of the meadow and the prairie. Even in The Meadow, Galvin’s own life is very sparsely gestured. He gives all the lines to Lyle and the others. This is in keeping with the charter of the lyric essay; but it is also his nature, shaped by that place.

So the novel is another device of a man who wants to write what he grieves for and name whom he disdains; who wants to talk about stuff he loves and does well himself—roping and horsemanship, the care of a daughter, for instance—without drawing attention to himself. It is another defence against hubris.

All of Galvin’s writing comes from the same place. It arises out of and it gestures toward a landscape and a way of life; a small group of people he loves, and the work of their hands and lives. It dwells on ideas that stir him—the consolation and sacredness of land, the miracle and mystery of nature, the nobility of work, the beauty of horses, the virtue of tradition, the necessity of witness, the ungraspable meaning of music, the power of poetry. He writes about what he loves. He writes with wit and passion, wonder and restraint, music and grit, wisdom and grace. And he
chooses the genre that suits his writerly purpose—wondering, elaborating, lamenting—or honours best the facet of the real world he wants to show. Among his different literary productions you will feel his artful hand at similar work: shaping memorable phrases, composing musical paragraphs, making mosaics. You will meet many of the same places and people, some of the same events, in his poems, his lyric essay and his novel. In them all you will hear his vernacular voice, and it is a literary voice very close to the way he speaks in person and to the way his neighbours speak. He has forged a literature out of the voice of his homeplace—the way its people have learned from the land there, and from each other, to think and talk. His writing is a conversation with the real world—mostly reflective, sometimes interlocutory, sometimes polemical—held in the common tongue, the country’s vernacular.

James Galvin’s landscapes are animated. They speak and persist and pray. His trees are a particularly lively lot, yearning and longing—pine away.

In *The Meadow*, for instance, timbered ridges come down from Chambers Lake ‘suddenly stop and bunch like patiently disappointed refugees,’ and ‘[T]he island never heard of states,’ the meadow ‘wears a necklace of waterways,’ and ‘the snow tries to memorize, blindly, the landscape’ (*The Meadow*, 1992, pp 3, 5). In poems and prose the sky listens to the land, receives the prayers of the pines. He ascribes will and desire to meadowflowers, wry admiration to coyotes. His beavers are pretty thoughtful too. Virga, with ‘sublime indifference’ lets down its hair.

But all this is clearly no simpleminded anthropomorphism. We know this mostly from the tone of voice in which these images are sounded out. This is very knowing image-making, sincere but lighthearted and modest. Never grandiose. This writer is under no illusions. He knows he is using phrase and syllable and image to get at the life that moves through things other than himself, through the land itself and all its citizens. These human terms are the best that I can do, he seems to be saying. These are images of the truth of other lives than mine. I know I am not meant to do this, but we know what I am talking about don’t we: everything lives, in the real world, and this is a way of showing it.

In his poem ‘Speaking Terms,’ which appears in his latest collection *Lethal Frequencies* (1995), Galvin has the pine boughs ‘lipping approval’ in words that sound a hell of a lot like trees in wind: ‘Shh! This way! Shh! This way!’ And then the poem goes on:

Better to impersonate than to
Personify, when it comes to nature.
Shh! I tell them. This way!
And start walking.

—*Resurrection Update* 1997, p 216

He knows the rules and he breaks them knowingly, trying to let the living world live again on the page. He carries his witty critique of the rule against anthropomorphism one step further in the next poem, 'Trespassers':

A breeze tensely ruffles the pond,
Erasing the pond's attempt at representation
Of treetops and sky—try again.
It keeps doing that.

—*Resurrection Update*, 1997, p 217

In all his writing, particularly, of course, those passages dedicated to the land in its nonhuman aspects, Galvin works at uncentring his mind from himself. He attempts to write from inside other articulations of creation, without trying to mimic them, without imagining he can possibly leave his own voice and humanity behind while doing so. He sloughs off a little of his humankindness, his mere and separate self, without losing his perspective. He is at once the tree or the meadow or the rain and also utterly himself, its witness. We feel them both, world and witness, and the relationship reaching between them, much as Rilke had in mind.

*The Meadow*, looked at this way, is a sustained exercise in uncentring himself from himself. He writes the life of the meadow from many points of view, including his own, but also Lyle’s and the weather’s and so on, entering for a time lives he has not actually lived, and thoughts he has not thought. He imagines the actual from the inside. And so, his writing preserves the liveliness of things that are not human. His imagination is able to make the stretch to touch the life that moves—quick as a horse’s gait, slow as a mountain’s rise and fall, patient as the sky—in all things, not merely the human ones.

Galvin’s landscapes are holy too, sacred. His trees are prayerful. His skies are cut out for receiving prayer. Rain is God’s mistress, a kind of angel. Trees aspire to become angels. Lyle, too, is a one-winged angel and a kind of feral saint. He writes a landscape of prayer, blessing, miracle but of little mercy—an unforgiving paradise. But it is not in the least effete. His world is substantial and tough and also hallowed, respected by its tenants. His diction of prayer and heaven is his way, I suspect, of expressing the mystery, eternity and otherness of land, his wonder at it, his respect for those qualities in it, his love for what moves in and over it. It is his way of carrying on the kind of his ‘harmonious and reverent conversation with his surroundings,’ as Lyle did. As with all of Galvin’s writing, to read it literally would be to read it wrong. His poem ‘Still Here’ makes all this clear in these lines:
The horses drift in from pasture
With their heads down.
Since horses don’t pray they must be grazing.
Lost in tenderness,
They could be, already, in another life.

— ‘Still Here,’ God’s Mistress in Resurrection Update, 1997, p.131

Prayer in Galvin’s world is a metaphor, as this makes clear, of being fully present, resigned to the moment and to the order of the place. Inhabiting a place as horses do, makes it holy.

James Galvin intends nothing so literal as to write transcriptions of the meadow’s music. He spoke of no such ambition. Still, he does speak of the music of a piece of work as expressing its soul; and he uses music as a metaphor for the genius of a moment or a place. He listens for that fragmented music expressing the principles beyond reason that order the real world here and now. He apprehends the world musically. But he knows that we may only encounter that music in the things that inhabit the actual world—sky and pine, meadow and creek, horse and peak, barn and ditch, man and woman. It is those we must witness. We make conversation in silence with those things that do not speak our language. And we recall that conversation and the nature of those things by our speaking of it, by our utterance. What sings in our words, sings. And any music that may arise from a piece of writing, poetry and sometimes prose, will arise from words and lines, perhaps even sentences. We cannot make it directly.

Only in one way—avowedly, in The Meadow and also I think in his novel and some of the poems—did Galvin set out to capture his landscape’s music. Among the things he wanted to put down, while he could remember them, were ‘the deeds, the stories, the utterances of ‘the locals. ‘I wanted to preserve the cadences of speech and the rhythms of weather and seasons,’ Galvin writes in the Henry Holt Reading Group Guide (Holt, 1998). In the speech of Lyle and Ray and others—and in his own faithful rendering of it—Galvin hoped to do them justice. I suspect he also felt that in doing so, since those men and women knew that they were the land’s and had lived lives in conversation with their surroundings, he was capturing the cadence of the place. Notice how his sentence moves without pause or punctuation from ‘cadences of speech’ to ‘rhythms of weather and seasons.’ I think, since the people are for Galvin a kind of weather too, he sees how their speech speaks the place, as the weather and the seasons do. Rhythm and cadence are among the things he set out to bear witness to, directly in the people, but ultimately of the place.
Here, in James Galvin, we have a man who has lived in and prayed within, has listened to and conversed with, a particular place for most of his life. He is more indigenous, continuously, to his home place than any of the writers I have studied. And his practice of belonging on Boulder Ridge has been perhaps the hardest and certainly the longest sustained. He has been schooled in it by a man, Lyle, who also knew that place all his life and expressed in every habit a deep fealty to it.

Galvin is a man who points me to a mountain range he has looked at all his life, for a picture of his soul. So, all things considered, we might expect to find some of the meadow, some of the ridge, the prairie and the Neversummers, Sheep Creek and beaver dam running through his work. How is it harmonious with his country?

I may have quoted enough of Galvin’s writing already to demonstrate the qualities of sound, form, line, structure, cadence and rhythm that characterise it. Let me choose one more piece to stand for it all:

The meadow is under two feet of snow, which looks gray but not dirty in this light. Leafless willow branches make an orange streak down the middle. Each year the snow tries to memorize, blindly, the landscape, as if it were the landscape that was going to melt in spring.

The wind has cleared a couple of the knobs above the meadow, and the silver-gray sage throbs out. Above that stands the front line of timber, where the trees begin, or end, depending, still dead black though the sky has brightened behind it, a willing blue. Nothing is moving across the meadow this morning.

—The Meadow, 1992, p 5

All his writing has about it a quality of vast, deep passion powerfully, elegantly reined in. It is, in this way, very like the oceanic prairies, reminders of the seabed this country once was. It is unadorned, unfussy, austere. It is lean, its phrases minimally made (‘a willing blue’). It is angular but its faces are eroded, its rises and falls fashioned as though by wind so that they are smooth. Everything curves; nothing juts high or gapes low, though you sense that, once, like this landscape, it did. Now its relief is low, much of what it was or might be, barely hinted at. All its gestures are brief and restrained. It affects nothing but humility.

The musical, regular rise and fall of a sentence like the last one in this passage—I dare you not to hear its steady, unexcitable rhythm—moves as this eroded landscape moves, this terrain of long, shallow curves and modest yet hardy ridges.

Like the weather, Galvin’s writing proceeds in a soft voice, suggestive of small movement within a wide and silent space; and, again like the weather, even when it changes and delivers tragedy or violence, its voice hardly raises its register and pitch. His sentences are clean of excess, sculpted until there is nothing left of them but what there must be to bear the music and the message.
they are made for. This is how the country looks and sounds—uncomplicated habitats, undecorated places of texture and angular form; just what they should be in this light and wind and nothing, not a branch, more. His words and sentences always say more than they appear to. They are short and shapely, apt and resonant. They stay with you because nothing clutters them. Clutter is one thing the landscape of the meadow does not suffer from.

The tone of his writing is elegiac, tender and reverent, yet gritty and witty. It puts you in a space in which just such a mood prevails. The meadow and the surrounding country seemed like that to me when I visited them. They were utterly independent of the text that had fashioned them first in my mind. And they contained much for me that was not in the writing. And yet their line and form and tone were like that of the words and sentences that evoked them for me in the first place: similar terrains made of different mediums.

His writing, like the nature of this place of sky, prairie, meadow, range, and timber, is a play of toughness and softness—like granite and red sandstones, which make soils as fine as flour, like the sky and its weather, both ferocious and gentle; like grasses, which endure everything (fire, grazing, snow, wind) by balancing resistance with surrender; like sagebrush, which grows where nothing should and puts out such a perfumed and proud flower; like Lyle; like coyote; like pines.

But this writing has a human voice, always. You are aware that this is speech and that a man is making it. This happens through small vernacular turns of phrase (that word ‘depending’ in this passage, with its punctuation making the inflection of the speaker). Galvin makes no sharp distinction between the landscape and its people, and he too is part of the place. The more his prose carries a music like, or harmonious with, the place, the more it also sounds like him. This is conversation: which murmur is the land’s and which the man’s?

I set out on this exploration of land and language wondering in what ways a set of landscape-oriented writers imagined the land ecologically. I meant to consider how these writers attempted to see a place as though they were not merely one man or woman, but as though they could apprehend one place on earth as that place might see itself. I meant to note, in their work of witness, if that is what it is, their capacity to imagine from a perspective in which not only the human dimension played. I wondered how well they might be able to see the landscape in geologic time and evoke that sense of a place in their work. And I wondered about the capacity of these writers to see the set of relationships at play somewhere and express them somehow in their writing—for to see ecologically is to see relationships not merely discrete parts. So how ecological is James Galvin’s imagining?
Profoundly ecological, I think. His writing, particularly of *The Meadow*, but all of his prose and poetry, starts from the principle he learned from Lyle and from this place, that we are the land’s, not the other way around. It was the meadow he set out to write about—through its human stories and the cadences of its weather—in *The Meadow*, and the very structure of that book embodies a conception of land in which the place contains, shapes, possesses its people, who contribute to it, as weather does. In his prose works Galvin deliberately dislocates the passage of human time to suggest the otherness of time and causality that seems to prevails in the land.

And here is Marty in his address to the locals, pondering the nature of nature: ‘From nature’s point of view, if nature had a point of view (maybe nature is nothing but points of view?) ...’ (*Fencing the Sky*, 1999, p 97). This idea that nature or a place is just the composite of the infinite points of view within it is deeply ecological—trans-humanist. In both works of prose, he tries to write from many points of view, some of them nonhuman; and *The Meadow*, as I mentioned, is a sustained piece of such imagination. Both books of prose, again, contain reflections on the way in which other creatures might perceive reality—coyotes, owls, wildflowers, beavers.

Galvin imagines ecologically in his characterisation of Lyle, a man who has the weather in him, who has raised his consciousness to the level of a coyote. Above all, landscape, scattered in its many pieces throughout his writing, is present in his books for its own sake, because its drama is the one that contains and surpasses and explains all others. All his writing, one way and another, is a self-confessed attempt to imagine the land as ‘God sees it,’ as he puts it in a poem; as you would know it if you could transcend your mere humanity and see how it got to be what it is and how all its parts related, including our own within it. It is an essay in ecological perspective.

This essay and all Galvin’s writing arise from and express a musical engagement with the world. And in its musicality—I mean both aspects of his witness, his apprehension of distinctive pattern and his expression of those patterns, of which a place is made, through the patterns of sound made by his syntax, word choice and arrangement of—his writing is most ecological. According to Zuckerkandl and others, music makes space lively, forceful, dynamic. ‘Space we bear flows; it is in motion, unlike visual space. It is the process of composing itself’ (*Zuckerkandl*, 1956, pp 277–78). Just like a work of words—a thing that one hears; which composes itself aurally as one reads it. Music speaks what we cannot grasp with our eyes and thought. To imagine and therefore to experience a place musically is not just to hear its sounds; it is to understand it as animate and dynamic, and it is to sense the patterns of life at play within it, even those we cannot see. It is to grasp the whole of it—its ecology.

Places are not symphonies. They are places. Their ‘music’ is a metaphor for the elements of their actual lives that make them lively, inclusive, dynamic spaces, like space animated by music. The writer who imagines a place on earth musically begins to know that place as it actually is—animated, complex, much more than merely human, much more than meets the eye, richly and
densely patterned. In actual music, listening—that is, musical apprehension—connects us to the source of sound, and to every other thing that is touched by that sound, because the song, once made, belongs everywhere within a space in which it occurs. It also fills an entire space, not just part of it (bid, p 315). To see a place is to stand separate from it—what I can see is not, by definition, me. Seeing something confirms the distance and separation between us—there is the thing itself and there is me, seeing it. The seeing of an object is not a quality separate from the thing itself (as against the hearing of an object, which is a thing separate and distinct in itself, from whatever makes the sound). My seeing a tree or a meadow places it there and me here, seeing it. To write of visible things would be to write a pointillist landscape, each part severed from each other and from me. Unlike say the scent of sagebrush or the sight of the bird I heard in Lyle’s meadow, the song of that bird, like all music, stands entire, separate from it like a work of art—it is a thing made, expressive, of course, of the thing that makes it and the space in which it resonates, but transcendent of them. So, to imagine a place as though it were music, and to apprehend it so, would be to experience connection with all its parts and pieces, even those one did not notice, could never see; and then it might be to turn that experience into a lyric that sings in a pattern akin to some of the patterns at play there, representative as one or two notes of a chord are of the whole chord, and the whole chord is of the sonata, of the whole place, all its tempi and keys. To imagine a place musically is to stand in musical relationship with it: to see one’s self and even one’s work as part of it, as expressive of it as any of its parts; and it is to seek to express not its parts so much as its rhythms, its patterns of connection. It is to want to do justice in a work to that larger whole in some particular place that transcends any enumeration of all a place’s pieces, histories, weathers and waters, and of which those fragments are all expressive.

The imagined music of a place is the pattern or order of life it expresses; it is the symphony of all its parts, living, moving, playing—dissonantly and in a hundred key registers, yet all, somehow, of a piece. All of us, sometimes, somewhere, and particularly a writer like Galvin, lean toward, yearn for, what Paul Carter calls the metrical quality of the earth, its poetic; for what Viktor Zuckerkandl calls the dynamic, animate spaces of creation, for the tonal world—that is what we feel for in the places of earth, a quality as ineffable and real as a chorus of song. The music of a place is a thing that, though real, has no body for a home. In our words we find it one, for a while. It is the eternity of the place, its enduring genius from start to finish. It is its ecology-through-time.

’The human brain is avid for pattern,’ writes Ellen Bryant Voigt in her essay on syntax (Voigt, 2003, p 147). We make meaning of things through language spoken and heard, written and read, by the expression and apprehension of patterns of sound, through rhythms. We are, as humans, avid for pattern in language—and in the world. Some of us are more avid for pattern in landscape than others, but all of us make sense of it, if we are the least bit concerned to know where we are, by sensing its structures. We find meaning in a text the way we find it in a landscape—not by
imposing it upon the thing, but by listening and discerning the shape and interconnection of things. By listening. And then out of all the words that compose the sentence, out of all the life forms, fast and slow, that compose the place, an order in which they all participate is elaborated, a logic that could not be understood without the act of listening for pattern. The writer avid for a place’s patterns (which is to say, avid for its ecology) attends to it musically, then; and she tries to sing the nature of what she has discerned there in the rhythms, the breaks and starts, the play of tones, within her own prose. To put it another way: ignore the patterns and rhythms, the dynamism, of a place (for which ‘music’ is a good metaphor), and the place will elude you; ignore the rhythms and patterns of your prose (your written witness), and the place will elude your writing. The place does not elude James Galvin. He imagines and renders places ecologically because he witnesses them musically, taking care in his work to remember his metrics, his tones and rhythms, just as he felt for those qualities in the landscape. This is how James Galvin writes—of landscape music, in linguistic music.

‘I wanted to paint the landscape-in-time,’ he writes in the reading guide notes to The Meadow. The landscape begins and contains everything, and all his writing is, among other things, an attempt to see a particular landscape on its own terms—as something that has so long a heritage already, our human lives within it are almost infinitesimal. ‘Grass is a long time and a big space,’ Oscar reflects in the Galvin’s novel. ‘Your own life in it? A match going out’ (Fencing the Sky, 1999, p 79).

His novel ends with these words, shaping themselves into a meaningful pattern in the mind of Ad Trent, who sits in contemplation of the Snowy Range and imagines its rise and fall through time: ‘it’s good to get a little perspective now and then’ (ibid, p 258). Galvin’s perspective is ecological. It is, like Ad’s, lyric.89 It is nature’s; it is that of the place.

I have driven, now and then walked, around all the country in the island made by the Poudre and the Laramie, the North and South Platte rivers, and I sit here again in Lyle’s meadow, the island within that island. I have travelled all this, and I sit here now, alone. Tomorrow I fly home. This is not how I planned it. I meant to walk here with James Galvin. But he was away in Iowa, teaching, and could not join me in the country he has blackened with his life and prayers. I have sat with him in Iowa City, instead, and talked for hours about his writing, his life in this country, its life in him, and I have come back here to reflect on what I have learned. I think he is as present and as

89 In ‘The essential prose of things’ and again in ‘The long coastline,’ my chapter on Peter Matthiessen, I discuss Ellen Bryant Voigt’s term ‘the lyric point of view.’ She uses and explores the term in her essay ‘Ruthless Attention’ in her book The Flexible Lyric, 1999, p 178.
mysterious here as the real landscape that he has spent his life in conversation on the ridge behind me and the meadow on Sheep Creek.

The pasture is a little greener now, but only because spring is a little further advanced. No rain has come, and, this, as it turns out, is the start of a summer of fire all around the mountains that offer up this meadow to the sky.

This has been a passage through a lyric landscape—of high meadow and range, of this writer’s nature, and of the terrain of his writing. I carry away many things about all three. And since this has also been the last leg of my larger journey, I have found myself able to pull together thoughts and ideas that arose earlier.

I have learned to think of this land-oriented writing as a kind of witness, in which music matters deeply. It is a kind of musical apprehension of the world practised first in respectful conversation with your surroundings—nine parts listening, one part a testing of phrases meant to ring harmoniously with what it was you heard of the fractured music of the place. And then it is a speaking forth—bearing personal and local witness to that landscape, to what you have learned in conversation with it (for the place is where you have tried your ideas and images, sounded them first for truth). Your writing is a kind of evocation—a calling up, with sound and voice, of your encounter with that place, and, to the extent that you can manage it—for most of it will elude you—of the soul, the inmost nature within and beyond the forms, of the place itself.

In your listening and conversing, you discern the score(s) by which the place plays; in your writing you write down that score in words; in the sounding out of your writing that happens upon a reader’s reading of it, those scores play as a second music. If you have listened well and written truly, the musical quality of the place may reach the reader through your text. Music connects whoever hears it to the place from which the tone and rhythm seems to come, and allows, though disembodied in this case, an intimate engagement with the source of the music such as the writer himself experienced. (Since it is the writer whose words make the music, the reader will also find herself connected intimately to the writer through the music of his words.) Your writing is not meant to be a re-creation—how could it be?—of the place. But it recalls it, so that it arises imaginatively, true to its original nature, in the mind of a reader.

Your speaking forth is an act of love intended to honour the place and its people; or it is meant, as Galvin’s has been, to catch the cadences of people and place, their dignified relations, against a looming future, when the place you have known, and which has stood in some sense intact—the landscape-in-time, as he calls it—may be lost.

You will do justice to the piece of country if you work hard to give your words an order as elegant, as immaculate (though you will fail) as the order of relationships at play in that country—the tonal
order of the space that holds there, the ecological order and the visual, tangible order. It is not enough to explain it or to describe it. Your words converse with, they sing with and relate to that country, and they must aim to be as well made as it is, and be as eloquent. It will take a lot of care to find patterns of words conversant with that place; adequate to speak with and for it.

Music matters in this relationship of text and place, because most of what you will want to catch about the place lies beyond that landscape's form and history, and will escape the meaning-making and visual-image-making power of words (though you will need those powers of language as well). What you want to get at is the pattern of the place, what you may think of as the soul or music of its forms and the pattern of the connected lives that compose it. Of the land in that place.

The sounds words and sentences make—tone, beat, and so on—and the space they seem able to suggest will be where much of the evoking happens. But most of this will happen with very little intention. You will just try, as Galvin says he did, to paint a picture of that landscape, to catch the cycle and rhythm of its seasons, the cadences of its people's speech, and your words will make some music. You don't try to mimic it, for it does not actually sing; nor does it force your hand and fill your words with its note and rhythm. It is just that if you pay close attention to land, and its mysteries begin to open to you, then, if they touch you and you attempt this kind of witness, you will find it, the land, there in your word choice and structures. Somehow. There it will be—that place, its music.

I learned that the prose form in which James Galvin composed The Meadow—the lyric essay—is particularly apt for this kind of work of witness, because it encourages musical engagement with and elaboration of the actual world; it asks a writer to step back and let that world emerge through the music of his words and the silences between his fragments of text; and it encourages evocation over exposition, thus allowing the world to stand clothed in your words, but not lost in your human conceptions of it. That piece of the world may speak a little more in, and survive, your sentences, the less you box it into categories of human thought, the more you let its body and music sing.

And the music of the place rings in the life of its people—not only there, of course, but that is one of the places a writer must listen for it. A writer gets at the country through its people; at the voice of the land, through the vernacular cadences of folks grown native to it, who've shaped their inflections and turns of phrase in conversation with what is not human in their home ground, as well as with what is. The poetry of their lives, I learn from Lyle Van Wanling and James Galvin, expresses some of what is most real about the place that eludes them. It is through listening to the rhythms of those lives—but listening and recording what one hears as though it took place by the landscape's calendar and played as notes in the landscape's score—that a writer might best hope to sing the place true, and those lives within it.
The voice of a piece of work, even such an ecologically imagined essay as *The Meadow*, made with such reverence for the authentic music of the world it witnesses, will, I have learned, remain a human voice, and so it should. But not merely a human voice. Writing is steeped in the human, being a work played out in language. Writing is made of words, and words have human histories, make human meaning, sound in a human voice. But to the extent that the writing is made with an ear for its music, as well as an eye for its meanings—and the fitness of its music to the music of the place—then the voice of the writing may catch the lyric of the place, while also speaking to a reader's mind in thought and a human voice. The materiality of words—the fact that we may see them, know them as things with forms—along with the fact that they are products of a human intelligence ground a text's music in the everyday world, in a world we can grasp in ordinary time. A lyric text like Galvin's may bring a reader an experience of the inmost musical nature of a place on earth and of one man's intimate connection with it, while also conversing with the reader about that place and its human lives, in a voice absolutely its author's own. It accretes by fragments, like a landscape, like a long slow conversation.

I look about. James Galvin may not be in the meadow, I think; but the meadow is in James Galvin. It plays in his words, which make a prayer for the place they come from.
Appendix one
My phenomenological questions

These were the questions I asked each of these writers in conversation and unstructured interview:

Why do you write nature essays and poetry?

What draws you to it?

What is the value and purpose of the writing you do?

How did you come to the kind of literature you write?

What does it mean to go daily into this landscape?

What is it like to engage with this place?

Can you describe what it is to enter and know this place?

Tell me about where you live.

Tell me about the landscape you would think of as home.

What is its essential character? How do you experience it?

What other beings, human and other-than-human, share your home country with you?

Tell me about the seasons and the weather here. Tell me about a bird, a rock, a watercourse, a tree, a wind, a time you like best here.

How do you experience each of those things, and what is their nature?

Why do you live here? Why did you come? Why do you stay?

Does the place affect your writing of it?

What is it like to come away from encounters with this place and then sit and write of them?

What is the nature of that experience of remembering and writing places you live in or visit?
What are you attempting to do when you write about the place, the wild, and your encounter with it?

Where do the words and phrases, the music and metaphors come from?

What is the nature of the experience of writing the wild?

For whom do you write?

How do you write—by hand, on a keyboard, on a typewriter...?

Where do you write?

How much do you write in a day?

Do you choose one genre deliberately, or does the piece suggest its own shape?
Appendix two

A taxonomy of Australian nature writing

The other night in a Glebe bookshop, I overheard a woman ask her friend, ‘So is this nature writing?’ She meant the book being launched that night. I turned my head in surprise. This is not a question one expects anyone to ask in Australia, even in a bookshop, even at the launch of a book that probably, almost, fits the description. When I turned, I saw it was Kate Llewellyn, a poet and essayist, about whose own 1987 book *The Water Lily*, I had asked myself the very same question only a day before. I have included that book in the list of Australian nature writing that follows. When I spoke with her and told her about my work, Llewellyn was delighted and surprised to find someone in Australia with some awareness of this literature. She told me that she had just finished a manuscript, a piece that might be called nature writing, about the place she now lives, by the sea. Times are changing, if slowly.

As for *The Water Lily*, she writes to me in a letter that has just arrived, ‘You could say it aimed at the deepest, most simple and humble, ordinary pleasures of involvement with nature, that is, the back yard, the home garden, made by mum.’ So it is nature writing in its enterprise and effects. It was a rare and strange book in its time, and still. It is also a book with a small compass; and a focus upon domesticated nature. It was a turning from the city. It is a lovely for all that, though home-bound. It helped keep alive a feeble tradition, feeding an unfulfilled readership, and it led Kate Llewellyn herself into a thorough reading of the English tradition of modern nature writing, and so to her new book.

Kate Llewellyn’s garden journal drew a warm and loving response from readers, though it had felt ‘audacious’ and ‘unusual’ to her as a writer, she tells me, to ‘look at things away from the public arena, nothing to do with modern life or posh matters, nothing political or socially valued.’ Indeed, for a writer in the 1980s in Australia such a thing was odd. And it was nature writing—nature writing, though, of a strongly pastoral character, a retreat from city and society into a garden amidst wilderness. So you will find *The Water Lily* in my taxonomy of Australian nature writing below.

But it is time the Australian literature of place stepped, with Kate Llewellyn, outside the garden—and into the wild. I mean in its orientation and in its diction. There is nothing wrong with gardens or with pastoral landscapes—I, myself, love them both. Nor is there anything wrong with cityscapes and suburbs. But let us find a way to write of them as places first and cultural constructs second. It is time for a post-pastoral literature of place in which the place sounds out in all its
wildness—regardless of whether that place lies in an urban or a rural area, in pastoral country or national park, in the field or in the forest, in the backyard or on the beach. We need a literature that sees and expresses the placeness—if you like, the bereness—of places; engages with their nature, ecologically imagined, regardless of how paved and built upon they are, how farmed or gardened, how forested or cleared. This is what nature writing at its best—though it has leaned toward the charismatically wild places, the mountains and the trees—has always attempted. And it would help to step outside our backyards and gardens because they are—by virtue of gardening’s narrative, pastoralising, fabricating ethic, and, in this country, its predominant European aesthetic—likely to keep us from entering into the geographies of this landmass, just as they are. Our gardens and their celebration are likely to keep us in an anthropocentric and largely visualist state of mind. They are, though, a place to begin.

It is time, too, to get over the old, disabling dichotomy: the city or the bush. Just write the places—the city and the bush—for the wild order that animates them; and understand them, first and last, as works of nature. For cities too are made of nature, and nature—the weather, the laws of gravity, the quality of light, the density of the rocks, the amount of fresh water—runs through them, transcends them, includes them.

Regardless of one’s taste, Kate Llewellyn’s, for instance, or mine, for garden or pasture or city; no matter how hard either of us looked that night, in a very well-stocked bookshop, one would not have found much nature writing there, nor any nature writing section. Scattered in other categories—history, literature, natural science, environment, cultural studies, gardening, philosophy, travel and literary theory, for instance—you could have discovered some of the books I mention below. In fact, I had just been downstairs thumbing through Mark McKenna’s new Looking for Blackfellas’ Point—on a table of new nonfiction. But still no place exists for nature writing. As a genre it has no identity or constituency here. But we have, all the same, quite a bit of writing about Australian places and land—not yet a literature of nature, as I have elaborated it here, not a lyric nonfiction, intimate with and full of country; but we have a lot of writing.

There is only a small body of writing that might be thought of as nature writing: nature-literate, landscape-oriented, personal, lyrical, reflective essays, ecologically imagined and topographically expressive. Even the books and essays on the list that follows mostly fall short of (in their music, in their intimacy (with place and with reader) and in the depth of their ecological imagining) or fall outside in their very nature) the tradition as I have described it here.

Australia’s best writer of elegant, place-expressive essay is, I think, Tom Griffiths, yet most of his writing, graceful though it is, has been academic prose. The four writers most likely to come to mind as Australian nature writers all, despite their many qualities, write, I’m sure Judith Wright would say, about nature rather than out of its heart: Eric Rolls (A Million Wild Acres, The River and
A Celebration of the Senses); George Seddon (Searching for the Snowy and Landprints); Tim Flannery (The Future Eaters); and William J Lines (Taming the Great South Land). Rolls' A Celebration of the Senses and some of Lines' essays in Open Air practise more intimacy, speak with more lyricism. They find words for country—as do a few of the essays in Griffiths and Bonyhady's recent anthology, Words for Country, of writings on landscape. But there is still too little, in our literature of nature, of what Krutch called experience with nature; too much abstract intellection about it; too little intimacy with, and too much discourse upon, land. We do not have much of a tradition yet of witness.

It may be helpful, all the same, to list what literature of place and nature we do have. I do this using the categories of the taxonomy of nature writing I proposed in the chapter four, 'Nature, writing.'
NATURAL HISTORY ESSAYS

Gregg Borschmann’s The People’s Forest (1999); Alec Chisholm’s Mateship with Birds (1922); Nicholas Drayson’s Wildlife (1988); Tim Flannery’s The Future Eaters (1994); Ashley Hay’s Gum (2002); Robin Hill’s Bush Quest (1968); Charles Lasser’s The Face of Australia (1953); Donald Macdonald’s The Brook’s of Morning (1933); Stephen Martin’s The Whale’s Journey (2001); Ann Moyal’s Platypus (2001); Graham Pizzey’s Journey of a Lifetime (2000); Eric Rolls’ They All Ran Wild (1969); George Seddon’s Searching for the Snowy (1994) (though this brilliant, sometimes detached and scholarly, sometimes personal, fiercely intelligent book of a river/river of a book is impossible to catch in a single category); Vince Serventy’s Wildlife of Australia (1968); Paul Sinclair’s The Murray (2001); Nicolette Stansko’s Oyster (2000); James Woodford’s The Wollemi Pine (2000) and The Secret Life of Wombats (2001); Mary White’s The Greening of Gondwana (1986) and After the Greening (1994)

ESSAYS OF EXPERIENCE IN NATURE

Solitude and back-country living

E J Banfield’s The Confessions of a Beachcomber (1908); Charles Barrett’s Koowarrah (1939); Albert Facey’s A Fortunate Life (1981); Barbara York Main’s Between Wodjil and Tor (1967) (one of the very few self-consciously Thoreauvian works in the Australian literature); Elyne Mitchell’s Speak to the Earth (1945); Douglas Stewart’s fishing essays, The Seven Rivers (2001); Peter Timms’ Making Nature (2001) (another Thoreauvian enterprise, in many ways our most accomplished piece of nature writing).

Travel and adventure

C E W Bean’s On the Wool Track (1910; 1925); Ross Brownscombe’s Blue Rivers (1997); Charmian Clift’s essays from central Australia, especially ‘The Centre’ (1967); Frank Dalby Davison’s Blue Coast Caravan (1933); Robyn Davidson’s Tracks (1980); H H Finlayson’s The Red Centre (1935); Ernest Giles’ Australia Twice Traversed (1889); Augustus Charles Gregory’s Journals of Australian Explorations (1884); Barry Hill’s The Rock: Travelling to Uluru (1994); Ernestine Hill’s The Territory (1951); William J Lines’ A Long Walk in the Australian Bush (1998); C T Madigan’s Central Australia (1936); Thomas Mitchell’s Three Expedititions into the Interior of Australia (1839); Francis Radcliffe’s Flying-Fox and Drifting Sand (1938); T G H Strehlow’s Journey to Horses’ Bend (1969)

Rural life and garden life

(LYRIC) ESSAYS OF PLACE

Memoirs and nonfiction novels of place

Alice Duncan-Kemp’s *Our Sandhill Country* (1933) and *Where Strange Gods Call* (1968); Mary Durack’s *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959); Mrs Aeneas Gunn’s *We of the Never Never* (1908); Jill Ker Conway’s *The Road from Coorain* (1989); Kim Mahood’s *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000); Marie Mahood’s *Icing on the Damper* (1999); Kerry McGinnis’s *Pieces of Blue* (1999); Roger McDonald’s *Shearers’ Motel* (1992); Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987); Patrice Newell’s *The Olive Grove* (2000); Bernard O’Reilly’s *Green Mountains* (1940) and *Cullenbong* (1944); Carolyn Polizotto’s *Pomegranate Season* (1998); Eric Rolls’ *Celebration of the Senses* (1984); Tim Winton’s *Strange Passion: A Landscape Memoir*; in *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes* (1999); Judith Wright’s *The Generations of Men* (1959) and *The Cry for the Dead* (1981)

Prose poems

Kate Llewellyn’s *The Waterlily* (1987); Roger McDonald’s *The Tree in Changing Light* (2001); Tim Winton’s *Land’s Edge* (1993); Barry Hill’s *Broken Song* (2002) (which belongs in many categories, including the next one, but which I have put here to acknowledge its lyric power)

CULTURE & NATURE

This list is longer than I thought it would be. I have taken a generous reading of the nature credentials of many books and of the literary merits of others. I have strained the categories of nature writing to include some—in particular, I have not insisted on a high level of the lyric or of the central witnessing characteristic I have spoken of as essential to the genre.

The largest category of books here, by far, is the last—the many subtypes of books about mankind's relationship with nature. Most of these are not really literature, even in their own author's understanding of the term, though many of them are very important in the contribution they have made to ecological thought. They are books about ecology; they are part of the swelling literature on ecology; but most of them are not themselves literature—not works of literary ecology. They are books about the encounter with wildness, books about naturalism, books about books about nature, books of environmental history and philosophy, books of anthropology. Among the books that sit well in this category of literature with Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Thomas Berry and Stephanie Mills—books, in other words not merely ecological in focus but wild and musical in their prose—are those I've listed by Tom Griffiths, Freya Mathews, Eric Rolls, George Seddon, and Judith Wright.

There is quite a bit of straight natural history writing, the first category and the least lyric and personal in the taxonomy of nature writing. Travel is a large category too. There are some good books here by some fine writers—Bean, Brownscombe, Clift, Dalby Davison, Barry Hill, Ernestine Hill, Lines, Radcliffe. All of these are place-literate and expressive, to at least some degree, of country. A colonising project, a nationalising incentive, a pastoral tone, characterises Charles Bean, H H Finlayson, Ernestine Hill, C T Madigan, Francis Radcliffe (an Englishman) and the government explorers Giles, Gregory and Mitchell. But still you feel, you almost hear, the landscapes in their prose. Only William Lines and Ross Brownscombe have attempted a nature writer's narrative. Although few of these books can fairly be compared in the depth of their ecological imagining Thoreau, Matthiessen or Lopez, say, all of whose books belong in this same category, I sense that our best prose of place, our deepest engagement with country, may lie in this category of travel.

Much of the memoir, though land-based, is intensely concerned with family and personal matters, and it is hard to hear the particularities of landscapes speaking in each.

Australians have thought a lot about nature and our relationships with antipodean places. But we haven't made a literature yet. The bulk of the books dealing with nature in Australia are academic: histories; cultural studies of landscape perception; social studies of identity; anthropology; scientific ecology; social ecology; ecofeminism; green politics and philosophy. Little of it is nature writing, really. Many of the authors whose works I have included here—George Seddon and
Geoffrey Bolton, for instance, Val Plumwood, Paul Carter and David Horton, even Peter Timms—though they sometimes run a personal riff, write dispassionately, as observers, analysts and scholars. Their language is constrained by the kind of orthodoxies that preclude the wild, that do not invite the 'green chaos' to sing. They write about, they do not write from inside, the encounter with the world.

The historians, despite an evident love of the land, have written from a sturdily anthropocentric stance: the theme of Australians' discovering, impacting, shaping, naming an environment runs strongly through Blainey, Bolton, Hancock and Rolls. Blainey's title is *A Land Half Won*. Hancock's subtitle is *A Study of Man's Impact on His Environment*; and Bolton's, *A History of Australians Shaping Their Environment*. The subtitle of one book Seddon edited, *Man and Landscape in Australia*, expresses an ecocentric hope—*Towards an Ecological Vision*—which he has pursued in his later books. But he has not managed to escape the confines of culture—academic, scientific culture, in particular—to enter into the life of the land to anything like the degree of North American essayists. He holds to a deeply humanist, and humane, skepticism, which patterns much of the rest of the writing in the final category. Even Griffiths, who is more aware than the others of the lyrical tradition of natural history writing from Gilbert White to Barry Lopez, has mostly focused on the human stories his forests and dunes keep secret or disclose. This, I should add, is his job; as it is Seddon's. They work within the academy; and they write history.

A number of Australian academics in politics, philosophy, cultural studies, social ecology, theology and literature—Val Plumwood, Ariel Salleh, Kate Rigby, Robyn Eckersley, Freya Mathews, John Cameron, Stuart Hill, Martin Mulligan, David Tacey, Pete Hay—have, over the past fifteen years, led the world toward a new ecocentric paradigm in thought. They have written a lot of significant books and papers, and participated through their work in the greening of the humanities, within the academy and to a small degree outside it. It is surprising, though, that we have left most of the work of remembering earth, of remaking out relationships with the more than merely human world, to the academics, and consequently made ourselves a heavily academic prose, so far, of nature. We have not had enough writing from writers on nature; and so we have not yet made a literature of nature, though we have had a lot to say about it.

Something—I think the lack of a tradition of personal and lyric essays and the fierce humanism and secularity of our intellectual tradition—has made those of us who have thought hard about landscape choose academic forms and diction, or, at best, the approach of the journalist or social historian, rather than the models of a more engaging, personal and lyrical prose that American thinkers have practised for 150 years now. There is a remarkable ignorance of the American tradition of nature writing, among Australian writers.
On the other hand, we may be inventing our own forms. Gregg Borschmann's eloquent oral history of the forests; the opening chapter of Jill Ker Conway's memoir and its droll, exact, unfussy evocation of the western plains of New South Wales; Ashley Hay's loving survey of eucalypts; George Seddon's snowy river, which will not stay within its banks or behind its dam wall; all of Eric Rolls' rambunctious, intemperate prose for river and field and forest; the passionate reflection of historians like Tom Griffiths, Mark McKenna, Peter Read and Libby Robin; the musical anthropological and literary explorations of the poet Barry Hill; the elegant and ecocentric art criticism of Tim Bonyhady; the brainy ramblings of Peter Timms; the anthropological conversations with land and belonging being led by Deborah Bird Rose and others—all these works escape my categories, really, and suggest that a new antipodean literature, steeped in these places and their grammars, is dawning.

Looking across my list of nature books, all these letters of ours for this country, I wonder how we could have made a prose so formal, so mannered and gardenesque out of a set of landscapes so wild and unruly, so unconforming. There remains a deep rift in Australia between culture and nature; between the city and the bush; between the diction of letters and the common mode of speech. It shows in the abstractness, formality and aridity of our few essays, which largely belong to the intellectual elites. And it shows in our writing about land, which very largely adopts the conventions of the pastoral, turning to nature functionally—for redemption, for metaphor, for renewal—in language that articulates an anthropocentric enterprise in the diction of the city.

Too little of our writing strikes the right note between the discourse of the expert and the discourse of the local inhabitant. To be expressed, country needs words and phrases that are suggested by the place itself, and suggestive of it, not cultivated in the tamed landscapes from which the colonisers' literature comes; it needs the vernacular; it needs what David Malouf has called the intelligent vernacular. It needs conversation, not disquisition. It needs the rhythms of speech fashioned out of long association with country. Conversation is the rhythm and mood of the essay, done right. Out of a conversation with these places, nine parts listening, one part talking, we may find the right music for them. The genius of American letters, of the essay and the literature of nature, in particular, is that, without compromising either thought or artistry, they speak in the words and accents that the encounter with American landscapes has given rise to.

We have attempted a literature of Australian places with forms and dictions born in countryside not in landscape; we have tried to force a literature of cultivation to draw meaning and music out of billions of untame acres, out of arid and exacting landscapes. We need to start again; and we are beginning.
That literature, if it does emerge, may include the voices of women and men, Indigenous and settler, writers of every culture. It will need to respond to—and express—the tough authenticity, the genius, of this land and its many places. It will, if it is to prosper, respond to and embrace the wisdom of the Indigenous land ethic. And, it may—or it may not—engage with the North American literature. It will certainly be a more musical, lyric mode, resonant with the encounter in lively space that is place. This will be a literature that explores the meanings and ways of belonging here, within all the Australian geographies; that joins the kind of conversation being carried on in the North American nature writing literature about how to build a more truthful, generous, intelligent and enduring relationship with the rest of the living world.
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IV
Catching the lyric of the country

A conclusion

Lavender Bay and The Blue Plateau, New South Wales

The earth says have a place, be what that place requires; hear the sound the birds imply and see as deep as ridges go behind each other....

Listening, I think that's what the earth says.

William Stafford, 'In Response to a Question'

I am home. My apprenticeship—fragmentary and discursive—among these writers is over. I set out with a question about the power of a piece of prose to speak for a place on earth, to sway, in the reader's mind, with sedge and grass, to run like a winter watercourse in orange willow, to weep like a forest with rain, to moan like a high prairie with wind, to sing with distance and regeneration like a shoreline, to glow like a desert canyon with light. I have listened to these writers and their home places, and I think I have heard some answers. I have returned, at least, to this plateau, with a better, more complicated notion of the nature of places and of writing itself—and in that understanding, which arose in conversation with country and writer, and over which I have troubled myself long in the library and late at this keyboard, lie the makings of an ecological theory of representation. The places sing; and the writing can catch them at it. The writing can carry the place—its musical nature—to the reader. The structures by which the piece of country composes itself, over and over, may reach the reader in the structures that compose the prose. That which makes the writing most artistic, most peculiar to the writer, the product of one human imagination is what makes it capable of rendering the character of one place on earth, a more than merely human realm, the land-in-itself. The writing is not severable—if it is conducted with a lyric apprehension, with an ecological imagination, in the manner of a dance—from the place.
Adequating Country

In contemporary literary theory, Lawrence Buell wrote in *The Environmental Imagination*, 'the capacity of literary writers to render a faithful mimesis of the object world is reckoned indifferent at best, and their interest in doing so is thought to be a secondary concern' (Buell, 1995, p 84). All strains of literary theory, from 'the old-fashioned formalist theory,' as Buell puts it, 'of the literary work as artifact' to 'the contemporary theory of writing as discourse' is sceptical or even disdainful of 'the notion that literature does or can represent physical reality,' specifically the natural world 'in its self-existence as an assemblage or plenum or in the form of a gestalt that can impress itself on the mind or text' (ibid, pp 85, 86).

In my travels, I have encountered some thoughtful and articulate, serious-minded writers who genuinely understand their writing as a way of engaging with and bearing witness to the actual world; of writing, even, from the landscape's point of view, in a voice that arises out of their witness of places. They imagine the places of the earth as capable of being witnessed—and they regard no writing task as more important than that. They do not see places as mute nor merely as the inventions of a writer's mind. They know, with the theorists, that the way a human being experiences reality somewhere is influenced by how he or she comes there—with what intention, with what imaginative endeavour. They see the real world as mysterious and elusive, complicated and incapable of capture—in its entirety or essence—in a piece of writing. But we do not invent it; we live within it, and that is where they—it is where I—try to write from.

The writers I have studied here, and many of the writers within the nature writing tradition, think of land, of nature right here, as powerful and capable of musing, stirring, moving and shaping a witness, of changing that man or woman, and teaching them some things worth knowing and passing on—some principles, for instance, of dignity, harmony, restraint and natural justice (now soft thing, yet mostly beautiful); all sorts of schooling in colour, tone, form and gesture; the need for largeness of perspective, suppleness and generosity of imagination, longevity of memory; the possibility of miracle and terror, the certainty of death, the knowledge, written into geology and the fierce patterns of predator and prey in a habitat, that life is born from death and depends upon it; the cyclical pattern of departure and eternal return expressed in season and weather and erosion; the merits of listening and adapting oneself to an order of things, articulated in earth's places, older and more coherent than any that a single man or woman, or even a whole culture, could invent on their own. Little of this will strike a writer straight out of the land. It will arise out of her own human apprenticeship to it, out of his close attention above all to men and women like Lyle Van Waning and Indigenous peoples, who know, not out of ignorance but out of long-maintained, intelligent and humble attendance upon the actual world, that it exists, that it is the home of all of us, that it schools and shapes all of us, even those who think they are immune; people who know what they know out of long conversations with the land; people who would treat
with deep scepticism, even disdain, the notion that men and women invent places in their minds and tell of nothing in their words except perhaps their ideologies, cultures, politics and predilections.

Indeed, what a landscape can teach is what these writers want most to elaborate. For that they know they need a voice, a dance of word and phrase, apt for the space in which the wisdom arose, apt to make such a space arise again for a reader—in which the wisdom of landscapes, the intelligence of the real world may, as Barry Lopez puts it, arise; and they hope, when they stop simply writing as well as they can to think about it, that the lively space made in the mind of the reader by their writing, will be replete with the patterns, the music, the poetic coherence of the original place—that it will, in other words, 

adequate a landscape. For these writers, landscapes live; and the writer tries to live and move and write within them, articulating wisdom gained on the ground, inside some intelligent and dynamic fragments of creation.

From these writers and their works I have learned, then, some ways of understanding how a text may be seen as expressing, singing with, singing out the world, just as a life like Lyle Van Wanin’s, or for that matter James Galvin’s, Laurie Kutchins’, Terry Tempest Williams’, Peter Matthiessen’s, Henry David Thoreau’s or Barry Lopez’s does. For these writers, theory’s assertion about the muteness of country and the powerlessness of prose to represent place is a clever and empty abstraction disproved daily by their experience of land itself and their practice of writing. The words—the pattern of the sentences—arise out of intelligent human witness of the land. The work belongs to and expresses both witness and land. Land is not, and a writer is not doing, what the theorists imagine. From listening to these writers, observing connections between their writing and their home places, by thinking hard about the ideas I set out with, I have come to understand both places and pieces of writing as less finite, material entities. I have come to understand both, sometimes, as two parts of a musical, dynamic whole.

Beyond representation

But this is not, I think, mimesis. Representation is not what any of these writers are trying to do; they are not making facsimiles; they are taking part in the land, mostly by listening and being changed. And the way in which the land changes them is perhaps what we hear in their lyric essays. The rhythm we readers hear is an articulated listening; the reverberation of an intelligence to the life of a place. Moreover, the notion of representation presumes separation between place and prose, whereas none of these writers imagines themselves or their work as dislocated from the land—rather they see it as some kind of continuation of it.

Paul Carter calls such an engagement with country, as dynamic space, metbexis. For mimesis presumes a visual relationship, a relationship of two visible, material forms; it presumes that the writer’s project is to make a likeness. Mimesis involves imitation, the production of a likeness. And
this is not the project of the place writer at all. None of the writers I have spent time with saw their writing that way. The work, rather, is an enactment or a performance of something—of witness, of celebration, of engagement with a stretch of ground. It resembles it as a dancer resembles the music she moves to; as the sound of the played cello resembles the movement of the player’s fingers upon the strings. The same lifeworld animates them both. The work does not aim to set the country out before us, but to honour it, to ring true to it, to move with it, to communicate, in patterns of words worthy of the amplitude of the landscape, some ideas that arose, some stories that occurred there, which seem inseparable from the place itself, and part of the very logic and structure of the place.

At its best, as in the work of Barry Lopez, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, Laurie Kutchins and James Galvin, this literature listens to the land and to those people intimate with its places. It puts words and their music, patterned into shapely sentences, fragmented paragraphs, textured and cadenced lines of poetry and lyric prose, to work in service of that larger order—the land, natural history—hoping to reanimate it for a reader, perhaps, as it was animate for, is still animate for, the writer. Emily Dickinson, as I have noted, observed once that places speak, and the poet learns to listen. Perhaps the work of the kind of literature I have looked into here, defined by its attunement to place, is finally a listening, as Laurie Kutchins put it to me. It tries to discern the soul of, the music of, a place on earth; and in the work, if it has listened well, we may hear the place, or hear it as it manifests itself through the memory and nature and gift of the writer. The poem or the piece of prose, at its best, is a choreography in words of an act of careful listening; and through that listening we may hear the place express itself. As we ‘hear’ the music in a dance. We may catch the lyric of the country—or some of it, some scattered fragments. We will hear an echo of the world of a place somewhere, and feel that it is alive, first to the writer, and through her text, to us.

None of this is best theorised as representation. One of the measures of the quality of the listening, and of the grace that attended it, may be that the place so witnessed seems to reverberate in the writing. But the project is just to hear, to witness and to respond; beyond that it is to keep a place alive—in a kind of transcription—for a reader.

The nature writer listens to the world, then—to some of, or to one of, its lively, articulate places, divining its nature, looking for words to shape the stories, embedded there. The narratives, however broken, they want to tell are stories of those places themselves, and they will mostly be stories of people—indigenous locals, champions—who have participated in those places, have been claimed by them, like Lyle Van Waning, like Laurie Kutchins’ cowboys, like the men and women in Barry Lopez’s and Terry Tempest Williams’ fables; whose very lives seem to articulate the country. Through the art of words, their music, association and pattern, she or he, this nature
writer, tries to return places to life for us—for most us have grown used to abstracting and attenuating the rest of nature, beyond the human.

So nature writing tries to waken the world again for us; and waken us to it—not some romantic image of it, but to the wild world just as it is, for its own sake.

Is that representation or production of a likeness? Not in the way the theorist imagines. It is something else, and it depends on something else: not seeing and copying, but witnessing, listening, allowing oneself to be changed and to write out of the experience of being so changed.

It is to write in the voice the place animated in one; and it is to seek to make the place animate in just the same way for others as it was for you—but not by depicting it, rather by writing in a voice that belongs to the space and ground between the land and you, its witness. It is to make a work that is continuous with the land, worthy of it, suggestive of it, not in how the work looks, though perhaps in how it sounds—in what a reader might perceive as the work’s musical order, its poetic coherence.

'I don’t see my writing as giving voice to Wyoming,’ Laurie Kutchins wrote to me. ‘I see it as listening.’ The writing listens. It is a sustained process of hearing the land; and the end of that process is a work in which, I guess, the place sounds for the reader as it sounded for the poet. Terry Tempest Williams spoke of the work as like the burial moccasin, fit to hold and to awaken a memory of the life it celebrates; she spoke of writing in the language of the place, so that her prose might honour the desert by feeling as though the erosional grammar and logic, that dynamic of dramatic editing and magical light inhered in her text as it does in Castle Valley. If it does, it will be nearly a function of the way her sentences, and the ‘silences’ between her paragraphs, sound.

Barry Lopez has spoken in terms quite close to Carter’s of the idea of shaping in one’s writing’s voice the amplitude of the landscape; and he has suggested, employing an Eskimo word isumataq, that the storyteller is the shaper of a space (as the landscape is both the shaper and the embodiment of a space) in which wisdom may arise; he has spoken too of the storyteller’s use of diction and syntax, matters of voice and (musical and moral) truthfulness to fashion a tale in which the landscape’s order seems to play. James Galvin spoke to me of trying not to represent the meadow but to write as though from its point of view, as though the writing said what the meadow said and saw, in its own voice. If resemblance is part of that project, it is a matter, again, of attunement of voice and of narrative structuring. The landscape, for Galvin, is a mysterious, elusive, discontinuous symphony composed of fragments of melody, most of them lost on one, a music full of wholes, and his strategy for writing out of the inside of land he loves is to break his lines of verse, to fracture his narratives, to let plenty of space stand, infused with time.
Representation; likeness? Perhaps, but essentially musical and therefore not separate from the land; accompanying it, rather.

Peter Matthiessen agonises in The Snow Leopard over how to have a mountain, a transcendent moment with a mountain ring in a piece of prose; and he does it, I reflected, by the rhythm of his recollection, the hard work of keeping a certain music playing in his sentences. He wants the writing to give us the thing itself; he knows that is a matter more of silence and fragment than of exposition; a matter of interval between word and syllable, a lyric thing much more than a representational thing. And Thoreau knew that wildness might be preserved on the page through a poetry of fact, not a mere reporting of the world; through the pulse and visceral beat of one's sentences, the Aeolian harp playing in one's words; he knew a piece of writing must move—stop and start as on a walk or a run—and always surprise, always run a little wild, as a place does; he knew words could work in our ears as a place works in our experience—dynamically, dangerously, wildly. The one thing, as Lawrence Buell has shown, that Walden will not give a reader is a clear image of the pond. The book loses one in its own intricate musics, just as the place might, if entered and experienced in its full amplitude. It, like all the works of all these writers, may resemble the place it concerns, because the same poetry patterns place and work; it may suggest the pond and forest; but chiefly it moves, it animates the reader much as the place itself animated the teller. The music of the place carries in the structures and sounds and spaces of the work; which is a perpetuated dance with the place, a resonant song.

So to ponder representation is really to ponder the wrong kind of relationship; or the right relationship—interconnection, continuity—in the wrong kind of way. Works that express places do not attempt mimesis, but something else. The work relates to the place, but not by virtue of seeking to make a likeness of it. The place starts something that the writing carries on, that carries on in the writing. Mimesis and representation imagine place and text as separate material forms, when they are in fact two processes, two dances of rhythm and frequency, joined by an act of witness, of deep listening, practised by an author.

Even adéquation is barely adequate as a term for this. It will do. These works of words may be understood, in the large and baggy sense I have spoken of here, as impressions, I suppose, of places; as works of words that give and make an impression on a reader such as the place may have made on the writer, such as it might make on the reader if he or she went there, as I have. The impression, the adéquation is essentially lyric more than it is narrative. The work gives an impression of the amplitude, the lively structures of a place, and of the way in which the witness was moved by it, moved, himself, herself, within it. And the work, with its own amplitude and life, belongs in the amplitude of the space, which it evokes, with which it dances.
There is some equivalence in literary terms between place and text—and I have tried to show here in the writing of these six writers how such equivalence or kinship may be observed between the terrain, the lively space, of the country each writes of and the country of their prose. One would be pleased, too, as I have noted, if a reader felt this were so. What I have learned, though, is that a writer rarely sits with an ambition to produce such an impression. It is not an artifact one imagines oneself producing, which may or may not look or feel or work on a reader like the original. It is a process one is engaging in, like a dance to music that continues, in which most of one’s ambition is to keep in time, and to stay in tune if one is singing. It is the making that counts. To write with the land in mind is like sustaining a chord that one heard there—joining it, not copying it. And one sustains it through writing about all manner of ideas and stories, not just in depiction of country. It is the pattern of the place, its mind if you like, one wants to discern and join, and in listening so actively for it, one may perpetuate it. One tries to let that pattern animate one’s words; one tries to keep the place dancing in the work. But it is the working that catches the lyric—the hard work of draft and redraft, sounding out and editing over—not the work, not produced text in itself, except to the extent that, in being read, the text sounds out the rhythm again, and again. It is the creating not the creation—for a work, a place, creation itself, these are never done. Life is a process. One wants simply, impossibly, to take part for a time in an activity of creation as true and impeccable as that which the landscape performs on and on, daily, through the ages.

Writing sacred geography

In nature writing we continue, I have come to feel, an ancient human habit. We presume that there is a world beyond our selves, and environment whose weather and air quality, whose sources of water and of dread, for instance, may be worth knowing something about. In writing we try the land, to use Barry Lopez’s phrase. We witness it, attempt intimacy with it in order to know who we are, what it is, how we relate to each other; in order to become what we might be. We witness it to see how the place can sustain us, and where qualities within it threaten our lives and our families or simply will not sustain us; and we look for how we might sustain it—in song, in care. We witness it also to see what it is that makes it cohere and to wonder if those qualities of coherence—its patterns of interconnected life, of water and rock and light and rainfall, predator and prey, for example—might be worth attempting in our own relations with and within it; and whether they could serve to instruct us in how to make a similarly coherent life. Literature has long been a way of mapping the world beyond the merely human, as Joseph Carroll reminds us; of testing and coming to know and speaking of one’s environment. And for most of human history, literature has understood its task not as invention of the world, of meanings, or even of ideas. It has seen the task more along the lines of discernment of meaning and order, lore and pattern in the land (including the land’s human occupants), in the world and expression of it in words, and often dance, alive with those very principles one discerned. Among other things it does, nature
writing continues that tradition and shares something of this understanding of the relationship between the world and the words that arise from it.

If it were not presumptuous to say so, I would even suggest that the best pieces of writing in the literature of place are something like the sacred geographies that Indigenous peoples have sung and painted and dance and lived, the world over, to divine and make sense, to know and participate in, to celebrate and elaborate their country.

The world’s notes

Certainly, by listening to these North American places and their writers, and thinking about how they understand their own work, I have come to see nature writing differently. I would like to reposition nature writing in our minds. For, it seems to me now, it is not at all what most of us imagine. A piece of nature writing is not really, or not merely, a set of notes about a place on earth: it is some of the world’s notes overheard by a witness and allowed to shape an utterance, a song, a story, a lyric of place; and that work of words is a song about that place, about that listening, about that listener, about reality observed from inside country.

Have I retheorised literary representation? I doubt it, though I may have begun. I have resuscitated an older understanding of literature as an act of encounter with, a kind of fathoming of, the world beyond the human. And I have suggested that the nature of a place, the way it moves and expresses itself may—through that kind of close listening and attunement, that kind of dancing, practised by a place-oriented writer—pattern the literature that probes it. That may happen as an accident of close and sustained attention, or it may happen as part of a writer’s deliberate attempt to shape a narrative space fit to hold what the land revealed. But all I have really proposed by way of explaining how places speak or sing to their witnesses, and how that witness may catch their lyric in prose, is a metaphor—music. But then, all we have, with words, is metaphor. All words stand in for, they allude to, things they are not. Our metaphors will be compelling or not depending on the calibre of the listening and thought that gave rise to them—the attention into whose particular amplitude those words arrived. Like all metaphors, mine may elucidate the things it concerns—place and writing in this case. But it will also leave other things out, other things that places and writing are. Writing and places are not merely musical entities. But seeing them as such helps take us to qualities in their nature that usually escape us, without which we may never understand properly what they are and, therefore, in what ways they are capable of relating to and expressing each other.

A piece of writing speaks of and is shaped by other things than the lyric of the place: things such as the personal ideology, psychological type, matters of religion, class, education and gender, the Zeitgeist and so on, which, of course, will also mould the imagination and nature of a writer and her text. (In my conception, these factors make the listening body what it is; they are part of the
history of the listening, reverberating body, and therefore part of the voice of the music it makes. But I do not here dwell on these matters—they are well enough dwelled upon elsewhere.) So I am cautious about the way I have learned from this journey of mine to reconceptualise text and world. Still, I offer it here, at the end of this road—my notion of what nature writing is, what it attempts, how it relates to—how it relates—particular places on earth. What I have concluded has helped me understand what I am trying to do here in the plateau, and how that work belongs to an artistic practice much older than contemporary theory, much older than the essay and the novel—the ancient human engagement with the rest of the living world, with the environment, conducted and articulated in song.

I am involved in a literary endeavour that is a kind of divining of the real world, and it is dependent on movement and the patterning of sound. I have come to an ecological imagination of the nature of places and the writing of them (at least one kind of writing of them); an understanding of places and texts—both—as dynamic entities, processes really, never finished and, because each is a community of vibrations and the writing is born in the vibrating place, each capable of being part of each other.

Rhythm section

'So much of my writing is a matter of rhythm,' said Barry Lopez. He was speaking to me last week, by phone, when I was deep in the long, long process of editing this study. I was in the workshop from which finished pieces of writing sometimes emerge. I was here in Lavender Bay, hammering and sawing. I was sitting and working my fingers into the right rhythms on these keys. I was standing and walking about, gathering ideas, letting my moving body form them right, and sitting again to work them into the body of this piece. I was sounding each phrase and sentence for aptness—literally speaking every word. And he was in Eugene, Oregon, about to go to bed, spent from a day's work at the typewriter, where his fifth draft of a new book is nearly done. So much of the work of writing depends on rhythm. The larger part of writing is not the first inspiration or apprehension; it is the sustained and repetitive work of editing and rewriting. Particularly performed at a typewriter, when every new draft is a complete sounding out of the work from beginning to end, rewriting is a rhythmic practice—and for that matter, a sonic one. We concentrate on the finished piece of prose and call it an artifact, the work; but most of writing is the work of the making, and much of that depends on a rhythm the writer hears and tries to catch more truly in draft after draft. The remaking itself is rhythmic—a dance to a music begun in a landscape.

The rewriting—which is most of what writing consists of—is a drawn-out recitation; it is manual labour; it is a rehearsal of all one's lines in an empty hall; it is a readying for performance; but it is, itself, part of a performance that began, if one is a writer of this literature of place, in a dynamic
space, outside somewhere, in a landscape. That place's rhythms, and one's own within it, are what you are trying to sustain. They are the meaning-laden music you are trying to make. You are working to make the writing ring true, sing true, move true, to that rhythm.

Believe it or not, sometimes one is still, months later at the keyboard, in the workshop, reverberating with the music of a place. The music, to be precise, of a moment—or even a lifetime of moments, within a dynamic space. That music, which one entered for a short time or a long, and which animated one's whole body and mind, is what moves you still—your body and your thoughts. It is that one wants to sing out, sing about, continue in one's work. The hardest work of writing and rewriting goes into keeping the rhythm, the pitch, the timbre, the dynamics, all of it, true to all those qualities of the landscape. That music stirred the desire to write. But I think it is a desire not to make a thing separate from the place but something that continues it, as a whistled melody of the heart of a symphony continues that larger scale music. But you must keep moving, for the place, like the work are there in the movement. In the making, and in the finished piece of prose—which, like the place, is never truly finished, for it is new and alive whenever it is read—much depends on the rhythm, the shuffle of pieces and the intervals between them.

Land has lyric. One may enter it; for a moment or a lifetime; one remembers a music and spends months and years composing a work that hears and resounds that music or that lyric truly. You use words, of course, for otherwise no one would understand the thoughts and stories the place woke in you; but you are making something that has its own sonic landscape, its own rhythm. When it is done, it will not be the landscape. It will be a work. But it will perhaps catch and continue the lyric qualities of the landscape and express them in its own sound-and-rhythmscape. You will be pleased if it seems to. For you would like your work to touch a reader as the place touched and moved you. You would like that; and you would like a reader to be stirred by your work and the place that started it moving; and you would like a reader to be carried away by your work not so much to your place as to one of their own, and for their relationship with their own part of the moving world to be reanimated by this song. But you do not stop to think about any of that often, either there in the landscape or here in some study, thrashing out a rhythm, dancing out a song, at the keyboard. You know that writing is good for such lyric reverberation of the land, for so much of writing is a matter of voice and interval and rise and fall, and only after that, and because of that, is it also a matter of signification. Mostly, though, you just try to stay in the song, to sustain the vibrating air that is the chord.

Writing as though you were making a work of nature demands your whole body and most of your mind, and large regions also of that intelligence which is not yours but which you can share in sometimes—the intelligence of a place—but only if you keep moving and keep listening and keep calling in response. Even in the fifth draft or the third, at the computer or on the typewriter, in
some motel room in Nebraska or in your ex-wife’s family’s villa in Tuscany or in the apartment at Lavender Bay or in the converted chicken shed, the converted toolshed, the upstairs room, the old container out the back of the house, you’ve got to keep moving to the rhythm. Even cutting and tampering, polishing and throwing bits away. Even if you are long gone from the place where the song began.

I am thinking of Jim Galvin, blackening sheet after sheet of paper with the meadow, first in a rage and speedy with coffee, then slower, more spaciously, in a gentler kind of weather the meadow also knows. I am thinking of Laurie Kutchins, waking with a word in her mouth that sings to her as the Wyoming space did and does still, and letting herself be changed by the word’s music, turning out a poem and then another from another word that arrives and then another, and spending years, perhaps, letting those poems dance and fight and lose their vivacity completely and yet somehow shape themselves into a sustained musical work of word and line almost worthy of the music of the first words and the places they sang of. I am thinking of Peter Matthiessen, writing in a journal on a mountain and then coming home and polishing and polishing and polishing at a typewriter (now a computer), fashioning something in which the original moment rings, working at it until he begins to make it worse, and only then stopping, still not happy. I am thinking of Henry Thoreau writing outside at his table by the pond and by night in the cabin or back in Concord, cutting up pieces of his journal to make a poem of that pond, writing new sentences in white heat after walking far in Concord or climbing Ktaadn, hoping to sound as though he were not a man writing at all, but a place going about its life. I am thinking of Terry Tempest Williams deleting more words than she makes at a laptop just like this one, eroding her words’ landscape until what remains is fit to hold the space in which she danced in the desert. And I am thinking of Barry Lopez in his study upstairs, looking down toward the river where the chord he lives to is always sustained, and typing up his fifth and then his sixth and final draft of Arctic Dreams, each of them one hundred and fifty thousand words long and each of them made, a brand new thing, born of the one that went before it, sounded out sometimes in silence but always sounded, its entire topography travelled in his mind, and stepped out, with four fingers at a typewriter, until the rhythm is right and the Arctic is there as he knew it in imagination and desire and in his body’s long encounter.

And I am thinking of me, rewriting that last paragraph, particularly that last sentence, over and again, adding a preposition, inserting a comma, deleting a clause, adding another, killing off entire lines, in order to get the rhythm right, the rhythm, in this case, of the work of these writers in their writing places, sounding and stepping and typing out landscapes. Or writing this, hoping my plateau and I are in it:

Here is a place I love; the blue plateau. The more I try to know it, the more it eludes me. But it houses me too; it stretches out around my days; it holds its weathered, angular and elegant form under the sky and in my mind and memory. When I imagine its sandstone body lying on the bedrock beneath, I feel
the creeks and rivers that cut it, that drain the plateau, that canyon, scour and articulate this place of stone, running in my chest, going where my thoughts go, laden with the sediment of good old sandstone country. We flow with the same blood, this country and I, though still we don't know each other well.

Tredinnick, 'Here' from The Blue Plateau, (unfinished manuscript)

The philosopher John Dewey had a theory, I have recently read, that 'meaning is built into text as it is composed, step by step. Meaning is a function of all the choices made and problems solved in the act of creation, not of prior intentions or after-the-fact conclusions' (Shulevitz, 2003, p 31). Great artists, thought Dewey, 'learn by their work as they proceed, to see and feel what had not been part of their original plan and purpose' (Dewey in ibid). Meaning is built into places, too, developed over time as they make themselves up to no original purpose. Patterns develop and in them we know the place for itself. The writer writes what arises out of immersing themselves in country, stepping into the great wild unravelling of local meaning in one place on earth.

The world is music

All this talk of places and their rhythms is not so very far-fetched. The more that science teaches us about matter and the more we understand about the actual earth, the solid ground, the more they seem like music.

'Matter,' writes Willigis Jager, for instance, 'is the domain of space in which the field is extremely dense.' And Einstein said that '[i]n the new physics, there is no place for both field and matter, because field is the only reality.' 'Morphogenic fields,' beyond the material realm, forces that cannot be seen or measured, and yet can be intuited from everything science knows about the way things work, 'shape and direct the entire animate and inanimate creation,' writes Rupert Sheldrake. To describe a reality of this kind, whose dynamism, mystery and amplitude strike us just occasionally, we are going to need a language more than merely rational. If reality is musical, poetic, spiritual, we are going to need words capable of the same articulation, freed from merely visual and rational moorings, as places. The writer David James Duncan, who quotes these others, writes in his recent essay 'Assailed: Improvisations in the Key of Cosmology,' '[t]he physical universe as we now understand it cannot be accurately described via static modes of thought, for that which enlivens all things is dynamic, imperceptible, and—I believe with all the science in my heart—belong' (Duncan, 2002, p 79). Duncan speaks just before that of the 'symphony of forces woven through galaxies, unseen fields, synapses, ecosystems, subatomic particles and cells.'

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90 I take this and the other quotes in this paragraph from an essay by David James Duncan, 'Assailed,' which appeared in Orion in summer 2002.
And he reminds us that each of us is ‘steeped in and assailed’ by that symphony of generative and defining forces, the hum of things here, ‘even as we “study it.”’

The more our scientists and philosophers consider matter, the more it seems we should be listening and moving to reality rather than trying to know it just by looking. ‘Matter,’ writes Fritjof Capra, ‘at the subatomic level, consists of energy patterns continually changing into one another—a continuous dance of energy,’ in which every atom is implicated and resonant in every other. And, since the same musical reality holds in an ecosystem within rocks and animals, and among all the parts that make up a whole we call a place, then we might understand a place best by recalling that each separate part is implicated and sounded out in each other. As in a vibrating string, we think we hear one note, but we hear an entire chord of overtone and undertone. It is possible to intuit the whole from an experience had with some of the parts.

‘To unify recent insights in physics and in the life sciences,’ Fritjof Capra continues ‘into a coherent description of reality, a conceptual shift from structure to rhythm seems to be extremely useful. Rhythmic patterns appear throughout the universe, from the very small to the very large. Atoms are patterns of probability waves, molecules are vibrating structures, and living organisms manifest multiple, interdependent patterns of fluctuations. Plants, animals, and human beings undergo cycles of activity and rest, and all their physiological functions oscillate in rhythms of various periodicities. The components of ecosystems are interlinked through cyclical exchanges of matter and energy, and the planet as a whole has its rhythms and recurrences as it spins around its axis and moves around the sun.’ He goes on,

‘It has been said since ancient times that the nature of reality is much closer to music than to a machine, and this is confirmed by many discoveries in modern science. The essence of a melody does not lie in its notes; it lies in the relationships between the notes, in the intervals, frequencies, and rhythms. When a string is set vibrating we hear not only a single tone but also its overtones—an entire scale is sounded. Thus each note involves all the others, just as each sub-atomic particle involves all the others, according to current ideas in particle physics.

—Capra, foreword to Ernst Berendt’s Nada Brahma: Music and the Landscape of Consciousness, 1987, pp xi–xii

The world is not a set of forms standing discrete, working as the parts of a machine. The world is a dance of matter and energy, a network of relationships, ‘intrinsically dynamic’ (Capra in ibid, p xi). It is going to need to be apprehended rhythmically if it is going to be understood and expressed in its essence. The lifeworld of a place is an impossibly elaborate musical form. But the whole may be apprehended, at least a little, in a lyric engagement with a few parts, in the way that a whole chord is actually heard in the one plucked note, a whole symphony is suggested by a single chord or musical phrase. Imagine a writer standing in—no, moving through—a place. She takes part in
that symphony, even though she apprehends only snatches of it—the odd fragment of music James Galvin alludes to. Energy passes to and fro. Intervals rise and pass between witness and place, between footfalls, between breaths, on soundwave and wind. Nothing is still in these moments, in this place, in the relationship of human and land. The nature of this shared dance of form and energy moves her, it moves him, energetically, imaginatively, at the level of the physiology of hearing, the pattern of brain activity, the imprint it registers in memory and body cell. By the process of composition I have described—all of it about movement and the elaboration of sound patterns, about listening and voicing, a dynamic process connected in rhythm and sound if not in time to the moment (or the lifetime) inside that dynamic sphere, a place—the writer speaks about and relates something of that lyric encounter, yes; but equally what she does is try to catch and carry in her phrasing, in the quality of the intervals between her syllables and words, her sentences and paragraphs, a quality of tone and rhythm, a quality of music, like that she knew in that place, suggestive of the complex musical form she guessed at from the fragments she heard, an order with its rhythms of geological and microscopic motion, its human and animal and vegetable tempi, all enfolded and singing together.

One wants echoes of the place’s music—the dance of energies and intervals it performs—to resonate in the sounds one’s writing makes—the dance of energies and intervals it performs. What you write is just a bunch of individual notes and the intervals between them, not amounting to a melody or a chord, yet partaking of their nature; it composes a fragmented and less than fully musical form. And yet, since words and phrases sound, since typescript too is a dance of restless particles of matter, some resonance of the place and the place encounter—of the chord at the centre of the lifeworld of that moment or lifetime in the land—may reach the reader. In that voice of the work the tenor, the vibration, an echo of the full musical form of the landscape to which the writer gave herself, may reach a reader. For, though the writer heard only snatches of it, each of those pieces is alive with, and suggestive of, the whole song and dance that is the place. And so is each of fragments of her own lyric narrative. In them a reader may hear, may experience the nature of, the place, may discern its large and complex musical form.

I have come to imagine the work of the nature writer—my own work, for instance, or Barry Lopez’s or Jim Galvin’s, or any of these writers here—as something like the instrument’s response to music played upon it. Let’s imagine a cello. Let’s imagine the sound of that cello playing the first movement of the first of Bach’s ‘Suites for Unaccompanied Cello.’ There is a score; a player interprets it as music and translates that into movements of his right hand holding a bow, pulling and pushing it across tuned strings; and into movements of his left hand, along those same strings high up on the neck of the instrument, and of his wrist, vibrating to give the sounds colour and shape. The strings vibrate—their part in this dance. But it is not their vibrations we hear—not mostly, anyway—for they make little sound that is audible. A bridge, over which the strings run, carries those vibrations to the wooden and air-filled chamber of the instrument, held between the
knees of the player, and it is the vibration of those timbers and the air they cradle that reaches
us as this music. It is resonance that we hear. It is the response of the instrument’s body to the
music that reaches it, the patterned intervals between notes. Where is the music? Where is the
entity we call the suite? In the score, itself perfectly mute? Is it in the player’s imagination of the
music written in those notes? Is it in the movements his body makes in response? Is it in the
strings’ vibration? Is it in the sawing of the horsehair bow across the metal strings, setting them
in motion? Is it in the bridge, or the timbers or the air within the cello’s body or the air into
which its vibrations leap, setting it in motion? Is it in the vibrations of the listener’s ear drum
and the pattern of waves that reaches the brain and registers as Bach’s cello suites? It is in all
of them, I guess, and beyond all of them. It is something all these participants know and share.

In the same way, I imagine a place playing upon a writer, its lyric witness. It carries—that
music read in the place’s forms, felt as the place’s dynamics and transcribed into phrases and the
movements of body and mind necessary to make them—all the way through the witness’s body and
imagination, through all the rhythmic work of composition, into word and phrase and entire work,
which is the resonance, replete with the lifestory and voice of the witness, to the reader. Each
time the work is read is a new performance of the work. It plays again, sings again, and will be
different according to the mood of the reader, the tone of the space in which she perceives it.
And so the place goes on; it surrounds and includes a reader, as Bach’s first cello suite surrounds
me now, playing out of speakers in the living room.

And so much of it depends upon rhythm.

_The vast improvisation and all that jazz_

The wild we write is the music of the place. It is the theme upon which the place is a ‘vast
improvisation’ (Rothenberg, 2002, p 91), and it includes—that music—the way we were moved, the
way we moved, there. To hear it one must apprehend the world as though the nature of the place
ran through one, and one could make out its pattern, that theme, its wild music. Just now and
then—a reward for attention, perhaps—one can perceive it, and from somewhere inside the space
of that experience come words, shaped by the same ‘morphogenic’ forces that find expression in
the other forms there present; and those words that come or which you hammer out and find in
editing, in the erosion of your works’ larger landscape, are, now and then, expressive of the local
music in which they participate over and over, in your memory. Writing beyond reason, to use
Duncan’s phrase, yet not without logic, perceiving what cannot quite be perceived; performing
with the music that plays in a place’s life and history; practising awareness of the many lives and
deaths, slow and fast, articulated in the space of this place—this is what it takes to write the wild,
to imagine the world as it is.
That which is not merely literal and visible, corporeal, in my writing may point to, may even resonate with, that which is not merely literal, visible, corporeal in the land. The music of the one may allude to and resemble the music of the other. The writing's music, child of the place and of the writer's mind within it, may sound out the place's ecology, its wild order.

It is the dynamic space of the landscape that I reach for in imagination and words—and try to repeat in the nature of the dynamic space created by my word’s patterns of sound and shape, their meaning, their voice’s chant. The soundscape of the work, in the ways I have suggested here, may awaken an experience of the ecology, the amplitude, the complex music of the actual landscape; and it may for a time include the reader in that place.

But why write, then, and not sing or strum or dance?

I write rather than make music on an oboe or a sheet of manuscript paper, because I want not just to make sound, elaborate a local amplitude, join the vast improvisation a place plays; I write because I want to converse in language with other men and women and children. I want to talk, not just to sound; I want to make a little sense of places for myself and for others. I want to engage with the human lives at play in places, and with the human meanings one might discover and elaborate from an encounter with the rest of nature in a place on earth. I want even to persuade and influence readers toward a new relationship with country, in a way that only words can do.

But I know that a story well told and remembered, is a story with its own wild music. And I know now, too, that if I am to honour the place and join it through the act of writing, I will need to find my words’ music in the music of a place. I want to play along with the ‘vast improvisation’ that is this place or that. I want to ‘get out there and jam, to play with the world and let the world play with’ me (ibid, p 99). And I want my writing to join my readers in the music of the world and to make them yearn to go out there and jam with it too. David Rothenberg suggests that the best music of this kind—and I would like to think the same is true of the best writing—can change the way we hear nature, define nature, and then live in nature (ibid, p 97). He writes, '[i]f we jam with the world with the same intelligence and awareness as a skilled musician, we stand a chance of learning a way into the great improvised complexity of the natural world, a concert so immense and endless that we may never be humble enough to accept our role in it' (ibid).

Where that immense symphony becomes discernible, joinable, grounded, is in one place on earth. One must join the music somewhere. The place I choose is the Blue Plateau; Galvin chooses the meadow; Williams the red desert—or those places choose us. Some places seem to match our body’s natural resonance. Some writers choose many—they travel and write, like Lopez and Matthiessen. Some writers are not where they want to be, like Kutchins, or they write in a place that is severed from the place about which they write. A remembered place can of course sound in our prose. Music stays with us.
Metaphor and meaning

When I speak here of music, listening, rhythm and so on, I am using, as I say, metaphors. Witness is not just a matter of listening to soundscapes. I mean a kind of apprehension, such as I have described here and called lyric apprehension. Listening is a better metaphor for that than seeing. When I speak of the rhythmic qualities, the music, of places, I do not mean just the sounds they make, though I mean especially those elements. I mean the order that is implied by the visible and invisible, present and past, aspects of a landscape: that which is not merely literal about it. By rhythm I mean patterned intervals and the forms between which they run. I mean the pattern of relationships at play in the landscape somewhere and similarly at play in a text.

What I have spoken of here—the understanding I have come to in Writing the Wild of lyric nature writing as an act of witness and a rhythmic expression of—is one that would, of course, occur to a man such as me. I have sung, not well but with joy, in a motet for forty voices written by Thomas Tallis in the middle of the sixteenth century. I was one of forty individual parts—think about the complexity of such a piece of music—all of us singing something different, all of us singing the same piece of music, each of our parts making conjoined intervals that comprised 'Spem in alium.' I used to play the cello. My old instrument stands in the corner of the living room in Karoomba, resting against the hardwood of these walls and silently recalling my childhood, singing out my calling to resonate the music of the world, and declaring my lyric disposition. I am, as you see, a man of lyric leaning. And you must take account of that in reading what I have written here. I know what it means and how it feels—and I know there is no difference between the feeling and the meaning in the case of music—to work fingers hard up and down metal strings, and bow them with my right hand and fill a room with a thing we call music. I am a man who knows the world through song—both hearing and listening, and both of them together, as in the Tallis motet, as in what we do when we write a place we know. And so I am moved by writing of the world that engages with it in a similar way. Lyric prose—not ornate and pretty or sentimental or virtuosic—moves me, and it suggests landscapes. And so I have chosen these six writers. For they write such prose. They understand places and the writing process, as I have come to, as a lyric enterprise, though not only that, and not in exactly the same way. Perhaps all I have shown here is that some writers engage with landscape lyrically. And that I, at least, am moved by that writing, and feel in it the landscapes it alludes to.

But, as you see, there are many, increasingly among the scientists, who understand the world musically. There have always been many among the philosophers (the ancients with their idea of the music of the spheres along with the modern phenomenologists) and many among the poets and some of the nature writers themselves who have felt that reality was at its heart musical. It is only in the past two hundred years or so that dominant western culture has stopped listening to reality and singing it. In any event, a man like me, seeking an understanding of what I am doing, a
writer such as I, stirred by landscapes, wanting to write them and wondering how I might allow them to reach my readers, encounters the argument of literary theorists that a divide rises between a text and a world, between cultural artifacts and nonhuman forms, between culture and nature, indeed; I am unconvinced of this claim, but stumped by it for a while; and then in my journeying for answers among these writers of place, their places and their writing, in my reading of their works and of some other works on music and literary theory, evolutionary theory and phenomenology, I encounter descriptions of reality and of composition that emphasise not the structures and forms of the two, but their ineffable and dynamic character, which is a lot like music and its making. I am compelled by such an understanding of land and writing—I would be, wouldn't I?

But I sense in this larger, intrinsically ecological, way of conceiving of place and text, a means of crossing the great divide between them, of reconciling in theory two parts that have never in reality been split. In the rhythmic, tonal, musical quality a place and a piece of prose stirred by it may share I find a way of understanding how it is that a piece of nature writing may represent that stretch of country; how it is that an essay that is lyric may catch and carry the wild lyric of a place. Through what amounts, I guess, to a reimagining of place and text as dynamic processes made of rhythmic relations, I have come to understand how a text may, by an activity in words, stir a reader as though it were a stretch of country, specifically this stretch of country; I see why it matters to listen and witness even what one cannot see, and I see how a written work might be understood as a sustained enactment of such a listening. All writing sounds; some writing has always been engaged in a lyric enterprise. Such an enterprise may catch the lyric of the country it witnesses.

Music and adéquation

Rhythm, music, lyric apprehension—these elements of place and the writing process help me draw conclusions about the questions I carried with me in my pocket on this phenomenological pilgrimage among places and their writers. It is through its lyric qualities, its dance of forms and sounds, through its rhythmic devices and the nature of its own dynamic space that a work of words may adéquate the real world of a place, not replicating it, yet continuing it, in a sense, and putting a reader, as Buell puts it (Buell, 1995, p. 97), 'in touch' with that place. And so I would offer these answers to the ten questions I posed in part one.

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91 These are the ten questions I pose in chapter two, 'Back to the places themselves,' p 36.
Does a place manifest texts as it manifests trees? A place may manifest texts not quite as directly as it manifests trees, perhaps, yet it may give rise to them through the agency of a writer attentive to a place’s poetics, its metrics and rhythms. Such a writer may work hard to write so that those qualities inhere in her prose; or she may simply write, but being steeped in her landscape, a participant in its dynamic space, she will write with its ineffable qualities embedded in her sentence structures, her words and phrasings. If this writer enters into the kind of relationship with place that I have called lyric, then she will be writing out of an encounter with country, in the voice of the interval that awoke between her and that country. A text of that kind may carry the note of the place-as-it-found-her; of the lifeworld of that encountered place. For a text is not best understood as a material thing, a form like a tree. It is a singing, a musical form, as well as a meaning-making and artifactual one. A place, too, is a realm of energies and musical intervals. It may give rise to a work through the process of a writer’s attention to dynamic qualities in the place, preserved through the process of the work’s making and made eloquent in the work. And so, by act of lyric engagement and/or by virtue of the immersion of a person in the life of the place, a place may be said to give rise to a text, though never, of course, without the participation of a writer, and usually not without his or her active engagement in a practice of lyric engagement, of which some self-forgetting is a part; and some conscious fabrication of one’s words’ music is another part.

Manifest may be too strong a word. It gives too much agency to a place. Looked at from enough distance, however, we might see a particular work or a class of works as representative of their bioregion or habitat in the same way that a certain grass or species of bird is, and for the same reason. It is a form that has, not without volition, adapted itself over time to the nature of the place. In the case of a piece of writing, the adaptations will be largely matters of voice, for the reasons I have elaborated. We speak of Western writing, in American literature, in this way. To give all the responsibility to culture for such adaptations is to forget that cultures too are adaptations to place. Writing such as James Galvin’s, Terry Tempest Williams and Laurie Kutchins’ is clearly, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, adapted to and manifested by the West.

Can our notion of authorship of works of literature (of place) be extended beyond the writer to the land out of which they work? In just this way I think that authorship can be understood as extending beyond the author's self to the land that has helped make him who he is, or which his writing concerns. None of us is finished at the skin or at the edge of our culture's reach. Natural history shapes us all, particularly those of us with a lyric disposition and a feeling for landscapes. In a lyric evocation, a kind of dance with the place, the voice may be best understood of that of the encounter, made as much by the sonic qualities of the place as by its writer's response.

What influence does the natural history of the writer and the writing have on the nature of the prose? A writer will be influenced by his or her natural history in many ways. I have explored in each of my chapters the ways in which I think a writer's work may be akin to his or her native ground. How this happens is through a practice of surrender and listening to a place; and a perpetuation of its dynamic qualities in your work. The ways the place is put together geologically, the way its seasons come and go, the power of its winds, the nature of its
light, its aridity or wetness, its storminess or calm, the ways and colours and voices of its birds and animals, the openness or closeness of its space—matters like these will have their effects in the structure of a writer’s prose, its spaciousness or density, its lightness or shade, its angularity or curvature, its fluency or discontinuity. These are matters chiefly of the quality of the amplitude of a place, the characteristic note of its dynamic space; and of the amplitude expressed in the tone and rhythms of the writing. Again, a place gets into a man or a woman and their writing, by the accident of their long presence somewhere, by their particularly porousness to country (and some of us are more open to the influence of country, as we are more open to the impact of ideas or other people’s needs than others); and it may be deepened by a practice of lyric attention. Here is how Aldo Leopold spoke of it, using the metaphor of the song of the place:

The song of the river ordinarily means the tune that waters play on rock, root and rapid. This song of the waters is audible to every ear, but there is other music in these hills, by no means audible to all. To hear even a few notes of it you must first live here for a long time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers. Then on a still night, when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it—a vast, pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries.

—Leopold, 'Round River,' quoted in David James Duncan, 'Assailed,' Orion, summer 2002, p. 79

To write that song as it is inscribed in and sung by that place, one will need a language capable of music; a writer will need to listen to his or her prose for a sound and shape that does justice to what he or she apprehended by that river. Here is John Haines on the same theme:

I think that there is a spirit of place, a presence asking to be expressed; and sometimes when we are lucky as writers, and quiet in a way few of us want to be anymore, a voice enters our own, becomes mingled with it, and we speak with a force and clarity not otherwise heard.


Do writers of land-oriented works of the kind I have in mind here aim to make a truthful impression or rendering of a place? And if so, how may a work of signs, a work in words, be said to attempt or achieve that? Through its musical qualities, for instance, the pattern and quality of its sounds, through the forms it uses, through the quality of the imagined space it shapes in a reader’s mind, or just through the images it conjures? All the writers I have studied here know that the task of writing well so that the landscape, and one’s relationship with it, expresses itself, so that its ‘coherence’ is preserved and suggested in your work, involves finding a language that is animated and carried forward, that is arranged by more than just the rules of grammar and the demands of logic, the orderliness of exposition or narration. For those devices for organising thought will not allow the prose to sing or to move with vibrations at play in the land. For landscape lyric you will need rhythm, cadence, texture, discord,
shapeliness, tone, compression of ideas, excursions into particularity, avoidance of long exposition. You will need to listen to your writing. You will need to erode it until its own amplitude is like that of the place where the story took place—the story that is the land in one of its moments, or of what took place in it. You will need to hammer and sand and feel your work's topography with finger and mind. You will have to inhabit the music it makes by sounding it out to yourself and asking if it rings true to the country. You will need, perhaps, to break up your writing into fragments large and small and insert line breaks so that you slow time and allow the music of your writing to resound and echo.

These are the devices of the witness of place. They are lyric devices. This is why the lyric essay suits the nature writer so well. It is apt for continuing the land's lyric qualities.

- *Can a text work on the body and mind of a reader in the same manner, with the same vernacular force, as the land, as Whitman hoped; specifically, like the landscape it is written out of or refers to? Can prose shape a space akin to the blue plateau, the red desert or the forest's edge? It is in these ways, through these lyric devices, through a fight with words, a drunken dance and earnest battle, that a writer may shape a prose that affects a reader not just in the ideas it carries and the images it uses but in its poetic, its topography, its voice, its rhythms, its structure—that is, the way its clusters of patterned sound, are grouped and strung together. Lyric writing aims precisely to affect a reader through the nature of the shapes of sound its sentences make, the timbre made by the intervals between its words, its phrases, its sentences, its paragraphs. The qualities of a work that are not necessary for the making of sense and meaning, that are there for tone, texture, and the association certain notes and musical phrases have—these are the ways in which a work can affect a reader as the land affects a wanderer in it.*

- *Does a writer aim to write, in some sense, in the voice of the place? Might that happen? Might a work even speak in the language of the place, without the author's intention? Is the writing a kind of listening, which a reader overhear? The writer does not aim to give voice to a place but to listen to a place and respond as the cello responds, as the dancer responds, as the member of the choir responds to a heard music. The writing, as I have said, is enacted listening, a continuation of rhythm felt and harmony intuited in a dynamic space. This may happen without the author's intention, but it is unlikely to occur unless a writer knows, as these six writers know, that presence and attention, falling into tempo are required in the landscape and in the long labour of composition and editing after.*

- *In what ways might a text of place be said to resemble the place in which it is born, to which it is oriented? Can a work of words—intentionally or inadvertently—express a place (as well as expressing its author)? A work of words may resemble the place it is born and, so, express it in its lyric qualities, tuned either inadvertently or out of sustained discipline to that place. Equally, a place may be silent in a work, even where the listening has been sustained and deliberate, if a writer's habits of sentence structure and word choice are fixed or directed by a powerful aesthetic such as the pastoral, or by a literature made in a landscape that is ordered by a different music entirely than the one the writer attempts to describe. This has happened in Australia, as I have*
described, because of the gulf that yawned between an English countrysided aesthetic and the sclerophyll character of these geographies.

- **Is it possible for a text to express or sing the nature of a place; or does a text, at best, just point to, just describe, a place?** Through its lyric qualities a text, even of prose, may do more than point at a landscape. It may resonate with it.

- ** Might we understand a piece of prose as a translation into human language of the nature of a place; or perhaps a transcription of its music (its soundscape and its notional music, its tone and energetic nature) into signs making music as well as sense to humans?** In just the way I have described above, a work—a lyric essay or a poem or a place-oriented fiction such as Cormac McCarthy writes—may be understood as a transcription into musical language of the lyric of a piece of country. It may be also an articulation of ideas that arose there and wisdoms the writer found embodied there. But it may also perpetuate a dynamic reality through the character of its own singing.

A woman in a class told me recently that, when she was a girl in the south island of New Zealand, she used to lie in the grass and look up at the range of snow-headed mountains beyond the property her parents farmed; and she used to wonder whether each of those peaks could be drawn as a note on piece of manuscript paper. Whether each peak and the melody that they made together in her mind could be scored. Each summit with its own length and dynamic, its own pitch and tone; strung together as a tune—this is what she remembers imagining fifty years ago on the grass in Timaru. The mountains as a musical score against the sky, waiting to be transposed on paper and played. That's what that child thought. The child is now a woman in her sixties, a grandmother herself to children as young as that girl was when she heard the alps play. She can hardly remember how to play piano; but she can remember the sound of those mountains. It struck me as a nice image for the way a writer engages with country and working to utter something that will transcribe the musical quality of the play of its forms.

For us—as writers and as human beings—to express the wild music of places and allow ourselves and our readers to feel they could belong in its amplitude, we need to give the local soundscape what David Rothenberg calls 'a human tinge.' Story does this. Story—particularly, I think, the true stories lyric essays tell—transcribe places' music into a human register. Story makes them human; it gives the music forms we can put in our mouth and turn over in our minds and imagine inhabiting. Essay without lyric, too crowded with thought, unshaped by sound, will stifle the larger musical—the wild—reality of a place. A writer needs to leave enough space for the music to play (Rothenberg, 2003, p 164). So that writer will need the lyric elements and devices I have just talked about in her telling of a landscape-based story. A reader needs the silences too, in order to hear the space in which they are invited to dwell for the length of the narrative. These things are what the lyric essay does. It transcribes the music of a moment, an episode or a landscape; it makes it human; it invites its music into its spaces.
What power do texts have to evoke a place; and if so, by what means does that evocation occur? Texts may evoke places in a reader's mind by many means, including giving us information about them and describing them. But to evoke really means to call up—and to do this a piece of writing must be made through a discipline of lyric attention to that place, such as I have described in this conclusion, such as all these six writers practice. That process has a lot to do with rhythm.

According to this musical reimagining of places and works, I can explain why it is that some pieces of writing ring true to country and some do not; why, for instance, I feel the absence of country in much white Australian place writing. Some writers have listened and some have not, for, though writing will always sound, it will only sound with the quality of the place it attends to if the writer worked hard to listen, to remember in his body and mind the nature of a place's own intervals and to work them into his phrasing. It is possible, of course, to go to a landscape, but write to a music played not there but in your literature's mother country, a place of very different musics. For a writer is not the body of a cello. A writer can choose how to respond to the vibrations she feels; how to dispose herself toward a landscape; how to make her words sound. She can choose to try to express country or to express the sound of ideas she brought to country, pastoral notions, for instance, brought there out of the city, out of her reading, out of the history of the literature she thinks she writes.

All this speaks to me because I am, I have discovered in this search, a man of lyric disposition. I know there will be men and women of a more narrative cast of mind who will remain unconvinced by this conception of the world, of the writer's engagement with it, and of the rhythmic process of expression. There will be those who cannot easily imagine places as lively spaces, never finished, not merely communities of form, nor again merely dependent, in my text, on my construction of them. There will be those for whom nature stays mute. There will be those who cannot imagine a piece of writing as a dynamic process, a dance of sounds, never finished, just like a place. Those who are not persuaded must find a way of responding not just to this writer of lyric disposition, but also to the findings of quantum physics, to the emerging understanding of how the real world works and how we relate to it in life and text; they must continue to forget the aural quality of written language; they must continue to understand perception mostly as seeing and text as silent assemblages of signs.

Lyrics, line and sentence

Lyric writing, as the Greeks first spoke of it, was made to be sung to the accompaniment of the lyre. It was to be sung. Music—matters of rhythm, melody, rhyme; patterned sound, in other words—ordered it, and accompanied it. The lyric mode in poetry and prose has come to mean something else musical—there is a lyric point of view, or disposition, as Ellen Bryant Voigt describes it, and it is characterised by listening to the world. The writer in the lyric mode is
witnessing the world and allowing themselves to be moved. They become, in a sense, the lyre, and let their strings be played. The work is the song that arises. They allow themselves to be moved, and the work expresses, in patterned sound, meaning something, the way in which they were moved, set in motion, changed. This is what witness—to use Galvin’s term, or listening, to use Kutchins’—means. The writer opens themselves up to what Rilke called ‘the gust in the god,’ the wind, the place-in-itself, its shifting amplitude. They are changed. Their work expresses that change—its source, its nature.

The lyric work, then, is the way the place sounds through the body and life and lyric labour of a witness, who is played, as it were, by a place.

So it is in the work of a writer who engages lyrically with a place that we are likely to find the place expressed—not just because the writer is concerned to shape a musical text fit to accompany a place, but because of the lyric attention, this witness and avid listening, that the writer has practised on the ground. It will be not only in lyric poems and lyric essays that places find expression, musical adi Quation; it will be in works that are made out of such an imaginative engagement with the world, perhaps however they are expressed.

But I have a feeling, as I have argued here, that prose, in particular lyric essays, may be most apt for the expression of country. A paragraph is more like a stretch of country than a stanza. The paragraph is made of sentences, clusters of phrases and clauses of uneven length, patterned into sentences and elaborated into that unit, the paragraph, a whole of a certain kind. The stanza is made of lines broken by the poet to articulate a particular meter, which will be essentially an articulation, therefore, made in his or her voice. The poet makes it what they want it to be, and it speaks of them in their voice. The rhythm of a sentence—and then of a paragraph made of sentences—owes less to the writer’s intention; it is not composed to a metronome beat. A sentence is made, if it is part of the making of a lyric essay, with an ear for its musical shape, but finally it is ordered by no scheme of man or art—by no prosodic design, I mean, and not merely by grammar and logic. Its rhythms will be, like speech and song, irregular; its patterns of sound will not be repetitive and evenly paced. They will be ‘a succession of irregular sonic shapes’ (Jourdain, 1998, p 123). The sentence will be right when it is not only grammatically sound and made of words that signify what the author means to say; it will be settled only when, for its author, it rings true to a thought and a time and a moment. It will be worked and reworked until its wild and irregular music seems apt for the fragment of country, the piece of a larger experience, the few steps of this dance, for this element of the larger pattern of the story, of the argument, that the writer wishes to express. Sentences accrete in musical fragments, making and conforming to, their own music. So, John D'Agata has written, do lyric essays. And so, I have argued, do places. The music of places is wild, like that of a lyric sentence—patterned, rhythmic, but irregular and unpredictable; self-sustaining, lively; wild; obedient to patterns of structure that are organic somehow, not merely
personal or human or instrumental. The wild order of the sentence is discovered, I have argued following Dewey's lead, in the work of its creation—rhythmic work of mind and body, the interplay of phrasing; song; dance. It makes itself up as it finds and manifests its structure. It invents itself entirely, from no template except the speech patterns of the author—and all that makes that so. Prose has a music wilder than poetry. The sentence is less orderly, more various, more changeful and irregular than the line. Its music is, like a place's, more full of holes, less orchestrated and arranged than the music of the line. And so, the lyric sentence, in its wildness, may be better at catching the lyric of country, in its wildness, than the poetic line.

I have written this paragraph after talking over breakfast with the poet Martin Harrison. I am making play with a thought of his, a conversation we shared. The poetic line, because it is ordered according to a poet's musical scheme, because it is given beat, expresses 'an individuated human voice;' much more, he suggested, than the looser rhythms (the phrasing) of the prose sentence.\(^*\) For just that reason, he suggested out loud—comparing a short-lined stanza of Jim Galvin's poem 'Old Men on the Courthouse Lawn, Murray, Kentucky' to a stanza of Galvin's poem 'Stringers for the Bridge' written in paragraph form—perhaps prose may be better at expressing that which is not merely the writer's voice, its cadence. The sentence may belong more, if that is what it addresses, to the country and the witness's encounter with it. It may speak in the middle voice. Neither Harrison nor I would want to push this argument too far. The point is not that a poem will not serve country well; but that, as few have suggested, a certain kind of shapely prose may do it as well, if not, for these particular reasons, better. As Thoreau wished to speak a word for wildness, since society had plenty of defenders, I wish to speak a word for the wildness of the lyric essay, for the sentence, since the line has so many defenders.

*The ecology of imagination*

I have asserted, then, that—if it is to catch the true nature of reality in the place it concerns, if it is to understand things as the land might, just there—narrative needs to be an enterprise of lyric apprehension. It must speak in the middle voice in the lyric mode to do the job that lies at the heart of the literature of place—reanimating the world for its readers. It writes out of the heart of an encounter with the world in the tone and rhythm of that encounter. But there are many ways, of course, to turn to country in words; and many readers are more taken than I am with plainer, essentially narrative accounts, written, it seems to me, about the place and about the writer in that place—but not out of the interval between them. Maybe all I have done is

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\(^*\) It is, I should note, however, to phrasing, to the more organic rhythms, the 'succession of irregular sonic shapes' (as opposed to the regular beats called meter), that musicologists give the name 'voice,' according to Robert Jourdain, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*, 1998, p 123.
confirmed a bias toward the lyric mode of standing present. Still my bias goes a fair way back, and starts, if not earlier, with Thoreau at Walden Pond.

I have wanted to find a way of understanding the claims of the writers I’ve studied here, and of many others in this literature (and other literatures and cultures), that one may make a lyric account of nature, in which a place may speak. All I may have done, perhaps, is continue a search as old as Henry David Thoreau’s, renewed by the ecocritics, for a better understanding of the relationship between nature-oriented writing, indeed all writing, and nature herself. For writing and places are large and mysterious things. They will elude all our attempts to pin them down and say that we have understood them fully.

But I hope I have shown how it is possible and helpful to reimagine landscapes as dynamic spaces and works of writing—all works of words, but lyric works in particular—as exercises in sustained attention, rhythmic composition of patterned sounds worthy of what they listen for. Understanding places and works rhythmically allows the possibility of an intimate, reciprocal and continuous relationship between a piece of country and a piece of prose. I hope, too, that I have been able to show that reading texts, particularly landscape-oriented texts, as geographies, as ecologies, enriches a reading of them, animates them even, and finds more of their true nature; and that taking account of nature, of specific natural histories in which works of words are located, enhances one’s understanding of them.

I have proposed that nature writing is a practice of ecological imagination. But I have also, I notice, practised a kind of ecological imagination myself. Not only have I reimagined and spoken of places as dynamic musical forms, never done, always composing themselves out of the impossibly varied and complex set of beings and energies at dance somewhere, I have also reimagined texts, the writing process and authorship ecologically. I have come to understand writing, authorship, even self, as adaptations to, responses to, environment, as manifestations of a dance of interrelationships between a body and mind (the author’s) and the body and mind of the country. Not only this, but always also this. A text—this essay, that book, this poem—is an ecology of interrelated sound and rhythm, making music and making meaning out of the process of its long elaboration and even then going on composing itself at every reading. As Paul Carter suggests, a text may be understood as a performance—the continuing rhythmic expression of the writer’s relationship with a dynamic space. And in the same way, a place may be an ongoing, fragmentary, vibrant performance, never still, and never done. Place and text, for a time, shape the other and are part of the same musical reality.

And so I have imagined not only places and texts but also the relationship between them ecologically. Writing is a sustained and dynamic, if truncated, engagement with and within a musical order, the land as it is here. The author’s self is an identity not finished at the skin or
the ego, shaped by what it shapes in its imagination, not discontinuous with the place(s) where it knows itself best; and, moreover, made and remade daily out of its dance with the order of reality in the land that the nature writer wanders and wonders in. I have imagined cultures as caused and shaped by what is not merely cultural, writer’s minds and ways of being touched and fashioned by what is not merely personal or cultural or social, and works of words as the products not just of individual cognitive processes, nor even of individual biologies but of a complex of interrelationships including one writer’s body and mind, and the lives and energies in which he or she works.

Places make themselves up, over and over, in the way they play, the way the relationships of form and energy express themselves just here. Rothenberg calls this, as I have shown, improvisation on a theme. For there is always a theme, it seems, a coherence and identity. Works of words make themselves up, find their form and make meaning, too, in the process of their composition, in the labour of question and answer, of making sense and making patterned sounds that ring true to that sense. In this way, texts and places are most similar; and because of the dynamic reality of both, a text that engages with a place may resonate it in the structure of its becoming, in its improvisations on the place’s theme.

To the extent that writing is a purposive, artifact-making enterprise—which it also is—I have shown, I hope, how much of the work of fabrication, stylisation and artifice is about movement and music, in its processes and in its purposes. Just because a thing is made by a man or woman who puts all of her skill into making it a work of art does not mean it does not carry in its structure and nature the very essence of a world beyond the author’s skin—in the case of a piece of nature writing, the place she is trying to witness. Indeed, as Thoreau has argued, also the critic Lawrence Buell and others, it may be through precisely those elements of a work—its most individual, human and artificial—that it might best adequately a place and its effect upon the writer. Writerly devices need not always be a kind of falsification of the world, nor are they merely explicable as self-expression. Much depends, as both theorists and ecological writers like Lopez agree, on the intention of the writer, the way he approaches the world and the craft of his writing. As Campbell reminds us, both theorists and ecologists accept that each of us experiences the world through a filter formed of predisposition, personality type, gender and intention (Campbell, 1989, pp 128–29). The world is not the same to all of us; it depends on how we approach land and it depends on who we are. If a writer goes somewhere to discern something of the identity of a landscape and then to speak of that—to let it speak to others as it spoke to him—then perhaps something of its nature may speak. Or, at least, what his writing expresses will be the nature of how that place stirred him—the place-as-he-experienced-it. If she manages not to turn the land into an object of her gaze, merely, a thing separate from her entirely, then she may be able to catch its nature in her work. If he goes to land, on the other hand, disposed to extract from it something he can use
in order to make a story, then what he finds will most likely sound in his writing like a silent object, an artifact put to use in a narrative.

The real world and the lyric essay

But here we reach the dispute between most theorists of literature and most writers of nature—incapable, perhaps, of resolution. The nature writer attributes to the land an authority and identity that is quite independent, finally, of any perception of it. The theorist is equally convinced that nothing is true, independent of the mind that asserted it was so (ibid, pp 129-30).

'What is it we witness,' I asked at the start of this inquiry, 'and how?' Even to call it witness is to presume the existence of an independent reality. Is there a 'real world' as James Galvin's writing seems to suggest, as Lopez's writing argues, as indeed all these writers I have studied, one way or another, would assert, that is there even when our backs are turned? And can any of us ever know that reality free of our interpreting reflex? For that, to answer my question, is what I think we try to witness. And we try to do it by casting our imaginations out into the landscape and understanding it as the concatenation of points of view and dynamic relationships it is, most of which escape my notice but will be hinted at in what I do notice. We try to do it by imagining a moment or a lifetime somewhere, as though we could set our human nature aside for a moment.

We try to view reality from within a place, as though we were not merely one discrete human being, bearing witness. That is, perhaps, never entirely possible. We hear what we are capable of hearing, what we are disposed by our own mind and body's nature to discern and resonate with.

But we sense that what we hear is part of a much larger musical order of which it is suggestive. Listening for that larger musical form, imagining one place, at least, on earth, as it is whole—this is what the lyricist always attempts; this is what she essays.

Remember those 'morphogenic fields,' those generative forces David James Duncan referred to; the energies that science cannot measure, but which it knows animate everything it can? It may turn out that these are the real world; these are the generative, sustaining dynamic forces that make a place what it is and differentiate this bit of the real world from the next. It may be these that one picks up now and then—in the red desert, in the winter sky above the meadow, in a halo about the sun. Who knows? The world within the world may be known to science someday soon.

Perhaps this is what we really tune our witness into.

Everyone among my subjects here can report odd moments of numinous encounter, of inexplicable revelation, of magic, when the landscape rang and his or her body seemed to ring inseparably from it. This is what is called a mystical experience, and the narrative world is sceptical of such reported moments. But all of us lyricists of place are mystics, finally, if that means to believe that the larger order in which we live does not depend on us and occasionally shows us a quality that nothing in our logical brains, our narrative instincts of cause and effect, can explain. We are
mystics like Lyle Van Wan ing, who, much to his own embarrassment, could hear, now and then, 'the tones emitted by different stars' (Galvin, The Meadow, p 221). We are mystics like a man I know, an engineer and confirmed sceptic, who saw his mother as plain as day, the night after they had buried her, and just cannot understand it. We share intelligence with coyote; we are guided by a canyon wren; we try to dismiss it, but we have known the world to be like that from time to time, and so we are convinced that it has an order all its own. Mostly, though, it is not magic we dabble in. It is just the world itself in its mundane particularity, as it makes itself known to our ears and eyes and body. We place faith in the 'inexplicable coherence' of the land because we hear it expressed daily, the undertone and overtone of the notes we actually hear; we experience it daily and feel for its poetic secret; because we know it is most likely that that quality has inhere d in it, evolving of course, for ever and will continue in it whether we fathom it or not.

When we speak of the numinous, the elusive, the real, perhaps all we are saying is that we have learned that the world, a place, the land, everything, is never merely what it seems at a glance. There is always much more going on in a meadow or a river or an arch than we will ever perceive or understand. And yet it goes on, and it is possible to sense that it does go on. This is why some places and moments seem so impossibly alive and suggestive. These are moments and places in which, like Lyle Van Wan ing, looking to the Snowy Range at one day's end on Boulder Ridge, it occurs to us out of a sunset that we don't know the half of it. We sense, with Laurie Kurchins, that the cadence will always lie beyond us. As writers we seek forms and structures fit to express the few notes we have heard somewhere, and the wild, coherent order—the chord of the place—those few notes imply. The right rhythmic patterning, the right contour of sounds and thoughts, the right set of notes in our work may serve to suggest, to sing, if you like, the larger order of the place and ours within it—just as the vibrating string suggests not just its own note but the orderly pattern of tones that comprise a chord (Jourdain, 1997, pp 32–3).

It is in rhythmic language, fragments of incantatory prose, essays written out of a feeling for the rhythms of places that we come closest to true witness of what is real. We do it best in poems and in essays, if we keep them more or less lyric. To enter into lyric engagement with place is to allow ourselves to become wild—to let our mind be more than it sometimes is, to let our cells and synapses be stirred by what is beyond thought, to go down deep and fly up high, to sink and be unmade and made again. It is to become the green man, Nature's scribe, the shore bird, the dancing woman, the wind's voice, the meadow's surrendered soul, Nature, herself, in one of her local manifestations. To apprehend wildly is to allow ourselves to hear and see, as William Stafford puts it, what the bird's song, the line of ridges, imply; it is to be for a time, and then to resonate in your words' lyric, what these trees, this pond, this long shoreline, this animated canyon, this valley and its wind, this meadow and ridge, this blue plateau imply in what we know of them through witness. We write, still half wild, out of the voice, the dance of words, that belonged to our encounter with that dynamic, suggestive space—the middle voice, the wind's voice.
We experience the land poised in an interval of its long composition, between notes. Yet that interval is not silent or still. It is a note, and it is filled and made elaborate by other musics impossibly fast (like that of the microbes and the birds’ flight), inconceivably varied, some of which we perceive and others that elude us. Everything, even the cliffs and ridges, is in motion and in the process of remaking itself. And this life of the place is what the nature writer tries to imagine, from where they try to write. Their writing, if it is good, will become a harmonious part of the wild music of the place.

And it will be utterly the writer’s own. For no two of us are built alike. No two of us witness quite the same thing; no two of us resonate quite the same way. In mind, in body, in life’s experience, in ‘nature,’ each of us is one. Still, the same place will sound in my voice and yours, if we are listening and singing in tune. Just as the same piece of music, composed, for instance, by Thomas Tallis, will sound in the voices of two choristers, each singing the same part (even singing different parts), though neither of us sounds exactly alike and each of us expresses everything we are in the singing. Singing in tune, resonating tunefully—this is hard work, though. It takes practice; it takes time; it takes love and grace.

I say we write ‘half wild’ when we write out of the reverberation that our stepping out into the place set off in us. But one is only half wild. For if the place moves us, if we catch its lyric, it takes an effort of will, the hard work of art, the labour of forming musical syntax, to sustain the rhythm, to keep it going in our sentences or lines. You can take your writing table outside; you can hear fragments of the place’s endless improvisation on its theme; you can sit on the mountain and hear the blue peak opposite ring; you can open yourself to the stories that pass through stone; you can let revelations come to you; you can occasionally hear the voices of stars; you can see the country just for an instant as it is when your back is turned; you can wake up with a word from the prairie upon your tongue; you can let yourself be mussed by wind; you can stand avid for the numinous event—but you will have to go back inside and turn out some sentences that sustain and make sensible the land as you encountered it. You must never stop listening. You listen to the sentence as it finds itself, just as you listened to the place as it made itself clear to you. You listen and you articulate until text and place seem of a piece—in their musical form, their rhythm, the characteristic but ceaselessly unravelling structures that compose both.

I

The essayist, like the poet, in the lyric mode, writes not about themselves but out of their experience of the world. Like the phenomenologist, what concerns them is the texture and structure of, and the pattern implied by, appearances. They witness. When you are the kind of writer whose imagination reaches out into the world in which we humans move and make out home—when, that is, place is your subject—what you witness is land as it strikes you, places as
they move you, as you move within them. The witness’s presence in the place is inseparable from the place they witness, and it will be a part of the story they tell of the place. The phenomenologist would say that all there is, in any event, is the phenomena—appearances as they occur to the consciousness of the man or woman. The theorist will take that to mean, I suppose, that there is no such thing as places in themselves, only cognitive episodes. The ecologist will say that all there is the places-in-themselves, and sometimes a writer and their work are a part of that place, part of its inner life, aware of that inner life, and aware of being part of it, a witnessing part. Though none of them put it that way to me, I am sure each of these writers works from an understanding something like that. Their inseparability from the places of the real world does not prove to them that they invent that real world, but that they are part of it, that they are, sometimes, capable of imagining the character and life story of a form—this place or that, the land—much older and larger than their own life within it.

Among the writers I have studied here, all of them essayists or poets, all of them witnesses, all of them given to ecological imagination and lyric engagement, no two ‘I’s are the same. Shaped by the places they love, along with their genetic inheritance, their individual genius, their life’s experiences, each of these writers’ voices—the nature and quality of the presence of each of them practices within their home ground and within the terrain of their texts. The ‘I’, each of them would say, is not in the narrative as a hero or subject; he or she is there as a witness, the part of the place to whom it is given to apprehend, to remember and to speak and to sing. They are there as a listener, the place’s sounding board, because of which, and through which the place may reverberate and reach a reader, in something like the same way, with something like the same character and pattern and lore it had for them.

And yet each of them employs a different strategy of presence, of witness. You can read The Meadow and learn little of James Galvin. You will not encounter ‘I’ very often in that book. Its author gives the lines to Lyle and Ray, to Clara and Clay and Frank, to coyote and Snowy Range, to meadow and ridge, to snow and pine. We know that the place is witnessed, of course, that someone is writing all this down, that all this arises out of a man’s intimate experience of all these lives. But if there is a stage here, he is hardly ever on it. The real ‘I’ in James Galvin’s work, I’d say, is the place, the landscape itself, its many parts. ‘Who I am is where I am’: Galvin quoted these words to me, attributing them to Wallace Stegner. Wendell Berry, a student of Stegner’s and a friend, has written the same thing. ‘I’ is strikingly absent from Galvin’s book because the place—the ‘where I am’—is so strikingly present. His writing self—its nature, its point(s) of view, its structure, its mood—is continuous with the meadow. His ‘I’ is the meadow, writing. Galvin is just something else that place is aware of; or, perhaps, he is, as a lyric witness within it, its awareness, its singing, self-conscious part, its mind. (‘We are something’s awareness,’ he writes in his new poem ‘Upslope’ in X, 2003, p 31.) And so, though you will find little of Galvin in his writing, you will also, in a sense, find all of him.
You will find much more of Terry Tempest Williams in her work, than of Galvin in his. I haven’t counted, but I am sure that the first-person singular pronoun occurs more often in her work than in any other’s of my subjects. She is the dancer within the places she loves. In her movement, the whole desert space in which she dances is implied. She is the lover, through whose ecstatic response we know the body of the land that stirs her. She is the mother, the sister, the aunt around whom her kin gather—canyon wren, coyote, raven, sunset. Hers, too, is an ecological self, unfinished at the end of her name, at the end of her toes and fingers. She serves her place as fiercely and well, she wonders at it as much, as Galvin does. She belongs; she is of it. But if there is a stage here, she is mostly on it—not as hero, but in these roles I have described, each of which conjures up the desert, the other.

These are two modes of witness, two strategies for lyric apprehension, to different instincts for speaking in the grammar of a place and doing it justice. Between these two witnessing stances—this cantata for countless landscape voices (Galvin) and this pavan for solo woman and desert (Williams)—lie the ‘I’s of these other writers. Barry Lopez is present in his landscape and in his text as the truth-teller is present in Lopez’s essay ‘Landscape and Narrative.’ His ‘I’ discerns the patterns, the immaculate order of the landscape and transcribes it into story. His ‘I’ belongs to a medicine man, a monk, a desert father, the embodied spirit of the forest, the green man. His writing’s voice is plainsong, a chant, it is wise and slow, suggestive of eternity and space. It is the storyteller, through whose gift a wise and beautiful space arises. Lopez suggested that the essayist hopes, by the end of the essay, the authorial ‘I’ has become the reader’s self. Lopez’s voice is so assured and resonant, his intellection so impeccable that I am not sure his I ever dissolves into the landscape and we take his place. He always accompanies us through the landscape, through the story, through the elegant elaboration of his argument. No matter, though. He is a wise, humble, engaging companion and local guide; even if he seems a little less approachable, a little more dangerous—like the green man—and powerful—like the medicine man—than some other essayists.

What about Henry David Thoreau? Much though he aspires to be nature’s scribe, nature caught in the act of writing, Thoreau has a voice so distinctive it has carried through a century and a half and seems only to swell. He knew that, though a writer might take his writing table outside, his art was art, not revelation or straight inspiration. His ‘I’ never recedes. It sounds with the voices of the classics, all those books he read; it sounds with himself, cranky and over-educated, passionate and learned. One gets more of a feeling from his prose than any other here that the music and structure of his writing is made and remade until it satisfied him; that in each draft it became truer to his human nature. Yet one knows, too, that his truest human nature was his listening self, his botanising and walking self; and so one hears the places he walked in resonating within the thoroughly fashioned wildness of his sentences.
And Peter Matthiessen—activist-ranter and clear-eyed mystic? His presence, his stance, varies from book to book, now fierce, uncompromising, combative, now lyrically attentive, avid, elegiac. His 'I' is sometimes documenting with political intent, sometimes practising the attention of the mystic. In his lyric mode—the second—we hear his voice most clearly, again, and again it seems continuous with the long shoreline where he lives and writes.

Finally, Laurie Kutchins: who said to me that she understands her writing work as a listening. Do I believe her? I think I do. I think her writing, as I have said, is an enacted listening. It is her attempt to give utterance to a characteristic cadence of place, as it moved her in a phrase that arrives, a music carrying memory, message, mystery; a music embodied in rock and human life and sung in the wind. Her 'I,' more than any of these others, is a humble; it is a sometimes girlishly fond, a sometimes agelessly sad, listener. Her work or words is what her listening sounds like.

In such writers, writers of lyric imagination and profound attachment to land, the real 'I' in their books is not themselves merely, nor just the landscape, but themselves-in-the-land, the land-in-themselves. It is the middle voice, perhaps, of a writer in relation to a place. Even if each writer here wrote of the same place, the place would sound out differently in each work; each lyric essay work would differ greatly and we would rightly call its voice distinctively the author's own. The life history, the resonant body, of each of us is unique; and even if the place in itself, the land as it is when our backs are turned, might retain an order, a poetic logic, that eludes us all and depends on us for nothing, that place will be different not only in each writer's conception of it, but in some small degree will be different because of the particular participation of each writer with it. Its dynamic space will be infinitesimally altered, in just the way that matters to art and matters to ecologies—because large consequences follow from improbably small changes, even in the most robust systems—by virtue of the different way each writer engages with the place, witnesses, is changed by and utters some lyric words in response to the land.

To imagine lyrically is also to imagine ecologically, because it is to attend not to oneself as centre and subject; it is to attend to the whole of which one is part, the relationships in which one participates, however so inconsequential, and it is to write out of that ground between. It is to engage with the whole, even though most of it eludes you; to discern and articulate the lively relations between the parts; to intuit the pattern the parts elaborate, the lore that runs among them; to understand that all one knows is a fragment of the real music, an image or two of the real world, but it is also to know, or to hope, that each such fragment says something about, because it participates in, the whole wild system here, of which even one's own witness is a quiet, though material part. A part—on stage or off, forté or pianissimo—one will play according to one's nature and natural history.
Pilgrims' Progress; ecocritical narrative

This work has been an essay in ecocriticism. It is another attempt at literary scholarship, taking nature seriously. And it is an essay—the form, with its vernacular diction, narrative flow, personal voice (and also the care of thought and robustness of intellect) that the new field of ecocriticism encourages in its practitioners. I have written, if such a thing is possible and if it does not sound too pompous to suggest it, a lyric scholarly essay. You will have noticed there are fragments here and discontinuities, occasional prose poems. I have made my way and my arguments not just by analysis and exposition but by making patterns of sound true to the terrains—physical, textual, psychological—I wandered and expressive, I hope, of the thoughts that arose there. The lyric essay does not argue as I have done, though. It sings rather more than I have, and it discourses rather less. There is thinking here, engagement with the authorities, elaboration of theory, and so on; but I have tried to keep it conversational, engaging, informal, like and essay; and reasonably shapely, like the essay in a lyric mode.

To a large extent I have written this way mostly because it is the way I think; and also because it is the best way I know to elaborate my thoughts with care and precision. I believe, with Scott Slovic, that the language of much literary and cultural criticism obscures the texts it considers, diminishes and misunderstands the work of writing, the nature of places, and the relationship between them. For this reason—and because I believe that finally we think and say nothing clearly until we have thought it and said it in plain words—I have favoured what Slovic calls 'the language of solid ground,' the kind he manages in his essays and books and the kind, for instance, SueEllen Campbell achieves in her essay on ecology and theory, which helped me enormously in my thinking.

Understanding and debate, in literature and ecology as in all fields, will improve if we continue to do the hard work of casting complex ideas and arguments in the plainest, even the loveliest, possible language. I have found it gruelling to keep that discipline up throughout this study, and I believe that only by holding close to landscapes and texts in their actuality, only by trying to make esoteric notions—like lyric and place and apprehension—clear, and even interesting, to myself in everyday terms, was I able to find my way to the occasional revelation, the odd connection, the pattern that made sense of all this. I have never had to think harder than I did in this dissertation. But I hope that little of that hard work—of narrowing one's notions down to exact ideas and finding words well made for expressing them—is apparent. For to have written well is to have delivered up one's meaning to a reader without too much of a struggle, even to have rewarded their attention with a 'read' not utterly arid or ugly in its sounds. I know I have not been short, but that is because the journey has been long and far. And I hope I have been clear (if also challenging and suggestive).
'As clear as mud,' we used to say in my family when someone used words ineptly or nefariously, veiling meaning that may well have been vague even to them, in long words and abstractions. Beware the man or woman who comes at you uttering words of many syllables, the essayist Walter Murdoch once warned his readers: either they do not know what they are talking about or they do not want you to know.\textsuperscript{93} Mud, as my family's aphorism understood, is a good, short, clear word—the kind of word the solid ground speaks when it gets wet, and slippery. And I have made a pilgrims' progress through some pretty slippery ground in this study. Despite my commitment to the good, old, short words Winston Churchill once said were best, despite my suspicion of the sesquipedalian, the polysyllabic and the arcane; despite my ecritical and personal partisanship for narrative scholarship, I have not been able to write only in words of mud and solid ground, nor simply to tell a story. I have, you will have noticed, spoken of hermeneutics and phenomenology, of auditory space decolonisation, of pastoralisation and musical apprehension, of \textit{adéquation} and mimesis, of lyric apprehension, of prosody and music theory, of syntax and linguistic structures. Forgive me. This may be an essay; it may occasionally be lyric; it may believe in rhythm as much as it does in reason; but it is also a work of scholarship, and it has had to tackle and employ the terms in which some of those important matters are transacted.

English-Irish writer Tim Robinson once observed that the writer proceeds rather as the rock climber does up a rockface. The writer trusts the words they find—their form, their shape and actuality, the fact that they come to hand—as the climber trusts his holds. The writer trusts the feel of words and lets them lead him; he or she trusts the words the writing suggests, trusts them, tries them, moves the way they lead. On the rockface and upon the page, theory helps, but it is the actual earth, the hold, the word that presents itself and seems right, that leads you on, that preserves you.

I have proceeded like this, I think—like a writer, like a climber; not like a traditional scholar. Barry Lopez told me he thought I had balanced the roles of scholar and writer pretty well, when he read a draft he read of my chapter on him. I have not found them easy to reconcile. For the writer and the climber the elegance and grace, the structure and arc of the traverse, the shape and rightness of the performance are what counts. The climbing itself is the point. The telling is what matters—not the conclusion, not the achievement of the summit, but the way you reached it. For the scholar, I think, it is different. The conclusion, not the experience, is the point—what is told more than the nature, the lyric, the emergent dance of the telling is what matters in the end. But, as I say, I have attempted not merely a writing; I have attempted the kind of scholarship a writer attempts, a more disciplined climb than I might otherwise have made. There are tensions in such a narrative scholarship—between freedom and discipline, between lyric and narrative,

\textsuperscript{93} Murdoch, 'Sesquipedalianism' in his \textit{Collected Essays}, 1940, p 164.
between synthesis and analysis—and an ecocritic like myself risks a fall. I have slipped, but I have climbed with ropes—braids of theory, wires of methodology—and colleagues (supervisors, other scholars) at top and bottom. So I have made the top, grazed, but intact. What I have managed here is not quite so lyrical a climb as I might have liked, nor so clean and compelling a conclusion as might have been hoped. But this is just an essay, just an attempt at something a little new. I seem to have reached an end, and I seem to have kept my balance. I am not the same man I was at the start. I have discovered things—a way of understanding, for instance, how, in its lyric essence, in its being, to use MacLeish’s term, in its distinctive patterns of sounds, a work of words may **adequate**, may catch, perpetuate, and reverberate the lyric of a place on earth; how the work of nature writing is not representation but lyric participation, a process of sustained rhythmic witness. I am changed—I have learned ways of witnessing, disciplines of attention and gestures of composition, forms and structures of living and writing, musics of place, qualities of light and amplitude I never knew before. And I have never stopped moving, from rockhold to rockhold, or being moved. I have relied upon, but not too heavily, I hope, my slender infrastructure of theory. So maybe, after all, this was at once a scholarly and a writerly clamber, a theoretical and a narrative passage across stone. Maybe the way I went about the climb will sustain the point I’ve reached in the end; and maybe the way I got there was a dance worth dancing anyway, and worth watching from a safe distance. Who knows?

Ecocriticism is new terrain. It is finding itself some solid ground of theory as well as making itself a rewarding literature written in the intelligent vernacular. It must fight the good fight among the polysyllables if it is to make its way in the world. And it does so. But I hope it never loses its commitment to the democratic principles of plain words and narrative expression. May this be one small contribution. May all ecocritical writing be clearer, perhaps, than mud, but always as grounded. And may some of it stick.

**Phenomenology in itself**

This ecocritical dance with rock has also been a reasoned phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology, as I said at the outset, is essentially a way of seeing, a methodology, a way of orienting oneself as an inquirer toward human experience in and of the world. It demands attention to appearances—phenomena, the lifeworld of things themselves—in contemplative mode. What it is looking for is the nature and essence of things that occur to human consciousness; it seeks out the texture of experience and the meaning and order it implies. It asks us to put aside presupposition in the looking. But it has come to acknowledge, since Heidegger, that no human inquiry can proceed free of presupposition. Hermeneutic phenomenology (to use two heavily polysyllabic words) asks us to circle back and forth between surprise (that is, wild witness) and presupposition; it asks for critical reflection in and upon the phenomenological data and upon one’s bracketed presumptions, in the light of appearances; it asks for illuminating description built upon
that dance between witness and supposition. This is what I have attempted here. What I have inquired into in this way is the inherent essence of nature writing—of the nature of writing, the nature of places, and the nature of the relationship between them.

I set out with suppositions and questions, but I tried to let myself be surprised. And I was. I tried to circle—another kind of dance, perhaps even a little rhythmic—between thesis and data, between idea and lifeworld, between abstraction and experienced actuality, back and forward, in and out, trying my presuppositions against what I witnessed in a contemplative mode. I let my suppositions alter under that influence; and I tried not to let my theses distort my looking, so as not to miss the fullness and richness of the places I got to know, the reports and textured silences these writers gave me, my exploration of the country of their writing. This is how my writing proceeded. That is where this dance went on—in my writing itself, where it seems to me I learned many things I had not known at the start and which I hadn’t noticed learning in my ‘fresh and unprejudiced looking.’ What I have written is a description of what I observed in that circling mode, what I have made of it—and what it made of me.

In a way, it was the rhythmic circling between observation and interpretation, that oscillating continuum from engagement in appearances to critical reflection upon them and upon the ideas one is trying, and back to the lifeworld, the real world, and back again to meaning-making narrative, and so on and on—it was my immersion in that phenomenological process, in the making of a phenomenological narrative, that I stumbled upon, as it seemed to me, the resolution I have offered here to the conundrum of literary representation—the rhythmic essence of place and essays of place, and of the process of written witness itself. For that is also what I found myself engaged in here. The answer to my question is a process (lyric labour, I mean), and it emerged out of giving myself over to a process (phenomenological method). The answer to my question is a way of seeing and being (or of orienting oneself in the world), and it arose out of a way of seeing (which is what phenomenology is).

It was in the writing of ‘The real world,’ my chapter on James Galvin, that the idea I have elaborated there, and more fully in this conclusion—my thinking about the musical nature and apprehension of places, and the continuation in writing of the wild music of landscape—first came to me. It rose straight out of my attempt to write an illuminating description of my long conversations with Jim and my sustained engagement with his country and his writing. And it led me to much wider reading in cultural studies, music theory, prosody and grammar, and then back out to whatever sense I have made of what dawned on me in that moment. The writing itself, you see, discovered the right frequency in which what seemed to me like insight rang out. That is where a whole process of rethinking and editing began, which has reverberated right through until now. In that process I have realised how inept some of my beginning questions were and how inadequate my early answers. I have left some of those stand in this dissertation, to show that
I have come some way and discovered something. But I confess I have also recast some of what I began with—my passage across the rock has refined my presuppositions. The real world has a way of focusing the mind and testing one's theorems.

I think it is a tenet of phenomenology that one cannot abstract one's conclusions from the telling out of which they are arrived at—or one can, but then the context, the narrative texture, the richness of the process of their coming into the world, will all be lost and one's conclusions will sound hollow. Phenomenology, as Moran and others have said, is essentially a descriptive mode of inquiry (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p 1). It seeks to illuminate and clarify the ‘structure and qualities’ of things in themselves, as they are experienced, and it mistrusts reductive, purely causal explanations. I hope I have not, in my elaboration of these conclusions, emaciated the work of witness, the practice of lyrical being in the world that nature writing is. Elucidation—of the way in which a piece of prose can catch the lyric of a place, of the structures and dynamics of the engagement of language with landscape—has been my purpose here.

*The things that remain*

Many times through this research it occurred to me that I had got hold of just one aspect of this literature, perhaps not even the most important. I might have dwelled on many other questions: the political stance this writing takes, the bedrock democracy, the bioregional governance and action it encourages; the human and natural justice dimensions and implications of this literature; the psychology or physiology of what I am calling witness, of awareness, of the intergrading of personality and place and so on. But this has been a phenomenology of witness and of place; it has been a reflection on the nature of the reality of places and works that concern them. I have reflected on this aesthetic matter and I have stuck to it because it is one of my own morphogenic fields; because I don’t seem able not to wonder about how lines of text move like fields of grass, how landscape enters literature, how literature might do it more justice. These are questions that move me, intrigue me and animate my work. I believe, too, that everything else comes well down the list from these large questions: what is a nature writer trying to do; how might a writer best serve, in their work, the order of things of which we are all a part, and on which everything, including the writer’s livelihood depends? How is it possible to write again from inside the world beyond the merely human? For if one can do these things, the world might become animate again for readers; an apt kind of humility and restraint may be suggested; a more dignified participation in, a listening to, the land might be modelled; the biological and evolutionary order, the life of the land, might be taken account of in daily life, in commerce and governance. Political change always begins in reimagining reality. Having the courage to imagine our home places differently and according them more respect in our work and lives—this may be what it takes to start the kind of erosion and reconstitution of our values and politics that Terry Tempest Williams speaks of.

This is why I have stuck to this inquiry into the structure of witness of land.
This inquiry has, as I say, done no more, perhaps, than elucidate something about that matter. And certainly it has opened up some fields of inquiry that I must leave to others. Time is up; I have arrived at the escarpment’s rim. I have had to read and think hard, in my own way, about many areas on the edges of this inquiry, the ecotones where my fields of interest cross over into other domains—the quantum physics of matter and mind, of places and morphogenetic fields; the philosophy and theory of music and language; the phenomenology of auditory space; the physiology of syntactical structures (the way the brain makes musical order and rhythmic meaning out of words); the psychology and physiology of speech, thought and written expression; the nature of the lyric and narrative modes of imagination and the natural and cultural history, the psychology of the literatures they have created; the physiology of listening; what Jay Arthur is calling ‘lexical cartography’ (Arthur, 2003), the way that language constructs maps and meanings out of its relationship with land, and the ways in which, more slowly, landscape can structure and alter language; the psychology, cultural geography and, again, physiology of what Yi-Fu Tuan calls ‘topophilia,’ human beings’ ‘affective ties’ with particular physical environments and the way topophilia shapes culture and language (Tuan, 1974); theories of evolution and literature, such as Joseph Carroll, whom I have relied on here, and Glen Love are beginning (Carroll, 1995; Love, 2003); philosophical, social-ecological and ethical understandings of the nature of place, such as Malpas (Malpas, 1999) and John Cameron (Cameron, 2003) are advancing. And many other things.

I am left feeling I have borrowed from many fields where others know far more than I do—or someday will. Perhaps this work will encourage inquiry by others, using very different methodologies, into areas such as these as they relate to the connections between text and world. I would like to hear, for instance, from the psychologist or cognitive scientist, or whoever, about the ways in which particular landscapes affect, move, alter brain activity, physical movement, personality and language formation. I would like to know how it is that the aridity and clarity of the air above New Mexico or the Alice translates into an artist’s choice of material, a writer’s choice of words, a person’s transformed state of awareness. I would like to know how a sclerophyll landscape might impact human consciousness, behaviour and, in time, expression. I would like to know what a human brain is doing, how the imaginative space of a man or woman is textured, when it is engaged in lyric or ecological encounter with space rather than visualist or narrative perception; and if, for example, a cat scan would reveal a demonstrable difference, a different colour or intensity or shape of ‘mind.’ But these are matters for others.

Falling water

So, I am home. My book of home, The Blue Plateau, is not yet finished, though soon it will be. It has been accreting in fragments all this time, voicing itself in irregular phrases, falling like sediment from streams, forming a bed that will harden and rise and erode into the form of the finished book—not that books, as I now know, are ever quite finished, no more than places are,
or investigations such as this. To learn how to make a book that resonates with this Australian plateau land, that makes a space in which its wisdom rises, to find a way of witness worthy of this place and structures and forms that will let the place reverberate, its chord sound—to do this, I have travelled these North American landscapes, studied these North American writers and their being-in-the-world, explored the topography of their prose and poetry. And now, as a result of all that has occurred to me and formed itself into something like knowledge in my walking far from home, I feel ready to return to my natural history, my lyric geography, of home. To go so far away and read so widely in the literature of another continent is, at a glance, a strange apprenticeship for witness of home. If it is true that landscape shapes language; that a work of lyric prose arises out of a dance with here—then how did I expect to find The Blue Plateau in coniferous forest, in glacial pond, in Atlantic coastline, in red desert, in high prairie or in mountain ridge and meadow?

Well, I didn’t expect to discover my book there, of course, nor a grammar or a voice suitable for resonating my own place. I hoped, like the pilgrim, to become the man I needed to be to write a book of home. I went to learn how to listen to land and how to write—as though in rhythmic response—the essential prose, the wild music, of where one is, which is also who one is. I was trying to enter the inner life of a practice of attention to country, and I went to places and writers among whom a literature that is such a practice is well known. I went to find a tradition and to learn from it, from its practitioners themselves, from their work and country itself. There are other places I might have gone, of course. I might have gone among Indigenous people in this continent of mine. That is something I still need to do. If one wants to find what it means to live and sing inside one’s country, that is where one should start. But this was a study, for good or ill, of a certain kind of witnessing of one’s being in the world—it was a walking contemplation of the essay, of lyric prose and poetry. For that is what I feel called to write; it is a literature that I am, as this man—Mark Tredinnick, of Cornish decent, the great-great grandson of a hymn-singing Methodist miner-colonist—also born to. I went to places where such a literature has turned its ear to country, as Indigenous people in Australia (everywhere) have turned their whole lives to country, of course, since time dawned, but as descendants of the colonists, men and women like me, have not managed so profoundly in this landmass yet. I went where men and women have let the writing they make take its sound and mood, its cadence and topography, its texture and weather, more from the places themselves than from the literature of the far away places their ancestors came from long ago.

In his essay ‘A Voice,’ which opens About this Life, Barry Lopez explains how once he sat on a plane reading a manuscript and was asked by the man who sat next to him what advice he, Lopez, would give—since he was manifestly a writer—to that man’s daughter, who wanted to become a writer. Three things, Lopez found himself saying. (I am paraphrasing him.) First, one needs to leave home, to take oneself well beyond familiar routines, to places where other values prevail, where other weather blows, where the landscape has an unaccustomed character, where history
has a different kind of hold. It is not that truth lies elsewhere. It is that one needs to learn to
discern freshly and to make the familiar—one's home place, for instance—strange, as though it
were a foreign place experienced for the first time; to make it new and yet also utterly itself, for
a reader. Going away can help you do all this because everything is, at first, strange, in a place not
your own.

Second, he said, you must read widely. What he envisaged was a kind of apprenticeship to masters
of the art one wants also to master. A writer must read for that—widely and well. He or she must
learn to listen deeply, to discover what writing is from the inside. It is not a matter of finding a
few good models to copy. The writer must simply learn from great writing how great writing is
done. One might also ask the writers themselves, as I have done here. But above all a writer must
learn how to read and must read as well as they can.

Third, said Lopez, you must discover a voice that sounds like your own, not someone else's. To find
one's voice is really to find oneself. It will be alright if that voice carries echoes of other writers
and local guides from whom one has learned, for through them we discover who we are, we find
our way to whatever we come to know. Their voices allow wisdom to arise in us. But we must
write out of that place of truth in voices that are our own, so that, perhaps wisdom may arise in
our readers. It is not only storytellers and local guides to whom a writer should listen in order to
learn what to say and how to say it: land itself, he writes elsewhere, instructs. It is perhaps the
ultimate teacher. It is like poetry, he writes. It expresses an immaculate order; the space that is
this place here is elaborated in structures and rhythms that have a liveliness and rightness one
longs for in one's sentences.

So, the writer should leave home, should read, should learn to listen. And that this is what I have
done in Writing the Wild. Now I may be ready for the Blue Plateau, for The Blue Plateau.

I began this in the wind, and I end it in the rain—at Lavender Bay. And out there in the falling
water by the bay, the butcherbirds are taking a phrase of notes, toying with it, varying it, turning
it, returning to the phrase with which they began. The birds' singing makes the morning's grace
note. The whole morning is strung with music—the morning is music..

It is now another winter in another year. The plateau and the country all about it have been in
drought between those winters, between those notes, and I—all of us here—have been in drought
too. But drought is just one of the phrases, a movement perhaps, of the large musical form that is
this land. It, too, is necessary. It has shaped this place—the plateau and the whole continent. It is
one of the notes that always plays in the chord of the country I know, part of the poem of here.
We have been, between these winters, between the wind and the rain, on fire with the bushland.
Now and then we have been in danger. Often we have been in wind. And now we are in rain.
Up in the Place of Falling Water, Katoomba, the dry is over, but barely and uncertainly. Within the plateau, the creeks run thin. But the land has known all this before. It knows rain will fall again. The rocks remember drier times by far; and the trees, which have been weeping leaves and putting out extraordinary blossoms, have suffered longer arid spells than this. The dry is part of the place, which goes on becoming itself. The place of falling water has gone on falling. And I, part of it when I am there and even when I am not, have gone on listening and—which is the same thing—writing. I have followed the phrases that come to mind, as the butcherbird does this morning, as though I did not make them but heard them, as though they belonged to the place and arrived like the rain, out of drought, a wild and necessary music. I have gone on falling into myself, coming—fragment by fragment, note by note, interval by interval—home.
Writing the Wild

Place, Prose & the Ecological Imagination

MARK TREDINNICK

Doctor of Philosophy
The University of Western Sydney
2003
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
Abstract

There is a kind of literature that practises—that essays—ecological imagination. It is the literature of place; it is nature writing; and it is practised at its best, and mostly in essays, by North American writers, following Henry David Thoreau. In my native Australia, we latecomers, we Europeans, have not managed much ecological imagination yet; we have only rarely found a way to catch the lyric of the country itself in works of literature. We have not composed a literature of place in which the Australian geographies sing. So, in this dissertation *Writing the Wild*, I go travelling with some North American writers (Barry Lopez, the ghost of Henry Thoreau, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, Laurie Kutchins and James Galvin) in their native landscapes, exploring the practice of landscape witness, of ecological imagination, they carry on there, and looking for the ways in which the wild music of the land may be discerned and expressed in words. I talk with them about the business of writing the life of places. I take heed of the natural histories in which their works have arisen, looking for correlations between those physical terrains—the actual earth, the solid ground of their work—and the terrain of these writers' prose, wondering how the prose (and sometimes the poetry) may be said to be an expression of the place. This work, in a sense, is a natural history of six nature writers; it is an ecological imagining of their lives and works and places.

*Writing the Wild* is phenomenological in its disposition toward reality, its orientation toward the essential pattern of things, and it is ecocritical in its respect for nature, its regard for the natural history of literary works and its narrative approach to scholarship. It is the kind of study a nature writer would write. It is lyric, narrative scholarship—a singing, as the phenomenologists term it, a grounded telling, such as Scott Slovic and other ecocritics have advocated and essayed. I stepped out on this study hoping to understand a tradition of landscape-oriented writing to which I found myself called; to unearth what these writers and that tradition might teach me about how to know and how to write one's own country. And so, as I journeyed in the home country and the syntax of these six authors, I have also been at work on a book of my own home place, *The Blue Plateau: A Natural History of Home*.

Reflecting on the work of these writers and the ground from which it rises, I am also reflecting upon my own writing practice. I've found my writing, my practice of witness of the wild, changed, slowed, deepened, fractured and remade by what I learned from these writers and their worlds—from the woods, the pond, the shoreline, the red desert, the high prairie and a mountain meadow, and these fine witnesses within those places. (*The Blue Plateau* nears its end too.) *Writing the Wild* is also, therefore, a natural history of one writer's education in the wild and its
writing, his coming to belong on the earth and within a tradition that attempts a careful, shapely
witness of the earth's places.

Writing the Wild explores the nature of nature writing, then; the practices its writers follow to
give expression to place; and the ways in which country might be said to find its way onto paper.
I travelled with these questions in my pocket: What are you doing when you turn to a place on
earth hoping to shape it into some words that express it, and yet also let it be? How do you write
a beloved landscape into text; how do you write the wild? What relationship can be said to hold
between a text and a particular part of the world to which it refers, responds, contains, which it celebrates,
of which it is an act of love? Can a text represent a piece of the world; can it ever be said to
express it—and if so, how?

Because I work in prose myself—in what I have come to understand as lyric essay—and because
nature writing has mostly taken place in the essay, I thought of Writing the Wild, when I began,
as a study of ecological literature in prose, of nature-writing essays. But it turns out to be a study in
the lyric apprehension of place. I make, here, an argument for the special fitness of the essay (in
particular the lyric essay) for landscape witness, but I have not been able to exclude poetry from
my consideration. This is not, perhaps, surprising. Barry Lopez wrote once that 't]he land is like
poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to
elevate a consideration of human life' (Arctic Dreams 1986, p 274; quoted in Hay, 'Writing Place').
It is that coherence of places, almost inexpressible, for which the lyricist of place reaches.
Lyricism, as I discover, is less a technique of composition, less a way of turning out words, than a
way of being in the world—a way of moving, wide awake, somewhere on earth, within the lively,
patterned materiality of a place-in-time. Sometimes it will be a poem the writer of lyric
disposition needs in order to find and express that engagement in country; sometimes it will be
a stretch of prose. As you will see, I have come to wonder, prompted particularly by the poets
I met (Laurie Kutchins and James Galvin), whether landscape writing of the kind that stirs
me—works of lyric engagement with country—might be understood as enacted, articulated
listenings.

John Burroughs, with Walt Whitman's poetry in mind, suggested once that a nature-oriented work
could be a 'spiritual auricular analogy' of a landscape—an activity in words that is equivalent, in
its forms and effects, particularly its musical shapes and forms, with the dynamic reality of a place
(Burroughs, 1867, in Mazel, 2001, p 36). Searching for an understanding of the capacity of landscape
text to represent a landscape, I explore Francis Ponge's notion, which has been considered by
Sherman Paul and Lawrence Buell, of adéquation—'verbalizations,' as Buell puts it, that are
'equivalents of the world of objects' somewhere in particular (Buell, 1995, p 98). This may be
something very close to what Burroughs, critic and nature writer, had in mind.
As this study proceeded, I found myself particularly drawn to the musical ('auricular') element of *adequation*; to the music of places (their dynamism and coherence, their rhythmic patterning through time); and the musicality of texts (their patterns of sound, their large-scale musical forms). The ideas Paul Carter explores in *The Lie of the Land* (1996) helped me come to some conclusions about those matters. You will find here what I make of Carter's notion of places as dynamic entities; his consideration of the middle voice; his advocacy of a more metrical engagement by writers with, and within, the landscape; and his understanding of the works that emerge from such a poetic participation in country as performances of place. Something like that is what I think the lyric essayist of place is attempting. And it is when he or she pulls it off that the lyric of the place is caught in the lyric of the prose (or the poem).

I have also drawn on the work of phenomenologists (and other theorists) of music and language; of literary scholars (especially John D'Agata and Ellen Bryant Voigt) who have written about the lyric essay and the lyric stance, about the musics (chiefly syntactical) of the line and the sentence; of musicians, writers and philosophers who have thought hard about the (musical) nature of spaces and places—'vast improvisations', David Rothenberg calls places in his book *Sudden Music* (2001). All this has helped me make sense of what I witnessed on my journeys among writers and their landscapes, from which most of what I have come to know here arose; it has helped me think about and articulate what these writers are attempting; it has allowed me to discern the reciprocal and continuous relationship—the lyric—that sometimes plays between text and country.

That relationship is not really a matter of representation. It is something else for which we need new words. To understand what a literature of place attempts and what it sometimes achieves—this kind of lyric witness of country—we need to think of places (as contemporary physics is coming to do) and also texts less as artifacts and finished objects; we need to recall that places (which are dynamic entities, processes never finished, always making themselves up) and prose (in the work of its making and again in each new reading) are always unravelling in their characteristic patterns; that each is a lively thing, a process; and that a place conceived in and concerned with a particular place may move in a similar way to that place, resonating with the same music. And so, the nature writer's work may be a musical *adequation* of place, a performance of and with country, an enacted listening, a kind of rhythmic witness.

For this to be so, the writer must come to imagine the place on earth, to which he or she listens, ecologically—that is, as a whole, most of which eludes you, from within that dynamic whole, from inside its music. To catch the place truly, the writer must write from the landscape's point of view (which, of course, is multiple, eternally restless; in which many time-scales play); one must write as though one were, for a moment or two at a time, the place.
The work of the nature writer, of the essayist of place, if it attempts lyric engagement in country, depends also—and I think this is to say the same thing—on coming to imagine oneself ecologically, as though one were not finished completely at the skin (to paraphrase a phrase of Barry Lopez's), as though one's writing self, at least, reached out to include the nature and mind of the place itself: the contour of its ground, the pattern of its catchments, the timbre of its air, the tinctures of its light, the behaviour of its rocks, the etiquette of its plants and animals, the stance and gesture of its forests and grasses, the geometry of the flight and the cadence of the song of its birds, the temper of its weathers, the passage and return of its seasons.

*Writing the Wild* is a journey through the light, the wind, the rock, the water, sometimes the fire that make the land that houses the writers who compose these lyrics of place. Most of what it learns about those writers, it learns from the places themselves. This dissertation takes landscapes seriously. It reads the works of these writers as though the landscapes of which and in which they write might be worthy of regard in understanding the terrain of the their texts. It lets places throw light on works of words composed within them.
For Henry Thoreau, who came at the start,
and Henry Tredinnick, who came at the end
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Acknowledgments

Although a work such as this grows very largely from one man’s sustained relationship with the keyboard of a laptop computer, it would not come into being at all without the example, friendship, patience and guidance of many other men and women, above all the writers I study here. I want to thank the members of the community, the participants in the ecology, out of which this work of mine has emerged.

Writing the Wild began with Barry Lopez. Meeting him here in Katoomba—and, of course, reading his work, which is everything (wise, lovely, humble, intimate, alive with country) I would wish prose to be—helped me recognise a calling and germinated the thought that became this thesis. When it was little more than a thought, Barry helped me believe it might be viable and someday bear fruit; he put me in touch with everyone I wished to meet; he introduced me to scholars whom he thought might (and in two cases did) guide me; he helped secure me an invitation to a gathering of nature writers in Harvard, which became the starting point for the pilgrimage I describe in this work. Barry Lopez has been a friend, a teacher and a subject. I count myself blessed that this was so and that it remains so.

The conference I attended, thanks to Barry Lopez, at Harvard in October 2000 was The Ecological Imagination: Reflections on Nature, Place, and Spirituality. It was hosted by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim of Bucknell University, part of program of ecological discussion they lead under the aegis of their Forum on Religion and Ecology. I thank them for including me in a rich conversation; and for giving me a phrase—the ecological imagination—that has organised this thesis.

Spending time with some essayists of place and their places was the idea that animated this study. One night, in Moab, Utah, in the middle of my journey among these writers’ homelands, Terry Tempest Williams said to me that, looked at one way, what I was doing was outrageous—inviting myself into the homes of a bunch of writers and looking with them closely at the way they work and live and write, and the way they love the landscapes from which their writing grows. She was right. And I am astonished and grateful that I found such a welcome from her and the other writers I study in this thesis. For their generosity, hospitality and candour I thank Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, Laurie Kutchins and James Galvin. I thank them, too, for being my guides through their own sacred places. And I thank, in some cases, their loved ones, for putting up with the intrusion.
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I wrote two chapters of *Writing the Wild* during a residency in Sitka, courtesy of the Island Institute. Another chapter took shape during two short residencies at the Camden Head Pilot Station on the mid-north coast of New South Wales. Thank you to Carolyn Servid and Dorik Mechau and to Elaine Van Kempen and Eric Rolls and their boards. *Writing the Wild* is a better thing than it might have been because of these spells in beautiful places; it was also improved by opportunities that came my way to read from it and from *The Blue Plateau* in Sitka and at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in April and May 2002. I was also able to share some thoughts about landscape witness at the Ecology, Community, Culture conference at the University of Queensland in June 2002. I am grateful to the people who made those things possible.

From the moment he overheard me speaking with enthusiasm about the writing of Barry Lopez until the moment, just recently, when he handed me his final comments and assured me I was
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and midwived this dissertation. I hope it stands as a fitting tribute to their elegant supervision.

I received an Australian Postgraduate Award to write this thesis. I also received from the
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Though I travelled far and often in search of the wilds of text and terrain that I speak of here,
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was far away, and for asking now and then how I was going, as though they were really interested.
Henry, who is new, I thank too, just for coming along and being so beautiful. He is the child not
only of his parents, but of this place. If he ever reads this book, he will know the work that made
his father the man he was when young Henry was born.

My ultimate debt, of course, is to the places I visited and this place I live within. Without the
land, there would be no words, there would be no wildness to write, no music to engage with, no
world to imagine ecologically or enter into lyrically.

To the places, then, of which the world is made, and their wild musics. May we always hear them.
May we always sing them.
1
The wild music of places

An introduction

[If everything is vitally interconnected then the whole world is a poem, an enchantment simply awaiting notation ...]

—Barry Hill, Broken Song

This is a study of the literature of place. It is a study of the nature of places and the prose that witnesses them; of lyrical apprehension and the ecological imagination.

There is a kind of literature that practises—that essays—ecological imagination. As I began to write a book about the life of the country where I live, I found my way into this literature and began to wander, and to wonder, there. The writing I have in mind is often called nature writing, and most of it is North American. In those books, most of them essays (lyric and personal), places seem alive on the pages.

In Australia, where I live, there is no tradition yet of such writing. There is, of course, an Indigenous culture of sacred geography, of sacramental custodianship, made in painting and songline, dance and story, and it is already millennia old. Any literature we may make in these late days can hardly hope to embody the intimacy with—and the intonation of—the land as Indigenous mythology and ceremony do. Yet it might shape a whitefella dreaming; it might fashion and sustain a new kind of reconciliation between latecoming Australians and these mysterious geographies, and among all of us who now share this landmass. I believe a literature of place, ecologically imagined and written in the landscapes' vernacular, is emerging now out of the engagement of writers with the plight and wisdom of the country's first peoples. For theirs is a culture, as I understand it, grounded in country, at its heart a celebration of, an enacted belonging in, the land.

But, wondering how a man such as I, speaking English in a colonised landscape, might write a literature worthy of my own home ground, I set off to explore such a literature, where in modern times it has mostly found voice, where it is already old—in the United States of America. I went seeking not a North American vernacular but the deeper ground from which a vernacular literature of country might grow—a writer's imaginative engagement with whatever it is that orders a place on earth. Writing the Wild tells the story of that inquiry. It is a dissertation; it is a writer's pilgrimage. It is an exploration of a calling.
The voice of the wind

This, as I will explain, is a phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology, which concerns itself with the phenomenon, or lifeworld, of human experience, asks a researcher to begin with himself. My concern in this study is with the nature of the encounter with the living world that is enacted in nature writing; and my subjects are some fine writers in this genre. But I began my inquiry, as phenomenology suggests, with myself. Before I left my Blue Plateau for the journeys this book narrates, I asked myself what I thought it was I did here in the country I have come to. Here is what this writer—here is what I—said then. (Later in this introduction I include a little more of my testament.)

I have been working at the pages of my book The Blue Plateau through two weeks when the winds blew in hard from the west. The air, night and day, boomed and rushed, surged and fell still. I worked with mind and finger, body and voice, drafting and redrafting at a desk inside an vast and restless space—the plateau. I sat at work in the study and felt the wind's body pressing down on my house, creaking the joists above me in the roof. These were days alive with fierce energy—with force and grace, will and wilderness. With each surge, with each new phrase of this symphonic music of the place, I saw, I felt, the heads of the eucalypts—silvertop ash and peppermint—in the wood beyond the study window bend to breaking. The days have been loud and heavy with the moving air. With its voice.

We speak comfortably about the sound of the wind, though what we call the wind itself makes no sound. Sound, the voice we ascribe to the wind, comes from the trees it bends, the leaves it distresses, the hard faces of cliff that resist it, the grasses and sedges and plantings that it moves. The sound of the wind is the sound of the land responding to the moving air. Places speak in this way, through the interaction of the bodies that compose them—limb, leaf, soil, rock, tin and timber of cottage, resounding space of the valley.

Sitting here in this speaking country gave rise all of a sudden to the thought that my words, perhaps, speak of the wind and the place as the trees and grasses and rockfaces speak of it. The place expresses itself through the movements of thought and body that happen in me, swayed by the air, moved by the energies and gestures at play within this landscape, as the trees are today by the wind. All the bodies in a place speak of it, contain it; they speak also of their relationships with each other, dancing connections and expressing bonds—predator and prey, root and groundwater, wind and leaf, man and woman—that make this place just what it is; what it is, at least, now, and what it is turning itself into. And I and my words are part of the process that is this place; part of its dance, its music, its nature.

I choose, composing this text, to speak of the place that houses me, using these gestures—markings on a screen, on paper, made by moving my fingers upon a keyboard. I might not do so, whereas the trees, it seems, may not choose not to bend, their leaves may not choose not to hustle about like schools of fish in a violent current. They move because this is the way they respond to wind. But I wonder how much
difference what I call my choice really makes. We are used to understanding trees and even animals as living without free choice, living by instinct, unanimated by what animates us. Certainly, we say, the rocks and winds are not among the quick and lively. But why do I call my response choice and the trees' response simply response? And where do these words of mine come from? Do I choose them freely, or do they find me as the wind finds the limbs of the siebri, bend them and produce movement and sound? Looked at from the landscape's point of view, we all are part, moving parts, of one moving whole. We share whatever life there is to share. We play our part.

I am, in fact, now sitting on a moving train in calm warm weather, returning to the plateau from the city. But I have only in a spatial sense been present in the train. It is truer to say I have been back in the buffeted house. The words come from there, from the wind, from the valley of the Kedumba, which is, imaginatively, but really, inside me; or is it I who am, imaginatively, inside its spaces? Words come to me, and I put them down. In one sense, of course, I choose them. In another—equally true—they choose me, speaking out of the moment I return to in memory. Speaking out of the valleys and canyons and treetops, like the wind. In memory, conjured and enlarged by my writing it, the landscape lives, and I am in it.

In a space of silence, stuck between thoughts—in a moment like those seconds when the winds eased, reminding me paradoxically of their force; in the space that is the music, between the notes—it occurs to me that what I choose is to open myself to the place and to celebrate what moves through it. What I choose is to write something down. What I write is not entirely, not even mostly, my choice. Though I hope that the place at one moment comes alive for the person I imagine reading my text, and comes alive with a quality very like the one I sat within, I suspect that some other purpose than that urges me to write. Writing, I enter more intimately into the movement of the air and the distressed forests. Writing is a way of belonging here, of sharing the life of the wind, of the wider country it animates and alters. Writing is a way of bringing myself fully alive within this country and sharing its mood and weather. It is a way of bringing it fully alive in me.

I think my text is a practice of presence. With these words that occur to me, I engage with the place, become part of the place, holding myself entire and detached within it, though, so that I may witness its parts, discern its unravelling phrases, guess at its larger musical form, sense something of the patterns that compose it. I reach out from abstractions that contain me in a conversation with a screen, and I become, in the moments of taking in the sound and movement, larger than I was a moment before; I become larger than my body; I become as large as my country itself. I leave my mere mankindness behind for a time to know the world in this small quarter, just as it is, and me within it. It speaks, and I hear it. I speak within it. It speaks within me, and perhaps in what I write.
Coming into country

One of those days in August or September 2000, I sat at the kitchen table in Katoomba, rereading Barry Lopez's Of Wolves and Men. Winter's last westerties were still troubling the trees outside, and not a thing was still along the ridgetop. The timber house groaned about me. It swayed imperceptibly in a stiff-jointed, desultory dance with the afternoon. But it was staying where it was for now, which was good for me. Things were stiller at the table, but the day's animated weather was not stopping at the walls and windows. My fingers were moving fast along the lines of type, my mind was finding its way across the topography of the text; moving in the contours of the country of the mind that made it; going the way the author's fingers went, making the pattern of sounds that compose this text.

Something—I think it was a line of thought about the kind of relations we might rediscover with the life of nonhuman beings—that led me back to Lopez’s book; and something made me turn back to the epigraphs on its opening pages. One comes from Henry Beston’s nature writing classic, The Outermost House.

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals... In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time...

—Henry Beston, The Outermost House, 1928, pp 24-5

The second Lopez takes from a long essay of Michel de Montaigne, 'The Defense of Raymond Sebond,' written around 1575. Here is some of it:

Presumption is our natural and original disease. The most wretched and frail of all creatures is man, and withal the proudest. He feeleth and seeth himself here lodged in the dirt... in the lowest story of the house... and yet in his imagination he places himself above the circle of the moon, bringing heaven under his feet.

By the vanity of the same imagination he equals himself to God, attributes to himself divine faculties, and withdraws and separates himself from all other creatures; he alloteth to these, his fellows and companions, the portion of faculties and power which he himself thinks fit.

How does he know, by the strength of his understanding, the secret and internal motions of animals, and from what comparison between them and us does he conclude the stupidity he attributes to them?

I had read *Of Wolves and Men* without ever noticing these words. Finding them now, I experienced one of those moments, heavy with recognition of truth, light with joy, when one of the circles that shapes a life comes almost to completion.

Moving to the study and sitting at my desk, I pulled my edition of *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* from where it sits, its spine facing me where I write. I found the essay in Book Two; it was published in 1580. Lopez has found the heart of the essay, and it is fearsomely long, but I sped through it over the next half hour. It is an elegant, rigorous and passionate argument against the arrogance of humanity's conventional habit—even then—of elevating itself above the rest of the living world. It is an essay on the sentience of the nonhuman world; even perhaps on the sacredness and mystery of living things. Montaigne was, of course, a nobleman who retired from public life to reflect and write on his estate in the Dordogne. Images from the land about him accompany many of his thoughts in the long essay, along with quotations from the classical sages—Lucretius, Plato, Virgil, Ovid, Euripides.

The circle that rounded itself in this discovery was a circle of calling. I am here in a sandstone plateau, by the valley made by the Kedumba Creek, to write, to reflect on the nature of things—on the nature of nature, really; on the nature of this place on earth. I would like every thought of mine to grow from the life of the place, for my writing to be an act of presence here, enlivened by the place to which it gives some witness. I came, though, to this country and to this sense of my calling as a writer by a path that wandered and took no pattern until I read Montaigne some years ago and recognised the kind of writing I felt born to attempt. Like Montaigne, I have felt called to turn words— as musical and meaningful, as engaging and exact, as I can manage—to the task of discovering and speaking for the lives we lead—we and all the other living things—on this earth. When I read Montaigne, and then found my way to other essayists, E B White, Aldous Huxley, many others, I felt that I had stumbled on a tradition and a form—the essay, I mean—that I could write within, if I proved up to it. It seemed like something I could do; it even seemed like a way of using words and of seeing the world that I had been drawn to all my life.

And it did not take me long, reading essays, to come upon Barry Lopez, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Ted Hoagland and Terry Tempest Williams—the nature writers. Reading them led me to reread some of the place-oriented books that had moved me in earlier days: Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* and Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*, from childhood. Much of the best essay-writing—the loveliest and the wisest prose, the writing that carried on what Montaigne had begun—was being turned out, I discovered, by the so called nature writers.

I was living at this time in Balmain, an old working-class neighbourhood, across the water from the city, loud with the noise of cargo and traffic. City buildings filled my window, beyond the scarlet bottlebrush. My reading among the nature essayists grounded my sense of vocation more deeply
and precisely, and it reawakened in me a lifetime's longing to live in country, to put down roots in unpaved earth and live and write what the landscape bestowed on me.

So, in time, I came to Katoomba and to the idea of a book of that place, a cycle of essays in the nature writing tradition, but growing out of sandstone, shaping itself like silvertop ash in the vivid air of ridge and valley country. Montaigne and nature writing brought me as much as the country itself. And on the second day of our moving into the wooden cottage beside Banksia Park, Barry Lopez came to visit. I had interviewed him by phone some months earlier for a piece I was writing on his new collection of essays, About This Life (1998). Later, in August, he came to Sydney for some readings and publicity, after talking at the Melbourne Writers' Festival. And so, I invited him to Katoomba for a day. We walked out along a path with which I have become intimate now, and looked out across the valley to Mount Solitary as the light fell. 'We have come at just the right time,' he said.

Lopez inscribed the front of my copy of his About This Life with some words of thanks for the conversations we had shared in these mountains and the hope that we might continue them. A little over a year after that day, I flew out for the McKenzie River in Oregon to continue that conversation with him, the start of the journey of conversations that this book charts. I have Lopez's book here on my desk. It stands in a long row beneath the window sill, flanked by Michel de Montaigne and Terry Tempest Williams.

And so my belated discovery, inside this wind, inside this shaking house, inside this other book of Lopez's, of this passage from Montaigne moves me with a sense of calling confirmed. It is not just the weather, though it is also the weather. It feels like a calling confirmed by this country. It brings the snake's tail near to its mouth. Looking hard at the world had led Montaigne, so long ago, to thoughts I have come here to consider in this place. And they are thoughts that belong to the tradition of nature writing, which I have also come here to practise and reflect upon. My discovery goads me to return to my book, which has been part of my practice of belonging here, and has taken the shape of forty thousand words now, which feel as disordered and given as the country itself, and may have, I hope, something of its life and character within them. Finding Montaigne within Lopez reminds me of some veins of connection between language and landscape, writing and the living world, culture and nature, the ground at our feet and the ground of all being—lines I have intuited but not fully understood—that I set out to explore in this study.

Before I turned to writing for my livelihood, I published books. Among the books I published in those years are William Lines' Taming the Great South Land, George Seddon's Searching for the Snowy, and Tom Griffiths' Secrets of the Forest, three works of nonfiction, of powerful prose, that explore the land and mankind's connection to it on this continent. These were books I warmed to, in whose creation I participated closely. They are important books for reasons that have nothing
to do with me, being works of made by the intelligences of those three authors. But I loved those books in a quite unreasonable way, and they were all of them strange to me—and to the market. No one, including me, knew quite how to greet them—books of considered and lyrical prose treating with the land. I can see now that my work on those books—commissioning and, to some small degree, shaping them—was part of my finding my way home to a literature of place; part of my journey to the sandstone country and Montaigne, Lopez, nature writing and my own book, *The Blue Plateau*. One day I ran into Tom Griffiths in the State Library. He was pleased because *Secrets of the Forest* was about to come out in a new edition, coinciding with an exhibition in Melbourne that celebrates the same mountain ash forests he treats in his book. He thanked me for championing the book the first time round. And he thanked me for my ‘beautiful’ review of Barry Lopez’s book *About This Life*. Lopez, he said, was one of his favourite authors, an inspiration.

Such happenings are not merely coincidence. They articulate a pattern of meaningful connection. No one orchestrates them. But it pays to notice them. I should perhaps have been less surprised than I was to find Montaigne among the writers who influenced and anticipated Lopez. There is a way of writing with every bit of life you embody, and it seems to lend itself to landscape. This is how Montaigne wrote, and many essayists have followed him, among them the nature writers. Donald Frame, who was Montaigne’s biographer and his translator, writes that the American transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson found Montaigne’s prose “‘wild and savoury as sweet fern,” full of a “sincerity and marrow,” that reaches to his sentences. “Cut these words,” he wrote, “and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive”* (Montaigne, 1957, p vii). Another scholar wrote of Montaigne:

> Any one of his pages seems like the most fertile and wild of prairies, a ‘free and untamed field’: long, ‘lusty’ grasses, perfumes underneath the thorn, a mosaic of flowers, singing insects, streams beneath, the whole thing teeming and rustling ... Thought and image, with him, it is all one.


I am very interested in prose that seems to sway like prairie grass and sing like insects and falling water. It is what this study is all about.

*Writing the Wild*

*Writing the Wild* is a study, then, of my calling. It grew, as you see, out of wondering what it is I attempt when I go to country as I do up here in the plateau and then treat with it in words. That question grew into an inquiry that I carried to some older heads, some accomplished practitioners of this literature. And this study is the result. It is a journey through the landscapes that are home to six writers of this literature—Barry Lopez, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Matthiessen,
Terry Tempest Williams, Laurie Kutchins and James Galvin—and through the terrain of their writing. It is an ecocritical study of some nature writers and their work; and it pays regard to the natural history of their books, as though that really mattered. It wonders what disciplines structure and what experience shapes the writing of the living world these men and women attempt. It wonders in what sense words might be said to live on pages like grasses in the untamed field; how country enters text; how prose lives as a landscape lives.

Literature in this tradition asks a writer to listen hard to creation here. It is an act of witness; of apprehension of the world. It asks us, as Robinson Jeffers once wrote, to uncentre our minds from ourselves—to imagine ecologically. What might this mean? *Writing the Wild* explores the nature of nature writing, the practices its writers follow to give expression to place, and the ways in which country might be said to find its way onto paper.

The questions that arose for me writing my own book are what launched me on my travels. Reflecting on these other writers' works and the ground from which they arise, I am reflecting, as I write, upon my own. They are the questions this study explores.

What are you doing when you turn to a place on earth hoping to shape it into some words that express it, and yet let it be? How do you write the landscape into text; how do you write the wild? What relationship can be said to hold between a text and the world? Can a text represent a piece of the world; can it ever be said to express it—and if so, how? Does a piece of writing give to its readers the place it concerns by 'spiritual auricular analogy,' (John Burroughs' phrase, see p 14 below) by an activity in words that is equivalent, in form and effect, with the particular dynamic reality of a place? Might the work of lyric engagement with place be understood as a listening? What has music got to do with the way we witness the world; to the nature of reality itself; and to a literature that does the listening and the places justice?

The nature writer tells the story of a place—its story—and of the relationship that plays between the writer and the place, in all its inclusive, wild intricacy and order. Their words, if they are good, give that experienced place on earth some flesh and feel, some true life, in the mind of the reader. They express a writer's love for the earth and its places, and they seek to return a reader to a similar state of love—not only for the place so enchanted, but for any place to which a reader can belong.

This, anyway, is part of what I as a writer attempt. It one of the things that Thoreau had in mind at Walden Pond. But this literature is large, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, and it contains multitudes. Many kinds of writing compose it—philosophical reflections, memoirs of place, ecological tracts, pastorals, parodies, prose poems, nonfiction novels, sermons, even comedies. Later, I offer a small variation on Thomas J Lyon's taxonomy of nature writing, and I attempt a fuller geographical survey of this literature's terrain. Its forms and styles and ambitions are many.
This giving voice to the place itself, this catching its lyric, is one of many things its practitioners think they are doing. But this literature attempts much else. Some of the writers of place and nature don't share my interest in the capacity of a piece of prose to move with the same music as the place it concerns. They write books to move us to save endangered animals, ways of human life and places, to shame and shock, as well as to inspire us. I am thinking of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and of the writing of Peter Matthiessen, which I consider in this study. And yet to the extent that these are literary enterprises, their authors took care with the sound and shape of the writing as well as with its message. And they took care to make their prose true to the place, so that that place might speak clearly to us.

*Ecological imagination*

Among other things, this literature imagines ecologically—it is a practice, I have come to think, of ecological imagination. I want to test that notion in the writing of these authors. But what do I mean by ecological imagination?

To imagine ecologically might be to see the world as though one were not merely human, as though one were, in a sense, the world—or at least this part of it, here, this place to which one wants to bear witness in words. It might be to imagine and speak as though one were the place itself—or at least *inside* and *of* that place. It might be to imagine the place in all its complexity of form and life, human and nonhuman, fast-moving frequencies of longing among the insects, slower-moving frequencies of erosion among rocks, middling currents of flow among the creeks and rivers. To imagine ecologically would be, I guess, to understand a place as a set of animate relationships among the local forms of life; a set of passages of energy and meaning, slow and fast, visible and invisible. It would be, too, to apprehend the place whole—not just to see, but to feel and know, and to hear it—and to wish to write the patterns that make it what it is. To imagine ecologically would be to attempt to notice, and then to write, the story one has to tell—a story usually concerned with the life of a landscape, but also of much else—from the point of view, at least in part, of the land. It would be to think, to imagine, to write, as if you were not merely this man or woman, but this man or woman within this place on earth.

At least in this way, though, nature writing is a practice of ecological imagination: it is literature written as if nature really mattered.

*Works of nature*

Every artist who turns to a place, a scene, an encounter as their subject, is likely to want to transmute their subject and their experience of it into a piece of work that is in some sense flesh to their subject's flesh, or better, soul to its soul. They would like, usually, to render its essence truthfully—unless their objective is merely to express themselves. The love and wonder, the
horror or fear, even, that drew the writer or painter or musician to that vase of flowers, that town or valley or meadow enjoins some kind of faithfulness in them, as a witness, toward the genius of the original. They will try to do nature justice in art.

Usually this will not mean attempting some literal facsimile of it, an exact representation on canvas or paper, in the imagery words are capable of. ‘I don’t care so much,’ Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother in October 1885, ‘whether my colour is exactly the same, as long as it looks beautiful on my canvas, as beautiful as it looks in nature.’ Nature can’t paint in strokes, can’t sculpt or write; but it can express itself. A nature writer, like any artist who turns to it in her art, in his art, tries, among other things, to catch the soul of that expression.

The world’s forms and colours, patterns and shades, ecologies and weathers, act on human sensibility, sometimes, with a truth, a strangeness and reality that some artists would like their art to have and to work upon those who meet it. An artist wants her work of art to feel like a work of nature—in the sense that it could not have been other than it is, in its essential integrity. This may be particularly the case for a writer who is moved by and concerned with nature itself—landscape, systems of natural history that include the works and ways of men and women. And it was the case for the great poet of nature (and human nature), Walt Whitman, according to his champion, the nature writer and critic John Burroughs.

The image Walt Whitman seems generally to have in his mind is that of the Earth, ‘rolling, rolling, compact,’ and he aims to produce effects analogous to those produced by it; to address the mind as the landscape or the mountains ... address it; not to excite admiration by fine and minute effects, but to feed the mind by exhibitions of power; to make demands upon it, like those made by Nature; to give it the grasp and wholesomeness which come from contact with realities; to vitalize it, by bringing to bear on it material forms ...

—Burroughs, *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*, 1867, in Mazel, 2001, p 36

Burroughs suggested that Whitman wrote not just as an observer of nature but from inside it, ‘immersed in her.’ His poems ‘approximate to a direct utterance of Nature herself’ (Burroughs in Mazel, 2001, p 36). If an artist is humble, if his feet are on the ground, he knows that no words he may write, no lines he may draw, nothing he may make, may ever have such power, be so direct an utterance of an order larger than himself. Still, it is a compulsion, an ambition, an unconscious hope, that stirs much art to life. And, when a writer’s subject is a particular place, that writer, striving for authenticity in rendering it, may allow herself to hope that her work might affect a reader of it with a force, with a texture of experience, analogous to that with which that place worked on her. Not exactly as it did, mind you, not in the same colour necessarily, but as beautifully or fearfully, as earthly, with the same vernacular force. She hopes to write the nature
of the place from the inside, not the outside; not as a visitor, but as a participant, an intimate. Sometimes, anyway.

This will be the hope, it may be the express project, of the nature writer. It is mine, I think; one of my hopes anyway. But such hopes are rarely express or even true at the point of apprehension or creation. They precede and follow the encounter with the place and then the page.

What a nature writer sets about is far more, usually, than making a depiction of the natural world. What they are about is witness, of some kind, of a world larger than the merely human. I have some questions about this that I carry into this study? What does the nature writer witness, and how? What does he do in imagination and craft—the hard work or draft after draft—with what he makes of this place on earth? How does what she witnesses shape the work she makes of it; how does the place a writer gives herself to, in intimate attention, shape the person she becomes, the prose she writes?

_The anatomy of witness_

This is a study of the two ends of writing the wild. It is a study of the two faces of witness: witnessing and bearing witness; apprehension of nature and speaking forth about, and out of, and also on behalf of, what one has apprehended of the larger order at play in a place. And it is a study of the ground between them—for there is a continuum between perceiving and expression, and it is filled with hard, though sometimes rhythmic, work. There is the writer’s encounter with the place; and there is her, there is his, rendering of that experienced place in prose. What goes on between place and writer, and what goes on between the experiencing and the telling—these are my concerns here. I wonder about them daily at my own work. I thought there might be some profit in wondering about them in conversation with writers who have worked within these questions; in conversation with the landscapes they have witnessed; in contemplation of the works these writers and their landscapes have produced.

This is an interrogation of a mystery—the way we apprehend (see, hear, feel, in every way sense and experience) the rest of the living world, or that part of it we know well and make the subject of our work; and the way we write. Do we frame and edit the world we encounter by the notions of reality and significance we bring to it? Or does the world find us, show itself to us as it chooses? Do we construct it, or does it construct—or at least shape—us and our idea of it, and our prose? Where is it words and phrases, thoughts and cadences, come from? How is it a writer settles on a form and structure to give written expression to their experience of place, and to the reflections that gives rise to? How much is authorial intention; how much the transmutation into words of intimate encounter recalled in the tranquillity or turmoil of intercourse with typewriter or laptop?
I know that I don’t think these things through as I write; nor do most writers. I am mostly content to bow with gratitude toward the mysteries that allow noticing and writing to happen at all. But I am a writer in search of disciplines and practices. I wonder what I might learn of the practice of nature writing, this business of witnessing the places, the wild, of the world, from writers whose work I admire; from men and women who are my mentors.

And I have learned enough respect for the wider order of things we call nature—specifically the way it articulates itself in particular places—to allow the possibility that a writer’s natural history may have a role in the process by which texts emerge—especially those works in which the lives of those places are witnessed. With Wallace Stegner I believe that one cannot know a man or woman or understand their work until one knows the places they have been, the light that they have grown up in, the topography that stirs them. This is, in a sense, a natural history of the literature of place. It is, at least, a natural history of the writing of Barry Lopez, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, Laurie Kutchins, and James Galvin—and to some extent of Mark Tredinnick.

The country of the telling

What I attempt is not description. My writing includes philosophical reflection and exposition, but I mean it to be more than those things. I am using my language to shape the country in my imagination, and in your imagination, as you read. I hope my prose has about it the same character that speaks to me from the country, from the birds, from the sandstone, itself. I think of my text as terrain. I imagine a passage through my phrases and paragraphs rather like a passage through the geography it engages with. And I hope that a passage through each might give the journeyer a similar felt-sense. This text is also a place, shaped by an unlettered but articulate geography, as much as it is shaped by me. Like the place, it is never finished, really. Both go on making and remaking themselves in the passage through them, time and again. I too am shaped by the place I breathe within. Authorship rests within this body punching keys, and it lies in the ground outside to the very edges of this country in which I find home. The text I make is not, of course, the place, but I hope that the personality of the place leaks into the prose, speaks through it, just as it speaks through the posture of the trees that grow in this one place on earth.

I try to keep my words close to the things they speak of. I favour a lexicon concrete, plain, old and clear words. Such words point at the objects that they serve to signify. In a sense, they contain the objects they speak of. They are more apt than words like ‘ecosystem,’ ‘scenery,’ ‘vegetation,’ ‘flora and fauna’ to conjure in a reader’s mind something they can grasp, imaginatively, through their senses, not merely through processes of cognition. I try in this way to keep the country of my text alive with moving, sounding, breathing, eroded forms.
So I try to find—to wait and listen for—words with a note pleasing in itself and reminiscent of the note the landscape strikes in me. I attempt to shape thoughts with the same economy the country uses to show itself forth—and with the same unending freshness and capacity for surprise.

*The Blue Plateau* expresses the place, as I meet it, as it meets me. It tries to voice the phenomenon of this place itself, and my participation in it. I proceed by drawing out the place itself, gesture by gesture, and the movement of my body and mind through it and in response to it.

In my book, I attempt what nature writing always attempts—and precisely what that is remains mysterious to us all. I sing the life of the place and the encounter we share, the country and I.

I am in the world and the world is in me. We participate in each other. I feel the warmth of the sun, I hear the hardness of the wind. It grows cold, and my body notices it. The black cockatoo flies above crying in its fashion. These things reach me, touch me, and I seek words to pass on to readers how I am struck, how I experience these things. They touch me, as the flame of a match touches my finger, uniquely. I express what ensues, uniquely. No one else will speak the encounter just as I do. But there is no denying the encounter. And it does not, nor does my expression of it, boil down to my psychology—to me. Something occurs and I speak of it. I am present in my words and so is it. Of course I don't give you the actual bird, or coldness or burn, manifest on the page. Nor do I give you my embodied self. Neither do I give you merely a portrait of my self and my informing attitudes, although those things, among many others, colour and inform my words. I give you symbols on a page, suggesting sounds. If I write well, then the place and its beings will rise, sound, in your imagination, as you read—their tone and weight and character will strike you.

My perception and my prose select what you encounter, but they do not, on their own, create the quality of the place that you may encounter there—in my text, I mean, and in the country that they conjure for you. My writing speaks of me and my nature, since I witness this place for you. But my writing would not adequately be explained as an expression of me, my past, the workings of my mind. That is not what it is, or not only that. I am who I am because of where I am and where I have been.

*The shape of things to come*

This is a work in four movements.

*Part I* introduces themes that will play through the rest of the work. It explains the whole and starts us off. It is a kind of prelude. It proposes a thesis, as you see; it outlines the intellectual framework for the quest; it elaborates its questions; and it tells how I travelled and how I conducted my fieldwork.

*Part II* is large and serious. It lays the theoretical basis for the journey to follow. The chapters of part two narrate the natural history of nature writing and engage with the critical literature. They
make a special plea for the essay and for the lyric in expressing the nature of places. After telling
the history of nature writing, I attempt to characterise this literature, and I offer a revised
taxonomy of the species. I propose a nature writing canon, and I then examine the reasons why
this literature has flourished in the landscapes of North America but not yet in Australia. Chapter
five looks into the pastoral aesthetic and the colonising worldview, as well as the nature of
antipodean geographies, all of which may have held back a literature of place in the Great South
Land. Nature writing, it suggests, is a post-pastoral enterprise, and it calls for a kind of engagement
with places that I call musical apprehension. This writing reimagines landscapes as dynamic spaces,
and writing as a kind of musical engagement with them. With these ideas in mind, chapter six
turns to the academic literature on representation and nature writing, and attempts, following such
writers as Lawrence Buell, Joseph Carroll and Paul Carter, a new ecocritical understanding of
literature's—particularly lyric nonfiction's—relationship with the more-than-human world; it
attempts to retheorise the relationship between text and world. Central to its argument is the
idea of *adéquation*, and an emphasis on the musicality of language, of composition and of places.

*Part III* describes this writer's journey. Here you will find my fieldwork, the song of six places and
my exploration of them, the song of six writers. In these chapters, I tell you where I went—with
part two's questions in my pocket—and what I found. It is the heart of the study.

*Part IV* brings me back home. It concludes the study, the journey, the quest, the pilgrimage, and
looks at what it yielded. It reflects again on my questions and the answers, such as they are, that
occurred to me in my travels among places and writers. It thinks critically about the whole
enterprise—the questions, the thesis, the notion of ecological imagination that they test. It draws
together what my inquiries among forests and ponds, shorelines and deserts, prairies and mountains
and meadows have taught me about places, about witness, about the labour of writing and the
importance of music and lyric to all them all. It concludes that both place and prose are less
material, more mysterious and rhythmic things, than I had thought at the outset. It points to
things I found that I had no idea I would, and things I thought I would find and did not. It wonders
what this inquiry has proven and if such an inquiry such as this can prove much at all. Whatever it
has proven, it has discovered much that I, at least, had not known about writing, about the magic
of places and the limits and the reach of theory. And what I have found has complicated
and enriched my understanding of this literature and of landscape itself. It has changed me and the
way I engage with places.