

**All These Rivers**  
(A Collection of Poetry)

&

**Beyond the Temple, Beyond the Pond:**  
Deep Ecology  
and Contemporary Writing  
of the American West

Kris Johnson

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Newcastle  
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics

July 2016



## Abstract

This thesis comprises a collection of poetry, *All These Rivers*, and a critical dissertation *Beyond the Temple, Beyond the Pond: Deep Ecology and Contemporary Literature of the American West*, which collectively explore the relationship between the literature of the American West and Deep Ecology.

*All These Rivers* engages with the themes and tenets of Deep Ecology in its methods and principles of construction. It considers my relationship to the landscape of home, the Pacific Northwest, and how it is maintained and intensified by the process of writing my experiences into existence during a period of geographic isolation. The collection's title responds to the many rivers in this region, but also alludes to the collection's themes of origins, direction and cycles. The content and structure of this body of work demonstrate how nature and natural processes not only shape the landscape, but imprint upon the self. Voicing my complex relationship with this geography through the process of writing, re-mapping and recounting experiences, this collection seeks to collapse the distance between vast and intimate geographies, reconcile the wild and the civilized, and to reunify myself with home terrain.

The critical component provides a context for reading this collection of poems and further explores of the relationship between Deep Ecology and contemporary Western American literature through critical readings of Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm* and Ellen Meloy's *The Last Cheater's Waltz*. Concluding this body of work, I embark on a brief critical reading of *All These Rivers*, suggesting that the process of writing the collection, and the poems themselves, engage in a practice of Deep Ecology.



## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank my supervisors Sean O'Brien and Kirsten MacLeod for their good humour, generosity and their unflagging support. I would also like to thank my family and my partner who have been an endless source of reassurance and love.



## Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>All These Rivers (A Collection of Poetry)</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Beyond the Temple, Beyond the Pond: Deep Ecology and Contemporary Writing of the American West</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Introduction: Deep Ecology as Philosophy, Practice and Literature</b>	<b>70</b>
Introduction	70
Deep Ecology as Philosophy and Practice	71
Towards a Literature of Deep Ecology	73
<b>Chapter One: Contextualising the West</b>	<b>80</b>
Introduction	80
From East to West	80
The Contemporary West	89
<b>Chapter Two: Newborn and Salted</b>	<b>92</b>
Introduction	92
Beyond Tinker Creek	94
Finding Home	99
The Arcing Narrative of <i>Holy the Firm</i>	102
In Conclusion	108
<b>Chapter Three: Learning to Find Home</b>	<b>111</b>
Introduction	111
Reinhabitation as Practice and Poetics	115
The <i>Walzen</i>	117
Boiled Lizards	121
The First Three <i>Walzen</i>	123
The Home <i>O</i>	127
The Final <i>Walzen</i>	130
In Conclusion	132
<b>In Conclusion: Writing Home</b>	<b>134</b>
Introduction	134
Other Voices	135
Returning Home	138
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>144</b>



**All These Rivers**  
(A Collection of Poetry)

## All These Rivers

### I

Give me	6
Descendant	7
Father	8
Islands	9
Menarche	10
Roses	11
He is Risen	12
Skinny Dip	13
The Great American Pastime	14
Bulbs	15
Reading the Bible in April	16
Rainier	17
Blue	18

### II

Affair	22
The Drive to School	23
Hazy Jane I	25
Red Road	26
Coyote	27
Black	28
Desiccant	29
Halls Creek Narrows	31
American Diners	32
Jemez Springs	33

Corolla	34
Leaving Colorado	35

### III

After the Ceremony	37
Science	39
Maybe in Missoula	40
Thunderheads	41
Rainier	42
Drought	43
Gun	44
The Adjacent Field	45
A Letter to My Mother	46

### IV

Feathers	49
Cast of an Irish Deer	50
To Please the Gods	51
The Living Planet	52
We Have Kissed the Four-Legged Gods Goodnight	53
Hancock Geese	54
Asylum	55

### V

The Doe	57
Hg	59
Clear Cut	61
Baby	62
What I Meant When I Said Goodnight	64

Inheritance	65
Rainier	66
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	67

I

## Give Me

a mountain that can bury me waist-deep  
in mudwash, ash, lava, pumice;  
from whose finned ridges, sharp and black  
as obsidian, I can throw myself to the welcoming  
white of glaciers – Kautz, Tahoma, Cowlitz,  
Carbon, Nisqually, Puyallup,  
Winthrop, Ingraham,  
Mowich, Emmons. Give me  
the five rivers, at spring-melt surge,  
fat on milky minerals.  
With them I will force open  
the turnstile of the mantle, cool my feet  
as I split the hot earth in two,  
make my way home.

## Descendant

Not from the warm heart  
of America or the flatlander folk  
our mother recalls  
drinking Whiskey Sours  
in her parents' Wisconsin garden –  
we are of these hornblende hills,  
Pacific, salted, our faces  
freckled with quartz, feldspar  
and St. Helen's ash.  
Here there is no long summer.

We are saplings  
grown in pine's shadow –  
stunted, pale, our nails black  
from digging loamy soil.  
The vibration of glaciers  
passing over granite  
echoes in our spines, our skin  
is woven from the wet  
spore of decay. But I am  
feverish from the seep

of magma, choked  
by the hot breath of the mantle.  
Sister, you must also  
smell the sulphur-smoking  
crater, hear the lisp  
red tongues of tube worms,  
feel the slip of the plate  
subducting beneath  
this fault. Tell me, sister,  
you also burn.

## **Father**

Your muscles, ready to self-arrest  
on the slopes of Dome, Jack or Adams,  
were familiar with holding your weight  
back from the knife-edged arêtes  
of Stuart, not something so light as a girl.

And your mouth that spoke Petzl,  
Patagonia, Marmot, Montbell  
fell silent on daughter,  
refused to coo the soft  
syllable my mother gave me.

But you agreed to teach me  
to tie a figure eight, place gear,  
stem, set an anchor –  
to heel hook and hand-jam  
without scraping my knuckles.

For birthdays you gave me lockers,  
quickdraws, rigid-stem friends.  
Christmas unwrapped Karhus  
and carbon fibre poles – you trained me  
to turn my skis with a Telemark knee.

It only took me following you  
through the Cascades, Sawtooths,  
Olympics, Sierras; to Vantage,  
Smith, Peshastin, Penticton;  
up Baker, Liberty Bell  
and Forbidden, for you to say it.

## Islands

I.

Rain pelts sand, shoulders, face;  
drowns Bellingham Bay  
beneath tasteless water.  
In the squall's shadow  
tips of fir, cedar, hemlock  
bow along the spine of Lummi Island.  
Thick with her resin, the wind threatens  
to pull me below the waves – legs slipping  
past seals, eel grass, dog sharks, skates –  
until the tide slides me up her flank,  
onto a shore black with mussel shells.

II.

We face the Salish Sea, a body of water  
with which I have no intimacy, dotted  
with islands I cannot name. Tonight  
we will not see the lights of Bellingham  
or hear semis on the interstate.  
Sea birds call through the dark,  
searching for their love,  
lost on the other side of a wave.

III.

When the dead seal washed ashore  
at the entrance of our fort,  
we knew it meant trouble.  
The coast guard was surely  
on its way. No touching,  
no telling our parents. Pretend  
we'd never seen it. Disassemble  
the fort and move up-beach. Tomorrow  
shall we have a look to see if it's still there?

IV.

When is an island  
not an island? From Fidalgo,  
over a bridge called Deception,  
wrought iron & welded, we drive  
to Whidbey, the water below  
empty but for currents fighting  
in white-capped anguish.  
Here, we are on the wrong side  
of the rain shadow, forest  
mixed with mist, clouds slung  
low over the hillside, drift wood  
piled on a beach that never dries.

## Menarche

My mother says,  
I am ripe  
for the slaughter  
of a man's touch.  
Warns that if  
I stay in the surf  
I'll sink  
with the weight  
of blood  
in my womb.  
But I'm not  
coming in,  
am staying here  
until this wound  
is cauterized  
by brine.  
On my lips,  
against my thighs  
I desire only the cold  
kiss of the ocean.

## Roses

My grandfather's hobbies  
were roses and guilt –  
as thick as incense –  
fuelled by philandering  
and an absence  
of Hail Marys.

A pragmatic man,  
he didn't believe  
a virgin could forgive  
the weight of those sins.

I knew him by the roses  
which knit his garden  
into a quilt of white, pink, yellow.  
Roses he spoke to with pet names  
and delicate tones.

Cut and bunched  
at the peak of bloom,  
sipping water from half-filled  
mason jars, his roses  
came home with us  
after June visits.

Even in winter, when coastal clouds  
held rain just above  
our heads and us women  
stayed inside reading tea leaves,  
he'd dig out a favourite –  
Sweet Juliet, Pegasus, Othello –  
pruned back to nub,  
ready for replanting  
in my mother's garden.

It was from him she learned  
to lace the hole  
with blood and bone meal,  
the proper ways to encourage new growth  
by trimming spent blossoms,  
when to pick  
the fat red hips.

## He is Risen

After we have drunk the wine,  
unhinged the host from the roofs  
of our mouths, sung Morning Has Broken,  
been forgiven our year's worth  
of sins, extinguished the last of the altar candles  
and eaten a slice of sheet cake  
bearing *He is Risen!* in yellow icing,  
the priest shakes our hands  
and we exit with peace  
and blessings. But I am worried  
by the resurrection. Imagining  
how the ground could bulge  
with past cats or dogs or fish rising  
from their small graves.  
Or how an ancestor might push  
back the gravestone.  
Alighting from death's hangover,  
perhaps still drunk and sputtering  
loudly in broken English,  
what wisdom could he pass?  
Would it be that of the soil,  
roots and trees – how a five foot trunk  
could be felled by two men.  
Or would he speak of the valley's  
pre-dam rivers – so thick with fish  
he thought they were made of silver,  
and of time before this city,  
before pylons and power stations,  
when houses were lit from within.

## **Skinny Dip**

I do not let my mother's warnings,  
curfews or the dead – those beautiful boys  
drowned earlier in the summer  
(drugs, a dare failed, cracked skull,  
broken neck) when the Lake  
was high and cold – stop me.

Floating in the black, I imagine  
their bodies – never recovered –  
rising beneath me, pressing my hips  
level with the surface of the water;  
my navel, nipples, eyes and lips  
mimicking the constellations

above me. In ripples  
and waves I hear them whisper  
my name and feel their tongues,  
strong from gulping great mouthfuls  
of water, licking my neck,  
shoulders, the soles of my feet.

## **The Great American Pastime**

Deep in the ninth  
the Mariners keep the game alive  
with two on base,  
the winning run at the plate.  
Dave Neihaus booms  
this homily from the pulpit  
of the transistor radio.

Here at the cabin  
there is no premonition  
of autumn, though the larch  
on Ingalls Pass blaze golden,  
Stuart has already seen snow  
and the pennant race  
is well underway.

Across the orange silk  
of California poppies,  
the moth battered screen door,  
spiders spinning bobbins  
out of flies, winter-warped  
deck boards and your barefoot,  
outstretched legs

the porch light  
falls as the day's heat  
fades into the dry black  
of sunflower seeds.  
And we wait  
for the pitch, commentary  
and Kingdome silent.

Even the crickets hush the pines,  
who hush the wind,  
which tries but fails to quiet  
the pound of your heart  
as you pray for the crack  
and the thunder of the stadium  
ringing the night like a bell.

## Bulbs

We know she is dying,  
but whether she'll be dying  
for six months or five years  
is anyone's guess. So we visit,  
prepare meals, bring flowers,  
promise we won't cry.

We teach ourselves  
to crochet, and when her hair  
grows in, the soft grey of goose down,  
we trim it neat around her ears,  
scatter the clippings  
on the lawn for nesting birds.

And when she gives us the bulbs –  
not because she's dying,  
but because she has too many  
bulbs and too little space –  
we accept her lilies,  
narcissus, hyacinth, dahlias.  
You brake gently on the drive  
home, take corners slow.

And we wait for last  
frost, for a time to dig holes,  
bury bulbs, let our fingers weep  
into the soil. *Go to the earth,*  
we'll say, *here is a place*  
*you can rest.*

## Reading the Bible in April

April is new and hot.  
The tulips have wilted  
to slips of red  
and the daffodils  
cut back or clipped  
for bouquets – their stalks  
are neat and blunt.

There are bees  
kissing the hyacinths'  
many open mouths  
so I crease the holy page.  
Fatter, they emerge –  
carriers of the gold  
and impotent pollen.

Drawn like the bees,  
I inhale the hyacinth's earth-breath.  
Fed by ten months of soil,  
this is a darkness  
only the dead understand,  
only the ground possesses,  
and whatever power  
they have to wake,  
a wonder as mysterious  
as the resurrection.

## Rainier

I am in love  
with this mountain  
that all summer long  
threatens to kill  
my father,  
swallow him whole  
in the pale blue  
of the Emmons,  
crush him  
beneath an avalanche,  
or send him sliding  
down the Kautz –  
his crampons failing  
on pre-dawn ice.  
This mountain I love  
will one day  
destroy the city  
I grew up in,  
unearth the graves  
of my relatives  
and knock  
down the door  
of my childhood home –  
fill the basement with silt,  
strip the kitchen wallpaper,  
strangle the chandelier –  
carry hydrangeas,  
hyacinth bulbs and coffins  
down the Duwamish,  
out into the Sound.

## Blue

This is a colour. No,  
this is a family.  
I say wavelength, nanometre,  
terahertz and this  
becomes science  
the way blood turns family  
to DNA.

I have never known  
the meaning of blue blooded –  
only that we are not.  
But I know the veins of my arms  
and the fat, blue veining  
of my mother's legs – hereditary,  
she once told me.

She makes a map  
of our watershed: the Columbia,  
Chehalis, Nisqually, Skagit,  
Snohomish, Duwamish, Stillaguamish,  
Snoqualmie. Snoqualmie,  
a town (I was raised in)  
split by a river. No,

the river was not blue.  
This is the mistaken identity of water.  
This was the mistaken  
identity of me  
wrapped in a blue blanket.  
The river was mountain run-off,  
sedimentary leak, log jams

and algae. Who knew  
anything could set down roots  
in water so fast?  
I was the second daughter,  
a sedimentary layer of girl.  
My mother never  
forgave the nurses

for the momentary surprise  
and lifetime of disappointment  
they gave my family.  
My two step-brothers jump  
from the trestle bridge,  
their legs testing  
just how deep the river

sinks. I fall a lesser distance  
and learn the meaning

of black and blue  
and Shiner. Not ultramarine or cobalt,  
Prussian or Morton Salt –  
this is nothing synthetic,  
this is blood.

Home is a matter of paint on walls.  
Cerulean, they say, was the pigment  
most widely used to paint the sky.  
I ask for sky blue.  
I do not know then that sky is not a colour  
but a display of physics –  
a Rayleigh Scattering.

Outside the room with sky walls,  
two hyacinths grow.  
I must have looked the part  
of blue girl to those boys  
who brought them to my door.  
My father says the hyacinth  
is the grave good

of the flowering world.  
I learn the names of flowers:  
iris, anemone,  
cornflower, harebell,  
globe thistle, delphinium, phlox.  
I am taught the names  
of stones: azurite, lapis lazuli.

The first man I loved  
gave me lilies  
and an indigo ring.  
Together they looked  
like Chinese porcelain.  
Our relationship  
was not as delicate.

My mother with blue eyes  
is to me what the Madonna  
draped in blue robes  
is to a world  
of guilty Catholics.  
She keeps grandma's  
rosary on the bedside table,

its beads are the pale blue  
of crevasse.  
There are other names  
for this: cyan,  
robin's egg, powder.  
But none comes close to the cold

of those stones in her fingers.

I did not get her eyes,  
but my hands  
and feet are mirrors of hers.  
It is her voice I carry  
somewhere beyond memory,  
it is her voice I think of  
when I think of grace.

II

## **Affair**

*for my Father*

Each year, when the weather turns black he packs the car,  
pulls out of the driveway heading south,

seduced by red canyons, petroglyphs, dry river beds  
where the wind blows prickly as cactus.

He wants to put behind him the slow rotting cedars, squalid thump  
of foot on humus, granite peaks sagged under the weight of snow.

Dropping off the Blues, he skirts the tailbone of the Bitterroots,  
passes beneath cumulonimbus and Old Moon, through juniper forest,

ghost towns, gas stations, state-lines. In Mormon country,  
his morning cup percolates on the hood of the Corolla.

Somewhere south of Loa, he finds the light. Coolant indicator  
red as the Reef, he pulls off State Route 24 onto an unnamed road

to hike mesas, slick rock, narrows; pose as vulture bait on Hickman Arch,  
arms splayed to the sides, shirt bunched beneath his head.

Returning home brown, leathered, viscous coastal blood running warm  
and swift like the Fremont, he promises to take us with him next time.

## **The Drive to School**

We are driving  
the West Valley Highway.  
There is a hard frost on Carpinito's fields,  
the mountain is pink with alpine glow  
and you are still playing  
that Simon and Garfunkel tape  
you bought over the summer  
at a yard sale for a quarter.  
Up until then, I didn't know  
you liked music.

You tell me these were the songs  
you listened to before my father  
arrived with his electric riffs.  
I've heard about the afternoon  
he played from the roof  
of Anderson Hall.  
For a whole half hour  
the Whitman campus  
was his captive audience,  
and then the police arrived.

This was the album  
you listened to as you smoked dope  
with your teenage sweetheart  
in your parents' living room.  
You'd done your research,  
marijuana was no killer.  
This was Albuquerque, you were fifteen.  
All these years later  
you still have the turquoise ring  
he bought you.

The cassette plays a list  
of past lovers – each  
undoing the potential  
of my existence.  
Erase Kent, North Bend,  
Venice Beach and Howe  
from your inventory of addresses –  
replace the view of the mountain  
with fields of winter wheat,  
the slope of the Blues.

I am sure life would have been better  
if you had married Michael.  
You tell me you called him  
not long ago. Still  
living in Walla Walla –  
he grows night blooming flowers,

has an antique dining table,  
rides a five speed bicycle  
and cares for his mother.  
This was his favourite song.

## Hazy Jane I

She holds the wheel with both slender hands –  
not married then, but she wears a moonstone ring  
on her left ring finger, a silver band  
on her middle – shifts gears  
with the smoothness of our father,  
doesn't panic as the snow begins.

We had gone driving, just to drive.  
Took Central to Auburn, then turned back  
because this is what you do when you are eighteen  
and gasoline costs eighty-nine cents a gallon.  
What you do with your little sister  
when you come home for what you know  
will be the last Thanksgiving  
with the family all together.

Strip malls, used car lots, warehouses  
lost to white; silver-dollars settle  
on the windshield faster  
than the wipers remove them.  
*Isn't this great*, she says  
with her eyes on the road.

## Red Road

For you, it was always about the red rocks.  
Screw the old growth, moss and lichen,  
moonrise over the Columbia Plateau,

the pale curve of the Chuckanuts,  
perfect alignment of whitewashed volcanoes –  
Baker, Glacier, Rainier, St. Helens, Hood –

the scent of sage brush, alpine air biting your lungs.  
Forget those children you fathered,  
the salt of the ocean, the taste of Ileen's sweat.

Get on down the road,  
closer to the bone. Go watch  
the bitter fight between cadmium blue

and vermilion, blind yourself  
with the winter desert,  
I know nothing else will do

## **Coyote**

She swears she saw him Monday  
    cross West Valley Highway –  
to visit the bones of his road-killed brothers,  
    their spirits long ago lifted  
by the beaks of crows.

    Him again on the Green River's  
reeded-banks stalking coots and grebes,  
    his tufts of fur shed  
to blackberry thorns in Mill Creek's wood,  
    phantom figure in her headlights  
driving home from work.

    All Thursday night she laid awake  
to listen to his howl and yip.

    And in the dark of Saturday morning,  
caught in the kitchen window's cast light  
    his dog silhouette  
lean in its December coat –  
    nothing in his mouth  
since the Butlers' Manx went missing.

    Packless, she worries  
he is lonely. Has no idea where he goes  
    once he disappears  
beneath Pete's fence.

## Black

Off the old highway  
where Teanaway Road  
branches to North Fork  
and Twenty Nine Pines –  
there you'll find it.  
Not soft,  
sheep-face-black –  
warm muzzles haloed  
in steam. It's sharp  
as the slate-chip  
of a crow's wing, sharp  
enough to tool bone,  
bleed the life from a bear.  
Glossy like magpie beaks,  
chickadee caps,  
elderberries unpicked.  
This is the black  
of swan's feet,  
cohosh, the spots  
on maple leaves.  
Black of new moon  
that steals the road  
from your headlights,  
knits ponderosa to the sky.  
When this black asks  
you blindly into the forest –  
pull over, still the engine's  
hummingbird-thrum,  
get down on all fours  
and follow.

## Desiccant

I once loved a wet man.  
From his lips I drank the Pacific,  
the salted water of the Sound,  
Fragrance Lake –  
trout-green and shallow.

I followed him the weeping months –  
February, March, April –  
licking dew from devil's club,  
nettle, bracken fern, sequoia.  
He promised to baptize me  
in the Strait of Georgia –  
said with him I would never thirst.

But Father, haunted by clouds  
and distrustful of tides  
as loyal to the moon,  
complained I'd grown soggy –  
heavy as a wave. He warned

of the salmon scales  
that would soon stud my tongue,  
of the gills I'd grow,  
the chill I would suffer –  
said my hands would turn to fins.  
And what use would they be  
if I could not grip granite?

Beneath bare cattle country sky  
we drove I-90 East  
to where water is contained in rivers –  
Columbia, Cle Elum, Yakima –  
fed fat by Cascadian glaciers.

Passing ponderosa forests  
we joined the ranks  
of rattle snakes and sagebrush;  
crossed mesas that cracked  
open into gorges,  
their wide jaws toothed  
with basalt columns.

There he tied me – my skin  
to lizard, heart to blaze,  
body to be purified by desert sun.  
From me he drained  
the sluice of the Duwamish,

Snohomish, Skagit, Green – gave thanks  
as rain and ocean left my pores.

Now my legs are thin as a raven's,  
my hair coarse as coyote pelt.  
I no longer thirst, but burn  
and flick my tongue to the Palouse wind.  
Cry *Father, I am cured. I am saved.*

## Halls Creek Narrows

The pressed throat  
of this canyon greets me  
with mute roseate strata.  
A different silence  
than that of driving the straight line  
of midcentury highway,  
cutting in half abandoned Okanogan towns,  
the soft-wood siding of prospectors' shacks  
turned black.

Not the silence of blizzard –  
even the falling snow speaks  
to my windshield, shoulders, the branches  
of cedar it settles on.  
Nor is it the quiet of fogged-in beaches,  
the muffled unseen ocean.

This is the silence  
of the hulls of expired cactus,  
of corn moons  
and sun-bleached cattle bone –  
the silence of a land deficient  
in the drip of water.

Unspeaking, in choked pools  
it holds the dead –  
feathers strung to tendons,  
tiny femurs and skulls,  
a deer carcass likely fallen from the lip,  
rabbit pelt and paw,  
a scatter of Fremont  
cottonwood leaves –  
and briefly, my reflection.

## American Diners

I miss the diners that like mirages  
materialize out of nothing  
alongside empty highways,  
that no matter how remote  
have at least three pick-ups, a Cadillac  
and a couple of semis in the lot.  
These are diners where waitresses  
still wear yellow gingham dresses  
with white aprons and sensible shoes;  
call you *honey-pie* or *darlin*;  
ask if you'll be having your eggs  
sunny side up or over easy;  
Ranch, French or Thousand Island dressing.  
In between showing to tables  
and taking orders  
they circle with pots of regular and decaf –  
no one's cup is ever empty.

Here a slice of pie – banana, Boston, chocolate  
or coconut cream; pecan, apple, cherry,  
key lime, lemon meringue, peanut butter –  
comes free with a meal on Tuesday.  
There is maple syrup, freezer jam  
and both varieties of Tabasco on the table.  
Order buckwheat pancakes;  
huevos rancheros;  
a short stack with home fries,  
two eggs and two strips of bacon  
when you pass at 1am,  
pushing on to the next State over.  
Apart from your headlights'  
cross-eyed vision and their occasional flash  
on a stunned jackrabbit,  
coyote or yucca, this light  
will be the last you see  
until morning.

## Jemez Springs

Despite the ochre scent of sulphur,  
the springs elude us as we descend,  
fir and spruce hugging the road,  
branches haunted by night.  
Nine days in the desert,  
sunburnt skin peeling off our noses,  
grit beneath our fingernails, lips  
chapped – we are desperate for water.

Each blue vein and freckle on the map  
proves non-existent. Where  
we're from, winter and drought  
do not travel together.  
But we do not wish for fog or rain,  
rivers bursting their banks, glaciers  
hung from the Cascades,  
the desolate Pacific cold.

Subterranean, hot, soft  
with sediment – we want the water  
that evades this landscape, that breathes  
steam through porous ground.  
But the saloon's neon glow  
guides us into town and we give up  
the ghost of the wild, resign  
ourselves to the Bath House,

become two road weary tourists,  
willing to pay six dollars  
for an hour in a cement tub  
that has seen too many backsides.  
We strip off clothes thick with sweat  
and dust – our naked skin a patchwork  
of adobe and the birch-bark-white  
of our native latitude.

My hair drifts in the water like kelp,  
I stare up at cobwebs and wood beams,  
listen to the faucet drip, crackle  
of my landlocked ears, our syncopated breath.  
And I remember summers spent  
floating in the ocean – belly up,  
suspended by salt, my heart  
consumed by the silence of water.

## Corolla

Deafened by freeway noise,  
the window rolled down since the handle  
fell off outside Easton, I shout  
all the five star routes  
on north facing walls  
as the sweat from my thighs  
revives a milkshake  
spilled in the upholstery –  
the thermometer of the Ellensburg Dairy Queen  
read 114 when we pulled over  
to top up the radiator  
from a two-gallon jug of water.

The one cup holder  
keeps upright a mug of coffee  
that floats a soured film of milk,  
fingernail clippings and floss.  
Held down by three strips of duct tape,  
the trunk threatens to spring loose  
and litter the asphalt  
with our possessions. But no one  
follows close behind.  
No one at all on this road  
to the back-half of nowhere,

save for tumble weed  
and vultures hitching our tail-wind  
in search of splattered jack rabbits.  
This far from the Sound  
the radio plays: Christian, Country, Mexican Polka.  
So I study guidebooks and the horizon;  
study signposts for exits  
and freeways, for cities I will never visit;  
read signs for Barley, Corn, Alfalfa;  
and your face – stubble showing  
after just a day on the road; and your hair,  
much more grey than I remembered.

## Leaving Colorado

Above dust and winter-bare elm,  
a lone highway that bends  
only once, to the right,  
immediately lost from view  
in a pine forest  
more black than green.  
And rusting corrugated roofs,  
gravel drives, skinny dogs  
digging holes  
beneath a chain-link fence.

Above the pioneer cemetery  
where babies and mothers  
were buried together,  
where snake-bites, cholera  
and gangrened-gun-shot wounds  
put men early into their graves

I try to remember  
home – fog, dark as slate,  
swallowing children,  
boats, cedar, mountains;  
the weight of salt  
on my shoulders – above  
wrens clinging to willows,  
valley yellow with aspen,  
a river, tightened by drought,  
homesick for an ocean  
it will never reach.

# III

## After the Ceremony

Sweat poured  
down your face,  
the bridesmaids'  
cleavage, and left crescents  
beneath my arms,  
stained my white satin  
beige. The dahlias  
and guests were limp,  
heat-struck  
as the champagne bottles  
that burst their corks,  
but all the while  
the barometer  
was plummeting,  
lenticulars stacking  
thick over Rainier.

Last to exit  
the dance floor,  
our friends  
having staggered  
to the backyard  
for a kiss and grope,  
I turned off the music,  
brought in half-drunk  
bottles and what was left  
of the cake, ate a slice  
on my way to the bedroom,  
where I found you  
asleep, raised my dress  
to my waist and roused  
you just long enough  
to consummate  
the marriage.

Still dark,  
I woke  
to the rain's  
pulse, its roof-hammering  
heart beat steadier  
than my own,  
slid from the sheets,  
feet hitting  
the hardwood cold  
of childhood nightmares  
that always ended  
at my mother's bedside,  
her sleep-voice  
saying, get in.  
The day's fever

had broken.

First West Hill,  
then the valley  
swallowed in cloud,  
thunder growled  
up Titus, Kennebeck,  
Guiberson, joined me  
at eight-one-seven  
Hemlock Street.

On the porch I met lightning,  
a bullwhip bolt  
pulling neon plumes  
from the power line,  
illuminating the drive way  
and neighbour's garden;  
I wanted you  
beside me.

Night on my skin,  
I returned  
to the crisp bedroom  
heat, ready to tell  
you what I'd seen –  
stopped when I heard  
your pillowed breath.  
And there I lay,  
waiting for morning,  
the sound of water pouring  
from swollen gutters  
filling the growing  
silence between  
claps of thunder,  
sleep as distant  
as the storm.

## Science

Though your feet ache with cold and the sea  
is chopped by wave, I tell you, *don't be afraid*.

Remember how we learned freezing point  
by adding ice to salt and water?

How simple it was to make  
mercury step down the ladder.

This experiment is no more complex,  
but instead of ice we use our limbs.

See how in this brine the blood climbs  
from our hands to our hearts' keeping.

Now kiss the cerulean of my lips  
to test my theory

that one's cold flesh can warm another's –  
mouth to mouth, belly to belly.

## Maybe in Missoula

Ever since we crossed the state line  
you'd been searching for square-chinned men

in Stetsons, listening for slow John Wayne drawls,  
but everyone sounded the same as they did in Seattle,

just like me. You wanted stories of shoot outs,  
pistol cocking thumbs blown off

in show downs with the law. But the cops  
were busy pulling over out-of-towners,

taking the drunken Nam Vet from street corner  
to station; Walmart sold ammo now.

If only you'd been born here, you'd have ridden bulls –  
arm raised to the Gods of Yippee-ki-yay, the seconds

stacking up like vertebrae. You'd have smoked  
Marlboros, sipped bourbon, worn Wranglers,

howled to the fat Rocky moon. But where  
had your gun slinging, whiskey drinking,

chew spitting heroes run to? Where were the buffalo,  
Kit Carson, Butch Cassidy, Billy the Kid?

Gone with the days of old men in rockers on porches,  
straw in their mouths, shot guns and dogs at their sides.

Gone with the stage coaches, train robbers, pioneers  
and cowpokes, Cheyenne chiefs in regalia and buckskins.

We'd missed the rodeo's silver spangled calf-ropers  
and the sky-high perms of neckerchiefed queens.

But it won't hurt to keep on driving. Maybe in Missoula  
there's a tavern fit to drown your sorrows –

its name something honky like The Wolf Den, Fur Trapper  
or Last Chance Saloon – where I'll teach you to shoot

tequila with salt, Tabasco, lime; sway you to the singer's  
smoke-stained vocals crooning Patsy Cline. We can dance

the big sky morning in with a *heel and a toe, heel and a toe,*  
*slide slide slide.*

## **Thunderheads**

Over Salisbury Plain  
clouds gather, stiff  
as the whale-bone-white  
spine of the Olympics,  
and I pretend I am safe  
in the belly of the Skagit,  
thirty-six miles from home.

## **Rainier**

It's only a white lie,  
saying I am homesick  
for the Mountains.

This keeps me on the surface:  
granite, ice, snowfield,  
the thin line of Rainier  
which divides  
it from clouds.

But what I miss  
are her hands,  
creases and cracks  
lined with soil,  
her delicate bird-bones,  
soft cheek and hair  
brushing my face  
as she holds me tight.

I am even homesick  
for the word,  
which I rarely have reason  
to say, and can't do  
without crying.

## **Drought**

My mother calls to tell me it hasn't rained in thirty-nine days,  
and that started by something as simple as a spark  
fired from a low hanging muffler or the flick  
of a butt from a window – the East is burning.

Full on the Okanogan's grassland and towns,  
pioneer shacks, penned-in cattle, barnfuls of hay –  
the blaze jumped the Yakima and started its demolition  
of Cle Elum and Kittitas County.

They've closed State Route 97. They're draining the Columbia  
with no sign of progress. On the news –  
Sunlight Waters smoulder-black and mandatory evacuations.  
No one can make out if the cabin still stands,

but all the Mariners' home games have been played  
with the roof open and the Seafair forecast looks good.  
The smoke-hazed sun sets red at Des Moines  
and on her line, four loads dry in a day.

## Gun

This, you tell me,  
is not a gun.  
You slip its name  
between Bernini,  
Botticelli, Bosch.  
You purse your lips  
and say Beretta.

This is a tree  
that grows in the snug  
between your chest  
and arm. And you  
are the spreader  
of its leaded seeds.

This is an heirloom.  
A legacy you will pass  
to your son and he to his,  
and so on and so on,  
until no one remembers  
to whom it first belonged.

This is steel given breath  
by the power  
of conical locking lungs,  
two perfectly round nostrils.  
You take it to the fields  
where it can breathe.

But when you are away  
I hear it rasp for air.  
And though I try to let it out,  
before I've even turned  
the key of the safe –  
that thing – it always  
says *bang*.

## **The Adjacent Field**

Here there is nothing to fear – the lamb  
caught in the barbed wire  
has been all but covered by nettles,  
its rot overpowered by thistle.  
For three years in this forest, the doe  
has known my scent. She stops to eat clover,  
one ear tuned to my approach.  
Unlike the coyote,  
the fox is more cat than dog.  
Yet unseen, my mind fables him as a slink of rust  
in the underbrush, a silent stalker  
of nests or voles. But there is something metallic  
like the dropped cutlery or the fall  
of a hammer in the sound  
of the wood pigeon taking flight from the ash.  
And though for the time they are blocked by leaves,  
the red flags warn of machine guns and mortars.  
The tanks are just a field away  
and enough to make me long for the fear  
of wolves or bear.

## A Letter to My Mother

Mother, it was me.  
I was the one who finished  
the apricot brandy,  
blended whiskey and bitters –  
relics of your father, whose faith  
hung on the certainty of cocktail hour  
and the strut of a woman  
in kitten heels.

On Sundays  
after I extinguished  
the candles I hid,  
tucked with my robes  
in the vestry, eating the sweet-body  
of the white-flour Christ.  
I washed him down  
with holy wine.

Does it matter  
that I broke into the ship yard?  
Against the hull of an ocean-liner  
a boy I didn't love pressed me –  
and I worried about leaving fingerprints,  
criminal records,  
if honour roll students  
were offered shortened sentences.

I stole the green Tabasco  
from the Horseshoe cafe, forgive me.  
Forgive me for caging a bee  
and forgetting to let it go,  
for forging your signature  
on school forms, standing on graves,  
smoking cloves, sneaking out  
of my bedroom window.

Forgive me for leaving,  
it was never my plan  
to marry and move  
across the Atlantic.  
I hate that ocean,  
though I have never touched it,  
hate the entire continent  
east of the Cascades.

I am lost in a country too small  
for bison, Studebakers,  
the red barns of the Skagit.  
Here there are no mountains – just farm,  
field, moorland and paddock

crimped all too soon by coast.  
This sea named *North*  
spreads east in irony or deception.

I search its beaches for life:  
a sea star, moon snail, jelly fish  
or mussel – remembering  
how their black shells oozed orange  
after being dropped by gulls –  
but find only serrated rock  
scattered with limpets, limp fans of kelp,  
washed pebbles and glass.

My husband tells me  
I am not well.  
Mother, I have forgotten  
the direction our blood  
and rivers flow,  
the many names for salal  
and the outer islands  
of the San Juan archipelago.

The raven and his light  
have left. Winters are darker  
and I grow bitter.  
Summers are wetter and I turn pale.  
This land is so treeless  
it breaks my heart.  
The heart of my home  
is made from stone.

Sometimes I dream  
I am held in your arms  
or the salmon are returning  
from the ocean  
or it is March and the fields  
west of Mt. Vernon  
are white with Snow Geese.  
But the geese take flight

as soon as I arrive  
and the salmon,  
though they scale ladder  
after ladder and thrust  
against current and rock,  
never reach the stream  
of their birth  
and I wake, as ever, alone.

# IV

## **Feathers**

Because she shields her heart with feathers –  
hawk, osprey, owl, egret – she believes  
her home is in the trees.

From pine needles, pelt of vole,  
beetle shell, acorn hull, rowan leaf  
and spotted maple she builds her nest.

Always sharp, her lover's  
mouth could have been a beak.  
And though she swore she saw him  
flying low over the reeds,  
he called her name,  
but never moved to seek her.

## Cast of an Irish Deer

This is how I imagine death will arrive,  
without cloak or flesh to cover  
vertebrae – the blank space  
between finger-thin ribs  
clear demarcation of other from living.

Not the white one would expect  
of bone, but cast from an oily, unknown ore,  
he towers on four femurs  
no bigger than my wrists. Of course  
his cloven hooves are pointed.

Long palmed and clawed,  
his antlers float as a veil  
blown back by wind.  
The sleek scythe of his jaw  
laughs with hunger, eyeless sockets  
say there is no need for sight  
where I am going.

## To Please the Gods

Offer them the coin from Corinth,  
dogs' tooth pendant,  
kohl, cowslip, gold lock ring,  
jet bead, terracotta fruit  
and tortoise,

flint hand-axe  
and bronzes in the form  
of a votive leaf,  
Minerva weight, wheel,  
figurine of a priestess.

Give them the bone hair-comb,  
perfume container  
in the form of a doe,  
head of Dionysos,  
camphor beetle,

limpets and winkles.  
Make a game of guessing  
which artefact they most desire.  
But just to be safe, you'd better  
empty your pockets –

give them your house keys,  
wallet and phone. It's time  
to part with that plectrum  
you've had for years.  
Cut a lock of your hair,

pull out an eyelash.  
See if it pleases them  
to have the taste of me  
you carry on your saliva.  
Rip pages from your journal,

hand over that dog-eared Dunn  
you've been reading.  
Let them lap at your sweat,  
take your pens.  
They may demand

your shirt and the shoes  
from your feet. Be obliging,  
give them what they want.  
But darling – not a single  
drop of blood.

## The Living Planet<sup>1</sup>

is dead and none of us are where we ought to be – not this auk,  
raccoon, lynx, beaver, fulmar, grey wolf or bison.

It is not out of morbid curiosity – though I would like to know  
who fired the felling shot and what happened

to their eyes, hearts, lungs and bellies that would have been full  
on flesh or grass (are they preserved

in canopic jars, offerings to some other gods?  
Or were they left to the crows, ground into dog food?) –

but because through them I've learned  
to mourn our shared losses, that each day I return

to sit on this bench or walk amongst them, reading  
the bestowed names: *Canis lupis*, *Fulmar glacialis*,

*Castor canadensis*, *Sturnus vulgaris*, *Panthera tigris*.  
I carry this syntax strange on my tongue

and wear their death-pelts. And when I come home  
and beg you to make love to me (your words, not mine) –

what I really want is to have these furs and feathers  
taken off my shoulders; the hooves, beaks, claws and horns

removed from my side; have all use of language  
stripped from my mouth. Help me forget

the red deer fawn and the *ovis aries* taken from their mothers  
by joining me in this one act of creation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The 'Living Planet' is the name of an exhibition at the Great North Museum: Hancock.

## **We Have Kissed the Four-Legged Gods Goodnight**

*after Tamsin Nagel's, Enclave (ii)*

There a dainty hoof points from around the trunk,  
a wing, bristled wolf pelt, boar tusk,  
udders, tail, round ear, pointed ear,  
fur, feathers and the neck of a doe – incomplete  
gestures laid down among the snags.  
Hear no pulse, grunt, growl, scratch,  
howl, groan – not even a leaf to rustle.  
See no breath curl from nostrils  
or ribs heaved in pant. No steam  
rises from the furrows.

And where is the moon (saviour,  
guardian, protector,  
companion?) that was made  
to watch over them?  
On the altar beside the candlesticks,  
flower arrangements, incense and bells,  
in a box made from maple  
and padlocked with solid brass (the key  
is in the reverend's pocket)  
it is rumoured her heart is still beating.

## Hancock Geese

No longer bothered  
by their attitude of cool detachment –  
the bred urge to migrate –  
this autumn I fell  
back in love with the geese.  
With spread arms and strained neck  
I praised still afternoons  
and the sun's half-light slicking the fields  
for setting the correct scene  
for their passage.

But something akin  
to longing brings me here  
to stand in this place  
from which the geese  
have only, but always,  
just left. In time  
I learn to ignore the strings  
suspending them in flight.

\* \* \*

The sun has changed its position  
and so I do, but these birds –  
always home-coming –  
never land. Their silence  
sifts from my thoughts  
the snow geese  
making their return  
to Mt. Vernon –

how they used to call  
me from chores  
and wake me from sleep  
until distracted  
from the simple task of breathing,  
I no longer questioned  
the journey it would take to greet them  
or how – as they lifted  
in winged crescendo – I also rose  
into the Skagit sky, the blue.

## **Asylum**

Welcome home. We have  
been building a bed for you  
from wheat, oat and barley straw;  
alfalfa, timothy, fescue –  
catchers of the last long shadows.  
Rest your cheek a while  
on a pillow of clover.

No more sleeping out  
in the waves, your feet cold  
and eyes stung with salt.  
Come, let us warm your hands,  
pull this flaxen shawl  
around those slim shoulders.

V

## The Doe

I.

Five minutes into my run,  
I came across the doe.

Save for her heaving ribs,  
she didn't struggle

as I slid down the bank  
to kneel beside her

in a bed of blackberry  
and last autumn's alder.

Helpless, I stroked  
her white muzzle and neck.

Whispered – *There, there.*  
*There, there* –

as morning droned  
on Lakeway and the sun

began to lift the frost.  
Eventually I rose, staggered

home on feet numbed  
and blunt as hooves.

I tried to wash her from me,  
but the steam

of her swift breathing  
filled the bathroom.

I wear her scent at my wrists,  
the touch of fur a secret.

II.

Because once I swerved  
to miss a buck on this road,  
the doe is on my mind  
as I slow to greet taillights  
and a shower of glass  
across the highway.

Guests from Oyster Bar  
shiver on the kerb, the chef  
conducts traffic, and a man  
with a face of Chuckanut stone  
looms over the body

of a motorcyclist.  
How small it seems  
as they pull a Pendleton blanket  
head to toe.

I know the radio plays,  
know sirens blare as I pull aside  
to let police cars pass,  
but the only sound I hear  
is my voice as I imagine it,  
telling you about the doe.

How I tried  
to comfort her  
the way I remembered  
and wanted my mother's touch –  
held again against her chest,  
the smooth of her hand  
over my hair.

I hear me tell you  
of her animal warmth,  
how I longed to lay beside her  
the way I used  
to press against you  
in the minutes before sleep.

## Hg

No, I won't be caught  
picking pin bones from my throat,  
I know this water:  
reflection of winter sky,  
Lummi peninsula,  
the lights of the marina;  
white waves when storms  
unsettle the Pacific, gulls  
drifting like unanchored buoys,  
barnacled rocks, porpoise fins,  
the sharp exhale of seals,  
the tires and nets coughed  
ashore by the tide.

I've pushed off  
watched the graphite line  
of the railway  
thin, the shipping terminal  
turn miniature.  
Watched the Douglas firs,  
cedars and hemlocks  
that edge the city  
to the lip of the Bay  
blend into the foothills,  
Mt. Baker disappear  
beneath the cast nets  
of nimbostratus.

I've seen Orca bones,  
skeletal ships,  
kelp beds, oil slicks,  
the ghosts of our city's past –  
men lost to exploration, lumber, coal.  
With a blade of eelgrass  
I flossed my teeth,  
scrubbed with an urchin,  
swilled salt and plankton.  
Slippery as herring  
I flowed with the mercury  
from krill to whale,  
to the ocean

and back  
in November's run of chum  
as they searched  
the Nooksack  
for their natal stream.  
Tempted by spinners, spoons,  
marabou jigs, drift rigs,  
they took the hook

and fat with roe, belly  
pressed to silver belly  
returned to Bellingham –  
all I knew of this water  
distilled by flesh.

## Clear Cut

*“In America, this wilderness  
Where the axe echoes with a lonely sound”*

– Louis Simpson

I blame it on our forefathers  
who sweated and sawed,

stripped bare the beast until nothing  
stood between them

and what they claimed as theirs.  
Hills left to scab healed

into cities which raised sons  
who satisfied themselves trimming hedges,

pulling weeds, mowing lawns;  
sons who found fearsome

the thicket at the slope of our bellies  
and decided it was our turn to cut.

## **Baby**

*for Opal*

Welcome  
to winter, I say.  
Welcome to wood  
stoves burning,  
and frost bitten trees,  
their sap-stiffened  
branches  
holding against  
the wind.  
To sky,  
tight-fisted clouds,

rooftops,  
telephone lines,  
streets dressed  
in ashen grit  
from what we hoped  
would be the last  
snow storm  
of the year,  
the red, green, amber  
of traffic lights  
on Electric Avenue,

to the slamming doors  
of pickup trucks,  
men, from lumberjacks bred,  
fuelling-up  
at the 76  
on diesel,  
jerky and chew  
before turning towards  
newly-built homes  
in old growth  
clear-cuts.

Listen, the chickadee  
and varied thrush  
are singing,  
soon it will  
be the rock dove,  
and great horned owl,  
whose voices  
in the unfolding  
dusk speak  
of more  
than darkness.

Darkness  
you know  
from the blackened  
kiln-curve of the womb,  
but not the constellated sky  
or gibbous moon,  
waxing  
the neighbourhood  
with her bone white.  
Welcome, Baby,  
to night.

## What I Meant When I Said Goodnight

Stay until the bats  
retire, and drunk  
on stars, the moon trips  
over the horizon.  
Until Orion  
unbuckles his belt,  
our skin solves  
the equation for dew point  
and our ears can tell  
the incantation  
of the owl –  
wings splitting  
the night into whispers,  
pushing the tempo  
of the field mouse's  
pin-heart to presto –  
from that of the pigeon.  
Until we have read  
every black knot  
on the birch, written  
poems to lichen,  
shared bark with deer  
and against our nails  
they've scratched  
their velvet. Until  
we are fluent  
in conifer, seeds  
mistake our legs  
for nurse logs,  
moss grows  
from our pores  
and the crow sleeps  
on our shoulders – stay.

## **Inheritance**

Leave me your rope and rack  
of Petzl Spirits, cams and aliens,  
your Anasazi velcros, plastic boots,

and Fischer touring crowns,  
though we both know one-eighties  
are far too long for me.

Into the Schonhofen –  
backpack perfectly sculpted  
to your spine,

the fraternal twin of my mother's  
which has rested empty  
in the attic since you split – pack

your fleece-bare Patagonia,  
Pocket Rocket, Platypus  
and 'condom bag'

which barely kept you warm  
during the summer  
of ninety seven.

Johannesburg's glaciers  
etched by drought and shadow,  
the black rock of Forbidden,

Sahale Arm in September,  
I-90 rolling like magic  
on the drive to Vantage,

waking in parking lots  
on cold mornings before the climb  
anxiety knotted like hunger,

the imprint of basalt  
and granite on your palms,  
your skin, a map of wrinkles

as creased as the Cascades,  
and altitude-thickened blood –  
all these are mine already.

## **Rainier**

Up from the river valley, from the yawn  
of farm land, second growth, moss-laid floor  
and the trunks of cedar.

From salmonberry, huckleberry,  
neon yellow lichen and the orange boom  
of mushroom. Beyond spruce  
and fir stunted by altitude  
to heather tufts and stone outcrops  
far above the tree line.

See the herd of mountain goats in a cloud of wool.

Across a mile of moraine,  
the mountain rests on its haunches –  
summer-thinned, its grey ribs show  
beneath feathered glaciers.

Here I pull you close to feel the bones  
of your fingers between mine.

## Acknowledgements

*Ambit*: 'What I Meant When I Said Goodnight'

*Butcher's Dog*: 'The Living Planet,' 'Maybe in Missoula'

*The Irish Literary Review*: 'Skinny Dip'

*The Lifeboat*: 'Halls Creek Narrows,' 'Science'

*POEM*: 'Give Me,' 'Cast of an Irish Deer'

*Poetry London*: 'Rainier,' 'Black,' 'Leaving Colorado,' 'After the Ceremony,' 'To Please the Gods,' 'Menarche,' 'We Have Kissed the Four-Legged Gods Goodnight'

'Affair' was highly commended in the *RSPB/Rialto Nature Poetry Competition*.

'Blue' appears in *The Poetics of the Archive* (2015), an anthology celebrating the Bloodaxe Archive and the Newcastle Poetry Festival

'Clear Cut' and 'Descendant' appear in *Halleluiah for 50ft Women* (Bloodaxe 2015).

'Asylum,' 'Feathers,' 'Cast of an Irish Deer,' 'Hancock Geese,' 'The Living Planet,' 'To Please the Gods,' and 'We Have Kissed the Four-Legged Gods Goodnight' and were written during residencies at the Great North Museum: Hancock and the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne.



**Beyond the Temple,  
Beyond the Pond:**  
Deep Ecology  
and Contemporary Writing  
of the American West

## **Introduction**

### Deep Ecology as Philosophy, Practice and Literature

*Nature: The phenomena of the natural world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape and the other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations. – OED Definition*

*Nature is not a place to visit, it is home...The physical universe and all its properties – I would prefer to use the word nature in this sense. – Gary Snyder*

### **Introduction**

While it can be argued that much of contemporary Western American writing is “rooted in the ongoing relationship, or conversation, among the human, the plant and animal, the land, and the supernaturals,” in this thesis I will suggest that a subset of Western writers are engaged in an important process of *rewriting* the position of the human within the natural world, and that this process is Deep Ecological.<sup>2</sup> Whereas *All These Rivers*, through praxis, seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the tenets of Deep Ecology can be adapted into creative methods and principles, this study will critically explore how those tenets are being expressed, and engaged with, in the works of other contemporary Western American writers.<sup>3</sup> Though in no way to do I claim that the West has found a perfect human/nature balance, by pioneering a literature which embodies a Deep Ecological philosophy and practice through theme and craft it provides a terrain where questions of how to live better on this earth are being discussed.

Because of their influence on my creative development and, what I perceive to be, their significance within this idiom, Annie Dillard’s *Holy the Firm* (1977) and Ellen Meloy’s *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* (1999) will serve as a case study. Close consideration will be given to the role played by the physical terrain of the West, and their relationship to that terrain, in shaping their consciousness and the imaginative capacity of their writing. Utilising texts which share points of resonance but are at the same time dissimilar, opens lines of thought which illuminate the depth and complexity of this textuality and highlights that what constitutes a literature of Deep Ecology is not rigid, but fluid. Though the modes of

---

<sup>2</sup> Gunn Allen, Paula. Preface. *Writing the Southwest*. By David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, eds. Boston: A Plume Book – Penguin, 1995. (xvii-xxiv). Print. p. xxi

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this thesis the ‘American West’ will be defined as all American lands west of the Rockies. ‘Contemporary’ will refer to writing from 1974 onward.

expression may vary, its authors are united by the common belief that literature can help us to re-imagine “how [one] can be alive” and “help people love the world”.<sup>4</sup>

### **Deep Ecology as Philosophy and Practice**

Deep Ecology is an environmental philosophy which asserts that our current ecological crisis is linked to negative cultural attitudes towards nature: “that nature is something less than authentic, that nature is not as alive as man is, or as intelligent”.<sup>5</sup> With respect to Western Civilization, Deep Ecologists believe that these attitudes derive from “Judeo Christian assertions of duality between God and creation and a hierarchy placing humans next to God in dominion over nature”.<sup>6</sup> Believing humankind’s alienation from the natural world is at the heart of our destructive environmental practices, Deep Ecologists make a call for a cultural and spiritual paradigm shift which transforms humankind’s relationship to nature through re-contextualizing the place of the human within the biological community. They call for a cultural shift from “anthropocentrism to ecocentrism” and an active rejection of “perception[s], values, and lifestyles [which are] ecologically destructive”.<sup>7</sup>

Though Deep Ecology gained momentum during the “Ecological Revolution of the 1960s,” (Sessions ix) it remained unnamed until 1972 when the qualifier ‘Deep’ was ascribed by the Norwegian Ecological philosopher Arne Naess as a way of referring to its cultural and spiritual dimensions and distinguishing it from other ecological perspectives. Its foundations, however, can be traced further back and are, arguably, most visible in the work and writing of the Western American environmental activist John Muir (b.1838-d.1914).<sup>8</sup> For Muir, a passion for the natural world translated into an “obligation to the natural world;” his writings sought to “transcend the landscape he loved and pass through to another level, a system of ethics that galvanized people to care for the landscape”.<sup>9</sup> Muir’s sense of duty and responsibility to the landscape, expressed in his writing and by his political campaigns to preserve the wilderness, has left a tangible environmental legacy that can be seen in the development of the American National Parks Service, in the ongoing work of the Sierra Club

---

<sup>4</sup> Bilbro, Jeffrey. “Helping People Love the World: An Interview with Gary Snyder”. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 18.2 (2011): 431-441. Web. 12 April 2012. p.439

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions Books, 1974. Print. p. 107

<sup>6</sup> Norwood, Vera. *Made from this Earth*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Print. p. 262

<sup>7</sup> Sessions, George ed. *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995. Print. p. ix

<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Muir and Deep Ecology is most fully developed in Bill Devall’s essay, ‘John Muir as Deep Ecologist’ published in *Environmental Review* (1982).

<sup>9</sup> Zwinger, Ann H., ed. Introduction. *Writing the Western Landscape*. By John Muir and Mary Austin. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. vii-xxvi. Print. p. xxiv-xxv

which he founded in 1892 and in the many forests and areas of designated wilderness that draw upon his name.

The influence of Muir's environmental consciousness and writing can be directly seen in the literature of the West, especially in the work poet, essayist and Deep Ecological philosopher Gary Snyder (b.1930). A Washingtonian by birth and long-time resident of California, Snyder's writing explores Deep Ecological philosophy through poetry e.g. *The Back Country* (1968), *Turtle Island* (1974), *Axe Handles* (1983), *This Present Moment* (2015); interviews e.g. *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964-1979* (1980) and essays e.g. *The Practice of the Wild* (1990). While many of Deep Ecology's other key thinkers, including George Sessions and Bill Devall, are, or have been, residents of the American West, for his extensive creative and critical contributions, Snyder is, arguably, the leading Deep Ecologist of the American West.

In *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) Snyder uses the foundations of Deep Ecological philosophy to create practices, values and codes to live by. In order to restore an understanding of our humanity as something which links us to, and does not elevate us above, the natural world and to heal our culture, he states that we must deconstruct the "dichotomy of the civilized and the wild" and move "towards a 'culture of wilderness' from within contemporary civilization".<sup>10</sup> Elaborating upon the subject of the wilderness, Snyder writes:

Wilderness is a place where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order. In ecology we speak of "wild systems". When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all members are present at the assembly. To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. (*Practice* 12)

While there seems to be nothing inherently threatening about Snyder's sentiment, for some the rhetoric of the wilderness and of Deep Ecology prove problematic. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate's influential text on the relationship between the ecological imagination and literature, his attitude towards Deep Ecology is, at best, mocking: "the true deep ecologist is a utopian who forgets that 'utopia' literally means nowhere, a primitivist who forgets Rousseau's wry admission that the state of nature 'no longer exists and perhaps never did and probably never will'".<sup>11</sup> Thinking Deep Ecologically does not mean denying humanity or human existence; it is not a quest for utopia. Rather, it encourages us to redefine what it means to be human, and to reposition humanity within the wider network of natural life. Neither *Holy the Firm*, *The Last Cheater's Waltz* or *All These Rivers* express a utopian vision and nowhere in *The Practice of the Wild* does Snyder state that primitivism is the goal.

---

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990. Print. pp. 24 & 192

<sup>11</sup> Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print. p.37

What he calls for is the adoption of a philosophical position and practice in which humankind's disconnection from nature is overcome by accepting that "our bodies are wild" (*Practice* 17) and, therefore, natural: "human beings came out of that wholeness, and to consider the possibility of reactivating membership in the Assembly of All Beings is in no way regressive" (*Practice* 12). To be human is to be part of nature, and acting Deep Ecologically means remedying those elements of humanity and human existence which negatively affect the relationship we have with, and consequently the impact we have on, the natural world.

### **Towards a Literature of Deep Ecology**

Accepting that the natural world is not just a backdrop against which things happen, but something we are intimately connected to, and shaped by, is an important step in thinking and writing Deep Ecologically. By being conscious of our connection to nature and grounding ourselves in, and writing about our relationship to, the natural world Western American writers are involved in the process of readdressing the relationship between humanity and nature: "the wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell the good story when we get back home" (*Practice* 26). Chapter One explores, in greater depth, the specific geographical, historical cultural conditions of the West which render it fertile ground for Deep Ecology and the ways in which these factors have contributed to the development of this body of literature.

The speculative, affective, reflective and reflexive nature of literature provides a perfect platform by which to engage in a practice of reconsidering and reimagining the relationship between human and nature. Arguing that "language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence, animals that we were/are," Snyder makes the case that "language is a mind body system that coevolved" (*Practice* 18). Accepting that language and culture are fundamentally biological and, therefore, natural, it is possible to view the production of literature as a practice which unifies culture (mind) and nature (body). More than a method by which to put Deep Ecological philosophy into practice, writing Deep Ecological literature, like direct action or grassroots, community organising, is a form of activism. It seeks to transform people's perceptions of the natural world, and at its best, "help[s] people love the world" (Snyder qtd. in Bilbro, 439).

Though Dillard has been largely overlooked in Deep Ecological studies, in *The Writing Life* (1989), a text in which she explores the practices and processes which have shaped her writing, she expresses an attitude of literature similar to Snyder:

Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer...will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power? What do we ever know that is higher than that power which from time to time, seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered? (*Writing* 72-3)

While Dillard firmly expresses a belief that literature has the power to incite change and charges the writer with being able to awaken in the reader a new understanding of ‘ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered,’ she does not necessarily address how the writer might go about doing so. One purpose of this critical study, therefore, drawing from a reading of Dillard and Meloy’s work alongside Deep Ecological theory, is to address *how* the writer constructs a text capable of inciting change.

Chapter Two and Three of this thesis explore how Deep Ecological themes and concerns inform a writer’s creative methods and principles, and look specifically at how the tenets of Deep Ecology are expressed in Annie Dillard’s *Holy the Firm* and Ellen Meloy’s *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* respectively. This approach is not meant to focus on these works in contrast to one another, but to allow the works to be read within and against their specific historical and geographical contexts. Presenting the texts in this way will allow for points of resonance to emerge while also respecting each author’s unique voice and experience of these landscapes.

Looking first to Annie Dillard’s *Holy the Firm*, Chapter Two explores the way in which her experience of the landscape of the West alters her relationship to the natural world. Dillard is not a Western by birth, but in 1975 she took up residence on a small and isolated island in the Pacific Northwest. Reading Dillard’s accounts of her encounters with the Western landscape against experiences of her home terrain of Virginia, I am able to address the role played by this landscape on the development of her Deep Ecological awareness. Further, though *Holy the Firm* is widely regarded as a narrative which explores Christian faith, I argue that Dillard’s use of religious themes and rhetoric are Deep Ecological in that she works to remedy and reconceptualise the problem of Judeo-Christian duality from within.

A born and bred Westerner, through her process of building a home in the Desert Southwest, Meloy presents the struggle of working to fully earn her intimacy with that geography. In Chapter Three I explore how her process of building a home in the Southwest – shifting from sojourner to resident – means embarking on a Deep Ecological process of re-learning and earning the terrain. Meloy does this through physical engagement with the landscape, but also through a deeper consideration of the historical relationship between humans and the landscape of the Desert Southwest. Her commitment to place and process of

earning her terrain is, like Snyder's process of moving into a terrain which has been significantly damaged by human impact and reclaiming it as home in an attempt to restore the health of the environment, *reinhabitory*. This chapter will consider how narratives of reinhabitation provide a model for how contemporary environmental writers might promote a more sustainable relationship to nature, wherein the human is presented as not an aesthete or tourist, but through an enduring commitment to place, an integral part of the ecosystem. Dillard and Meloy's texts address two main Deep Ecological narratives: the deconstruction of the Judeo-Christian assertions of the divide between spirit and matter and the reunification of the self and nature which repositions the human within the natural world. They also demonstrate a commitment to ecocentrism, as opposed to anthropocentrism. This is not to say that these texts don't engage with human matters. When writing Deep Ecologically, I believe there is an obligation, when speaking about nature, to speak about humankind. This real, natural world involves human presence. To deny that presence is to deny that we are a part of nature. What a commitment to ecocentrism ensures is that, while this literature acknowledges our humanity, it also acknowledges that we are but a small part of the wider network of ecological systems:

the land – a country – is a region within which the interactions of water, air, and soil and the underlying geology and the overlying (maybe stratospheric) wind conditions all go to create both the microclimates and the large climactic patterns that make a whole sphere or realm of life possible. The people in that realm include animals, humans, and a variety of wildlife. (*Turtle Island*, 108)

One of the ways in which this literature demonstrates a commitment to ecocentrism is through the author's direct contact with natural world. *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater's Waltz* are narratives which explore the relationship between human and nature in the American West and which document physical contact with the natural world.

Written *in propria persona*, these texts draw upon the lived experience of the body in place and provide an account of the landscape witnessed through the senses. Awareness of the body lends this writing an especially sensory quality, and a sense of immediacy, but also a sense of grounding, or being at home in the landscape. Encounters and communions with nature positively re-imagine humankind's place in the natural world and, by emphasizing the relationship between language and the body, and body and geography, these texts work to restore the relationship between culture and nature.

In *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater's Waltz*, transformative experiences occur through physical contact with the landscape and precipitate shifts in consciousness. How the landscape is perceived, felt and visualized is altered as a result of these experiences. The relationship between the author and landscape is dynamic and responsive. In *The Last*

*Cheater's Waltz* Meloy expresses a sense of merging, or of the unification, of the self with nature: "The rich, far-lost beauty of my home curved my breath. It required an attentiveness that was exhilarating and exhausting. Its colors and shapes pulled me right down below the skin of the world as I knew it".<sup>12</sup> In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard bears witness to the baptism of Christ in the waters of the Pacific Northwest. As this moment of illumination begins, the land also becomes illuminated: "The hedgerows are blackberry brambles, white snowberries, red rose hips, gaunt and clattering broom. Their leafless stems are starting to live visibly deep in their centres, as hidden as banked fire lives, and as clearly as recognition, mute, shines forth from the eyes".<sup>13</sup> More than illustrating an identification with the landscape, Dillard implies a sense of being not only witness to, but witnessed by, the landscape. She encourages the reader to imaginatively alter their perspective on the relationship between self and nature by destabilising the "divided Cartesian language of subject ('we see') and object ('the life of things')" (Bate 149). Like Meloy, who expressed a sense of merging with her surroundings, after witnessing Christ's baptism Dillard enters into one of the droplets of water clinging to his shoulders: "I deepen into a drop and see all that time contains, all the faces and deeps of the worlds and all the earth's contents, every landscape and room, everything living or made or fashioned, all past and future stars, and...faces like the cells of everything, faces pouring past...And I am gone" (67). These events in the texts imaginatively deconstruct binaries of self and nature, time and eternity, divine and earthly, metaphysical and physical in attempt to illustrate a reunification of human and nature and of spirit and matter.

As these specific examples from *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater's Waltz* indicate, though lived experience provides the basis for these narratives, rather than attempting to merely transcribe or imitate the natural world, the writing *enacts* the writer's experiences of, and affective response to, it. While the tenets of Deep Ecology inform the narrative of these texts, they also shape the craft and the principles of construction. These principles of construction relate not only to the overall shape and arc of the narrative, but to the use of affect and literary device (rhythm, repetition, metaphor, imagery and symbol, etc.). The use of craft and literary device allows the writing to transcend the literal or the merely representational. In these texts experiences, places, words and objects (animate and inanimate) gain significance thematically, conceptually, metaphorically and imagistically through repetition and reinterpretation so that the author may begin to reconstruct complex webs between language, self and nature. Through the process of writing Deep Ecological literature, the author comes to better understand, express and reconceptualise the human

---

<sup>12</sup> Meloy, Ellen. *The Last Cheaters Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999. Print. p. 217

<sup>13</sup> Dillard, Annie. *Holy the Firm*. 1977. New York: Perennial-HarperCollins, 2003. Print. p. 64-65

within the natural world. Directly, through theme and subject, and implicitly, through craft, these works signal a move “towards a ‘culture of wilderness’ from within contemporary civilization”. (*Practice* 192).

\*\*\*

Like the work of *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*, *All These Rivers* explores encounters and intimacy with the Western landscape, but from the perspective of one who is both an insider and, as a consequence of physical distance, an outsider. The collection explores my relationship to the West during a period of absence, questioning what it means to feel oneself a product of the Western landscape and the effects of physical isolation from home terrain. This collection primarily moves between two Western geographies, the Pacific Northwest and the Desert Southwest – the lands of *Holy the Firm* and the *Last Cheater’s Waltz* respectively. These juxtapositions root the collection firmly in the West while also allowing me to highlight how home is shaped in relationship to its absence, and how new territory is read against an understanding of home. In having a native Westerner’s sensibilities and intimacy with the region, the collection is closely aligned with Meloy, but, whereas Meloy earns her terrain through a series of physical sojourns, because of my physical separation from home terrain, the collection documents an embodied process of re-encountering and reclaiming the landscape of home through the practice of writing about past encounters and experiences. In the final section of this thesis, In Conclusion: Writing Home, I provide some further thoughts on how my study of *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* informed my practice and embark on a brief critical reading of *All These Rivers*.

One factor differentiating *All These Rivers* from *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* is form. Whereas Dillard and Meloy’s texts are presented as book-length personal essays, falling into a category widely regarded today as creative nonfiction, *All These Rivers* is a collection of poetry. And yet, while it uses the poetic forms, I would argue that it adheres to the principles of creative nonfiction. Defining what constitutes a work of creative nonfiction Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola state in *Tell it Slant* that: “the [work] is rooted in the ‘real’ world. Though [it] may contain some elements of fabrication, it is directly connected to you as the author behind the text. There is truth to it that you want to claim as your own, a bond of trust between you and the reader”.<sup>14</sup> Written *in propria persona*, like *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*, *All These Rivers*, is a personal narrative detailing my encounters with the natural world. It utilizes personal truths to document and recount events and places, and my experiences of them. The writing draws upon memory,

---

<sup>14</sup> Miller, Brenda, and Suzanne Paola. *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Print. p. ix

field studies and experiential research as the primary source material and is unified through the use of a singular perspective which gives the work a sense of narrative coherence.

Addressing the similarities between the contemporary lyric essay and lyric poetry, Miller and Paola write: “Lyric poetry and essays...hinge on inherent rhythms of language and sound. Lyric essays favour fragmentation and imagery; they use white space and juxtaposition as structural elements. They are as attuned to silences as they are to utterance” (106). The essays I address in this thesis are strengthened by their use of poetic devices such as rhythm, repetition, symbol, imagery and metaphor. And, like collections of poetry, they are built upon fragmentation and points of resonance. Blurring the boundary between poetry and the essay, though Dillard places *Holy the Firm* firmly within the nonfiction genre, stating that it is “a true account of three consecutive days on an island on the northwest coast,” she also states, “much of it I wrote as poetry...the prose – once I decided to print it as prose – was so intense and accented, and the world it described was so charged with meaning, that the very thought of writing a word or two further made me tired”.<sup>15</sup> While her practice suggests is that a more fluid relationship between the creative practices and methods of these two forms might exist, the question remains, why didn’t she finish *Holy the Firm* as poetry?

After her publication of her first book, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), a collection of poetry, Dillard’s creative output shifted, almost exclusively, to the publication of nonfiction prose (e.g. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), *Holy the Firm* (1977), *An American Childhood* (1987) *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1988)).<sup>16</sup> Providing some insight into why she made this decision Dillard writes: “it makes more sense to write one big book – a novel or nonfiction narrative...Into a long, ambitious project you can fit or pour all you possess and learn...[S]ince every original work requires a unique form, it is more prudent to struggle with the outcome of only one form – that of a long work – than to struggle with the many forms of a collection” (*Writing* 71).

Whereas Dillard uses poetry and poetic device as a means by which to construct and strengthen her prose, I have sought to engage with the principles of creative nonfiction and the lyric essay during the process of writing *All These Rivers*. Through its form, *All These Rivers* explores the question raised by Dillard’s decision not to finish *Holy the Firm* as a collection of poetry, and allows space to consider how, just as these essays are strengthened through their use of poetic device, a collection of poetry might be strengthened by critical and creative engagement with nonfiction essay form. By studying these works of nonfiction prose in tandem with my collection, I suggest that a more fluid relationship between these forms

---

<sup>15</sup> Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1989. Print. p. 47

<sup>16</sup> Dillard has published only one other work in poetry, *Mornings Like This* (1995) as well as two novels, *The Living* (1992) and *The May Trees* (2007).

and our critical engagement with them could, and should, exist. As the Western writer and critic, Wallace Stegner, states of contemporary Western writers: “A lot of experimentation goes on in the matter of method; in the end we find and use what we like and what we can handle and what fits our material. It is that material, the depth and breadth of our understanding of whatever [...] is under our microscope, that really matters”.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Stegner, Wallace. *Where the Blue Bird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. New York: Random House. 1992. p. 141

## **Chapter One**

### Contextualising the West: Deep Ecology's Fertile Ground

*[W]hile we may expand our horizons in any given lifetime and actually write about many places, we still reflect in our stories the spiritus loci which shaped our imagination. It is that shaping of the creative imagination that is the power of place. – Rudolfo Anaya*

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to explore the historic, cultural, aesthetic, and geographic conditions of the West which have led to the close and complex relationship between the writer and landscape in contemporary Western writing and which have also provided fertile ground for the development of a literature of Deep Ecology. The West is a physical geography of intensities and extremes: bone-dry arroyos and moss-hung forests, juniper-dotted mesas and rugged coastlines, glaciated volcanic peaks and deeply etched canyons. It is also historically younger than much of America. While its recent settlement by peoples of European-American descent and the presence of wilderness are factors which help to shape the relationship between writers and the landscape of the West, in order to understand the reasons why this terrain has been instrumental in providing the right conditions for the development of a literature of Deep Ecology it is important to consider how American attitudes towards, and experiences of, the natural world have evolved over time.

The first half of this chapter will address how America's attitudes towards the natural world have change historically and geographically. It will provide a brief account of the influence of Transcendentalism, Westward expansion and Western settlement in the writing of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Mary Austin, and Gary Snyder, principal figures responsible for inciting changes in attitudes towards the natural world. The attitudes towards the natural world expressed by these writers, as well as their varying levels of engagement with the physical landscape, have been instrumental in the formation of the West's distinctive relationship between human and nature, and provide the foundation from which a literature of Deep Ecology has emerged. The second half of this chapter will discuss the contemporary West, looking at its literature, landscape, culture and the study of Western texts.

#### **From East to West**

Writing on the historical influence of landscape over the American consciousness in his seminal text, *Wilderness and The American Mind*, Roderick Frazier Nash argues that, not only did the American imagination evolved in relationship to wilderness, but that “with the idea of

wilderness they sought to give their civilization identity and meaning”.<sup>18</sup> Pivotal in the development of the American relationship with the natural world and in the definition of American identity was Transcendentalism. Emerging in the 1830s, and elaborating upon the principles of European Romanticism, Transcendentalism significantly altered the way in which the landscape was perceived. It claimed that “nature was the proper source of religion” and “one’s chances of attaining moral perfection and knowing God were maximized by entering wilderness” (Nash 86). Pioneered by Ralph Waldo Emerson (‘Nature’, 1836), Transcendentalism regarded nature as possessing a *transcendent* quality, “because if rightly seen, [it] reflected universal spiritual truths” (Nash 85). Up until then, the natural landscape had been viewed as a “utilitarian spectacle” in which “trees became lumber, prairies farms”; wilderness was a threat to be conquered and transformed into “rural-garden-like nature” (Nash 31). These attitudes were reflected by the way in which wilderness was represented in the literature of this period such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* which presents wilderness as a “symbol of man’s dark and untamed heart,” but also “a nightmarish locale of both the devil and devilish tendencies in man” (Nash 39-40). Rejecting Puritanical views which drew upon scriptural rhetoric to encourage mankind to conquer and suppress the natural world, Transcendentalism sought to present a new way of viewing and interacting with the natural world and called for the use of “intuition or imagination (as distinct from rational understanding)...to [attain] spiritual truths;” a process which, consequently, empowered the individual, or the self, by encouraging people to find their “own correspondence with the divine being” (Nash 85). By giving more spiritual autonomy and power to the individual, and declaring that artistic exploration and intuition were means by which to understand the spiritual, Transcendentalism worked to undermine the religious teachings which dictated methods of worship which placed the church as a mediator between the individual and God.

The Transcendentalists also argued that “great poetry and philosophy depended on contact with mountains and forests” (Nash 128). This view of nature as a reflection of God’s divinity imbued the natural world with spiritual and muse-like qualities and opened the way for the acceptance of natural and wild landscapes as a worthy subject of philosophy, intellectual discourse, art and literature. Nature, when awarded this eminence, became an entity powerful enough to supersede man-made culture on all levels. By willingly embracing the abundant wilderness and melding it with the ideological position of Transcendentalism,

---

<sup>18</sup> Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. Print. p. xi

America had a cultural symbol potent enough to rival Europe's great cities, museums, galleries, societies, institutions or churches.

A protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), a prolific East coast Nature Writer and philosopher, most famous for *Walden* (1854), was a key figure in the Transcendentalist movement. Thoreau is significant in the sense that he was one of the first to attempt to put existing Transcendentalist rhetoric about contact with nature into practice. This point is highlighted in Max Oeshlaeger's *The Wilderness Condition* in which he goes so far as to say that: "Through a lifetime of living in close contact with nature Thoreau actually achieved that original relation to the universe about which Emerson only wrote".<sup>19</sup> Thoreau's writing relied upon the use of the personal narrative. On the reasons for making this decision, he writes,

In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained...We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst apologetic, Thoreau's use of 'I' is important in that it strives to give power and credence to the individual voice and to writing from one's lived experience. The influential nature of this work is suggested by the fact that, today, the American Nature Essay is a well defined genre, and a form which both Dillard and Meloy's texts engage with. In the case of Thoreau, the use of 'I' reflects the growing importance of the individual in America at that time, a by-product of Transcendentalism's decentralization of power from the 'community' of the church. By removing the need for church, where one traditionally engaged with matters of the spirit, and the city, where one typically engaged with matters of the arts and intellect, Transcendentalism worked to promote and empower the figure of the solitary individual in nature. Using 'I' allowed Thoreau to speak directly of personal experiences and deeply consider his self and selfhood. In this sense, Thoreau's work is not only important for what it has contributed to American literature, but for its delineation of a new American character – and, through the creation of a new character, the creation of a new American culture.

This new American character, or the new self, is perhaps best epitomized by the following passage from *Walden* in which Thoreau explains his reasons for his life choices:

---

<sup>19</sup> Oelschlaeger, Max, ed. *The Wilderness Condition: Essays on Environment and Civilization*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1992. Print. p. 276

<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *The Works of Henry David Thoreau*. Kindle Edition: Golgotha Press, 17 July 2010. Kindle eBook. p. 1

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (59)

It was not the case that humans should aspire to *transcend* the material world, but that they should embrace the wonder of the natural world and accept their place within its complex network. In this way, contact with nature was essential for its *transcendent* effects on the human spirit and for helping humankind see the larger cosmos and their place within it. Thoreau's attitudes in this sense move away from Emerson's philosophic position and allow for a way of conceiving our relationship with nature that is more resonant with Deep Ecology.

But lest we fall into a trap of believing that Thoreau somehow managed to become one with primordial nature, it is worth acknowledging that although rural and rustic, Thoreau's Walden Pond was situated on the outskirts of the city of Concord, Massachusetts. Further, he remained there for only a little over two years. Thoreau's interest in the natural world, though deep, was perhaps, narrow. And whilst Thoreau proclaimed the wilderness and the West as "prophetic, religious, aesthetic – the fountain of being, the source of renewal, the spring of art," he was not interested in the physical West, but the *idea* of it.<sup>21</sup> The West and wilderness served as powerful metaphors and symbols in his writing, but the semi-rural provided the physical grounding for his life. And though this allowed him to live simply and contemplatively, his relationship with the landscape of the East was informed by a historical-cultural and personal experience of humankind being able to shape nature to fit human requirements. In contrast, the landscape of the West, as Ann H. Zwinger states in *Writing the Western Landscape*, forced settlers, like "plants and animals," to adapt "to a severe world, living on the edge of survival" (xxiii). For many settlers the struggle to inhabit these perilous new biotas – deserts, mountain, and dense coastal forests – proved life-threatening. While these struggles for survival posed a problem for the Transcendentalist notion of the wilderness as a place of spiritual redemption and aesthetic renewal, it was the physical demands of the geography of the West that forced Westerner settlers to attune themselves to their surroundings. Zwinger argues that from this new relationship to the landscape comes "concentrated observation," capable of "deepen[ing] one's experience, and rearrang[ing] one's relationship to the natural world" (xxvi). Zwinger argues that as a result of differing geography, Western writers developed a "different approach to writing" from their Eastern

---

<sup>21</sup> Fussell, Edwin. *Frontier: American Literature and the American West*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. Print. p. 177

counterparts (xxvi) and regards John Muir (1838-1914) and Mary Austin (1868 – 1934) as “the first truly *western* nature writers” in that “they celebrate[d] the landscape as animate, existing on its own, requiring no explanation, no intellectualization, only devotion, insight, and understanding” (x). Through their direct engagement with the challenges posed by the natural terrain of the West they “established the veracity of an immediate relationship to the landscape” (Zwinger xv) and through them a literature of great force and conviction emerged from *within* the Western region.

The physically wild character of the Western landscape and his engagement there fuelled Muir’s literary output and subsequent environmental activism. Born in Dunbar, Scotland, Muir encountered several regions of America before coming to settle in the West, where he was at once awestruck by “the grandeur of the landscape itself, operatic, commanding and demanding, rugged and raw and glorious” (Zwinger xiv).<sup>22</sup> Muir believed the physical landscape of the West exuded a power which superseded the human and human endeavours, and alluded to an *original* nature. His passion for this wilderness and its wildness fuelled a writing of ecstatic wonderment and religious awe. On visiting the peaks of Alaska, he writes:

Beneath the frosty shadows of the fiord we stood hushed and awe-stricken, gazing at the holy vision; and had we seen the heavens open and God made manifest, our attention could not have been more tremendously strained. When the highest peak began to burn, it did not seem to be steeped in sunshine, however glorious, but rather as if it had been thrust into the body of the sun itself...peak after peak, with their spires and ridges and cascading glaciers, caught the heavenly glow, until all the mighty host stood transfigured, hushed, and thoughtful, as if awaiting the coming of the Lord. The white, rayless light of morning, seen when I was alone amid the peaks of the California Sierra, had always seemed to me the most telling of all the terrestrial manifestations of God. But here the mountains themselves were made divine, and declared His glory in terms still more impressive.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst he descends from a Transcendentalist tradition, unlike Thoreau who praised nature which was in close proximity to civilization and lived out his life in the East, Muir praised the wilderness that took him away from civilization. Though Muir’s personal accounts of encounters with the wilderness follow from Thoreau’s autobiographical mode, they push further in terms of their passion, spiritual dimension and general wildness. The shift between the two styles is, I argue, because of geographic location and engagement with the landscape. Writing and language are shaped by the relationship between the body and place; therefore

---

<sup>22</sup> Muir arrived in California in 1868.

<sup>23</sup> Zwinger, Ann H., ed. *Writing the Western Landscape*. By John Muir and Mary Austin. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Print. Excerpt from *Travels in Alaska* 152-154

Muir's physical contact with the wilderness of the West shaped his writing. When compared with the quoted passage from Muir, which is immediate, urgent and impassioned, Thoreau's account of his mornings seems reflective and restrained:

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and may I say innocence, with Nature herself. I have since been a worshiper of Aurora and the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. (58)

This shift in tone and voice is the result of Muir's many years spent sojourning in the rugged wilderness of the West. Just as Thoreau was influential in defining a new American character against its European and Puritan roots, Muir developed a new Western voice and Western character as distinct from the East.

Muir's ecstatic first person narrative accounts have been responsible for shaping not only the writing and the writer of the Western landscape, but Western culture more broadly. Not a pioneer – generally regarded at that time as one who seeks to claim and tame the land – but a *pilgrim*, Muir ventured into the wilds seeking communion with the landscape, communion with a higher power, communion with the 'true' self and in search of answers to difficult questions. As opposed to others who viewed wild nature as a resource which mankind could cultivate, Muir's impulse was not to change the landscape, but experience and encounter what was there. Believing in the redemptive and transformative powers of encounters with nature he undertook, and sought to convince others to engage in, pilgrimage into the wild:

thousands of tired, never-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timer and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life. Awakening from the stupefying effects and vice of over-industry and the deadly apathy of luxury, they are trying as best they can to mix and enrich their own little on goings with those of nature.<sup>24</sup>

Muir treated the wilderness as the place where one could go to actualize the self. In that sense Muir's practice clearly demonstrates what Snyder later petitions for: a reawakening of the wild within ourselves. Muir's writings promoted and reinforced his deep, spiritual reverence for wilderness and the value of nature pilgrimage so strongly that "the prototypical religious experience of nature in the American West is [still] the mountain epiphany".<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Muir, John. 'Chapter I: The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West.' *Our National Parks*. 1901. The John Muir Exhibit. The Sierra Club. Web. Access Date 13 May 2016

<sup>25</sup> Todd, Douglas. *Cascadia the Elusive Utopia: Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008. Print. pp. 40-41

Writing of this sort demanded something more of the author than observation of the landscape; it demanded a full physical, aesthetic and spiritual communion with wild nature. I specify that this is a particularly Western trait because, while a certain level of time spent in nature is universal and fundamental to all nature writers, contact with *wild* nature is not necessarily a given. This is best highlighted by Muir's disappointment when Emerson visited him in the West, but chose to stay within the confines of civilization, leaving Muir to conclude, "So the carpet dust and unknowable reeks were preferred. And to think of this being a Boston choice. Sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism" (qtd. in Zwinger xvi). For Muir, there was no better place than the remote and the wild and his writings of the "experience of the landscape as welcome ecstasy" significantly shaped "public perceptions of the frontier wilderness in the late nineteenth century" (Todd 41).

As Muir's writing reveals, the Western landscape generates a feeling that the landscape has power over the endeavours of mankind, triggering a constant awareness of the fragility of human existence, but also, if one is willing, the ability to recognise and rejoice in seeing oneself as connected to that larger order. This awareness requires an understanding of the body as a natural being. Western writing, in as much as it emerges from experiences of the body and the senses in response to physical geography, moves beyond reconstructions of the *idea* of wilderness to the physical *reality* of wilderness. Central to Western Writing and to what I argue constitutes a Deep Ecological literature is direct physical contact with the landscape; the landscape is read through the body and the senses.

Muir's desire to be in nature and align himself with nature thus shaped a distinctly Western imagination. Muir's writings, while expressing the glory of the wilderness, sought to do more than merely praise the land he loved. His passion for the world translated into an "obligation to the natural world" (Zwinger xxiv). Through his writing, Muir sought to "transcend the landscape he loved and pass through to another level, a system of ethics that galvanized people to care for the landscape" (xxv). Muir's writing not only communicates his passion for the natural world, but an environmental message of preservation and conservation. The following passage from *Our National Parks* (1901) serves as a powerful warning of the dangers of human impact:

Only thirty years ago, the great Central Valley of California, five hundred miles long and fifty miles wide, was one bed of golden and purple flowers. Now it is ploughed and pastured out of existence, gone forever, scarce a memory of it left in fence corners and along the bluffs of the streams. The gardens of the Sierra, also, and the noble forests in both the reserved and unreserved portions are sadly hacked and trampled, notwithstanding, the ruggedness of the topography, all excepting those of the parks guarded by a few soldiers. In the noblest forests of the world, the ground, once divinely beautiful, is desolate and repulsive, like a face ravaged by disease. This is true also of many other Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain valleys and forests. The same

fate, sooner or later, is awaiting them all, unless awakening public opinion comes forward to stop it. Even the great deserts in Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and New Mexico, which offer so little to attract settlers, and which a few years ago pioneers were afraid of, as places of desolation and death, are now taken as pastures at the rate of one or two square miles per cow, and of course their plant treasures are passing away, the delicate abronias, phloxes, gilies, etc. Only a few of the bitter, thorny, unbitable shrubs are left, and the sturdy cactuses that defend themselves with bayonets and spears.<sup>26</sup>

Muir's writing demonstrates environmental activism which campaigns for the development of an environmental ethics and aesthetics based on the preservation of wilderness for its intrinsic value. It is not nature's ability to supply us with goods or even its value as a form of recreation, but the sheer matter of its existence that deems it worthy of our care. For Muir, caring for the land – as a steward and defender – is as an obligation of loving the land. Muir's sense of duty and responsibility, expressed in his writing and by his political campaigns to preserve the wilderness, embody the underlying principles of Deep Ecology. Muir's character, writing and his new ideological stance rooted in an environmental ethic of preservation work to form the foundation for much of Deep Ecological thought in the West.

Adopting Muir's cultural attitudes towards nature, Gary Snyder's writing and practices embody and perpetuate his ethics and ethos. Snyder's poetry explores his relationship with the natural world through accounts of time spent in isolation in the North Cascades as a fire lookout, mountain climbing, creating a reinhabitory home in the foothills of the Sierras, and on pilgrimages to the Far East. Like Muir, Snyder's ability as a naturalist and someone who is deeply rooted in place, allow him to provide close and detailed observations of the terrain:

Lightly, in the April mountains –  
    Straight Creek,  
Dry grass freed again of snow  
& the chickadees are pecking  
Last fall's seeds  
    Fluffing tail in chilly wind,

Avalanche piled up cross the creek  
    and chunked-froze solid –  
water sluicing under; spills out  
    rock lip pool, bends over,  
    braided and white, foaming,  
returns to trembling  
    deep-dark hole.

Creek boulders show the flow-wear lines  
    in shapes the same

---

<sup>26</sup>Muir, John. 'Chapter I: The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West.' *Our National Parks*. 1901. The John Muir Exhibit. The Sierra Club. Web. Access Date 13 May 2016

as running blood  
carves in the hearts' main  
valve. (Straight-Creek—Great Burn, *Turtle* 52)

Though in many ways Snyder draws upon the legacy of Muir, and their work is closely linked by an ethics of care, Snyder's creative and critical writings differ in that they cast-off traditional Judeo-Christian language and philosophical positions. Unlike Muir, who moved to the West and was awestruck, likening glaciers to "glorious page of Nature's Bible" (*Travels* 122), Snyder was born into the Western landscape. As a result, his writing conveys a distinctively Western "spiritual relationship with the landscape [expressed through] informal, non-sectarian, virtually universal reverence for nature" (Todd 20). Through his careful attention to detail and awareness of the holistic natural community, Snyder finds new ways to communicate a spiritual relationship with the Western landscape. He demonstrates a quiet reverence through a keen understanding of the earthly community of which he is a part and rebels against destructive environmental practices which devalue the complexity of the natural world by placing humans and human endeavours over nature.

Of how a Western grounding affects consciousness and perspective of the Western writer more broadly, Wallace Stegner writes that: "writers west of the continental divide, when they are engaging the universe...inevitably reflect a different and larger universe – different history, different emphases and expectations, a different ethnic mix, a different culture [than Eastern Americans]" (Stegner 139-140). Snyder is among these writers who look beyond Western Civilization and Judeo-Christian culture to consider alternative relationships to the natural world: "My teachers are other poets, American Indians and a few Buddhist priests in Japan" (*Turtle* 106). In Snyder's writing, the landscape of the American West is not being read against or compared to American East, but considered on its own terms:

I would like,  
with a sense of helpful order,  
with respect for laws  
of nature,  
to help my land  
with a burn. a hot clean  
burn.

[...]

And then  
it would be more  
like,  
when it belonged to the Indians

Before. ('Control Burn', *Turtle Island* 19)

Snyder's relationship with the landscape, not as a spectacle, but as birth-place, aligns his writing with Meloy and her contemporaries, for whom the West is home.

### **The Contemporary West**

The West, because of its geography and relatively short history “retains a larger share of its ecosystems intact than any other part of the industrial world” (Todd 28). Paula Gunn Allen writes in the Preface to *Writing the Desert Southwest* (1995) that: “This juxtaposition of ancient and modern, the fact that traditional cultures have maintained much of their histories and cultures into a technological age, has given the American Southwest a literature unlike any other”.<sup>27</sup> While she is correct about the juxtaposition of ancient and modern, what this statement ignores is that all of these qualities are also shared culturally and expressed through the literature of the Pacific Northwest. Both regions have been influenced by the presence of indigenous cultures which are “not only larger per capita than across the rest of the continent, but far more culturally influential” (Todd 24).

In terms of how this affects expressions of Deep Ecology in literature, it could be argued that exposure to indigenous cultures has presented residents of the West with a new alternative to the Judeo-Christian belief system, one which acknowledges “a deep mystic presence” in nature (Todd 24). These indigenous cultures also, as Snyder's work emphasises, provide a way of living that draws upon wisdom gained from the natural world. While the West has been inhabited for thousands of years, those original inhabitants, unlike Euro-American settlers, managed to preserve and nurture the landscape as opposed to conquering it. Because of this wilderness quality, as preserved by these ancient cultures, in the West human time can be read against geologic time. This juxtaposition is made possible by the presence of old growth forests, canyons and other geological features which vividly highlight the natural processes and the length of time which created them. In this way, the West makes visible a terrain that has existed long before us, and that will (so long as we are careful) exist long after we are gone.

The physicality of the landscape of the West impinges on human consciousness in a way that destabilizes the perceived power and supremacy of the human being. The West's fourteen-thousand foot peaks and seemingly bottomless canyons, by revealing the earth's processes, make visible time in a ‘geologic’ sense. Its volcanic eruptions, deadly heat and earthquakes that shake the ground beneath its residents are factors which heighten Westerners' awareness of the power of the natural world. Collectively, the physical, historical

---

<sup>27</sup>Gunn Allen, Paula. Preface. *Writing the Southwest*. By David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, eds. Boston: A Plume Book – Penguin, 1995. (xxvii-xxiv). Print. pp. xxv- xxvi

and cultural conditions of the West change the way in which writers perceive and conceptualise the human in relationship to the natural world. Whilst on the one hand this landscape destabilizes the power of the human, the human impact is also more strongly realised there than in other parts of America. This is not because other regions do not suffer from environmental degradation, but because the wilderness is inexplicably visible and because of the short time from which the West has gone from *wild* to civilized. In many cases these changes have happened over the course of single lifetimes. In the West, the impacts and implications of environmental policies and practices have visible and tangible consequences. Though deep time is acknowledged in the West, time is also felt in terms of urgency – an urgency to change destructive environmental habits.

As a result of this unique combination of history, culture and geography the literature produced in the West is particularly sensitive to the relationship between humans and the natural world. This was first addressed by George Venn in his 1979 essay, ‘Continuity in the Pacific Northwest’ in which he states that “it may be that the environment and the human response to it will emerge as one source of continuity in the region’s literature that cannot easily be dismissed”. Addressing this matter over a decade later, Rudolfo Anaya in his Foreword to *Writing the Southwest*, states that the “central narrative” of Southwestern literature might best be defined as an expression of a “particular aesthetic that is rooted in the ongoing relationship, or conversation, among the human, the plant and animal, the land, and the supernaturals, each perceived as members of the same geospiritual community”.<sup>28</sup> The majority of studies of critical studies of which discuss Western literature, be it Northwest or Southwest, focus on the way in which the literature responds to, and portrays, the relationship between human and nature. These texts include Zwinger’s *Writing the Western Landscape* (1964), Wallace Stegner’s *Where the Blue Bird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (1992), Dunaway’s *Writing the Southwest*, Laurie Ricou’s *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* (2002), Nicholas O’Connell’s *On Sacred Ground* (2003), Douglas Todd’s *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia* (2007), *Getting Over the Color Green* edited by Ecocritic, Scott Slovic (2001), and *What Wilderness is This* edited by Susan Wittig Albert, et. al (2007). Some of the many writers working in this idiom from the 1960s whose work these texts discuss include Theodore Roethke, William Stafford, Richard Hugo, David Wagoner, Denise Levertov, Gary Snyder, Brenda Peterson, Terry Tempest Williams, Joy Harjo, Edward Abbey, Linda Hogan,

---

<sup>28</sup> Anaya, Rudolfo. Foreword. *Writing the Southwest*. By David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, eds. Boston: A Plume Book – Penguin, 1995. (ix-xvi). Print. pp. xxi

Barry Lopez, Denise Chavez, Barbara Kingsolver and, of course, Annie Dillard and Ellen Meloy.

Combined, these positions and the proliferation of writers engaged in the subject of the human relationship to nature make the case for why the contemporary West has provided fertile ground for a literature of Deep Ecology which not only explores our relationship to the natural world, but which seeks to reposition humankind *within* the natural world. While matters of climate (i.e. arid versus wet) and geography (e.g. inland versus coastal, mountainous versus canyon land) demonstrate reasons why there remains a tendency to read the regions as distinct, I believe these regions' extreme qualities of wildness and vastness – the sheer scale of their natural features – do more to align them, than to distance them. Given that both regions base their very *distinctiveness* on the way in which their culture and literature focuses on the landscape and human relationship with the landscape, the usefulness of studying them collectively is clear.

Because the study of Western American literature is still in its early stages, the consequence of being historically young, it feels apt to experiment and employ new methodologies. Applying the critical lens of Deep Ecology to this reading of Western texts, I seek to explore new ways of evaluating and categorising this literature and, doing so, demonstrate the way in which this body of Western writing is collectively addressing environmental challenges of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Working on the belief that recognising a shared literature and shared cultural values will be of benefit to the scholastic community and to environmental communities, this critical body of work considers the literature of the Northwest and Southwest concurrently. Contextualizing *All These Rivers*, *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater's Waltz* as Western seeks to find patterns and points of resonance, shared values, beliefs and practices that indicate the development of a literature of Deep Ecology. By understanding what common currents connect these regions and their literature, we might be able to better understand, and thus work to more articulately express, our place within nature's intricate weave. It is hoped that *All These Rivers*, by way of creative praxis, and this critical thesis, will work to acknowledge the West as a literary terrain that is collectively pioneering a literature of ecological, cultural and aesthetic significance.

## Chapter Two

### Newborn and Salted: The Deep Ecological Undertones of Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*

*The existing spirit of place is never assured. Yet it is with the spiritual presence in the landscape conceived as a place not just to return to, but to render intelligible, that we begin the difficult responsibility of reimagining our faith and our relationship to the natural world. – Mark C. Long*

#### **Introduction**

Whilst critic Pamela Smith claims in her essay 'The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard: A Study in Ambivalence' that Dillard "is a good distance from the ecological vision propounded by...deep ecologists", in this chapter I consider the ways in which Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm* (1977) is in dialogue Deep Ecologic philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Dillard refers to *Holy the Firm* as "a favourite, difficult book, a true account of three consecutive days on an island on the northwest coast" (*Writing* 47). It focuses on the relationship between four key events: a moth trapped in a candle, a flaming god falling from the sky, a plane crash that burns the face off a young girl and the baptism of Christ in a saltwater bay. Throughout this chapter, I will consider the ways in which these events and her encounters with the physical landscape of the Pacific Northwest proved formative in shaping Dillard's consciousness and the imaginative capacity of her writing. I will examine how her transformation of self functions within the text to break-down Judeo-Christian and Cartesian dualism to reposition the human within nature. The first of Dillard's books to grapple with the Western landscape, *Holy the Firm* provides an exciting case by which to consider the relationship between literature of the Western American landscape and Deep Ecology. Problematizing this, however, are its dealings with Christian subjects and themes.

Given that Deep Ecologists claim that Judeo-Christian culture "desacralized Nature, encouraged its exploitation, and promoted an anthropocentric world view in which humans are superior to, and in charge of, the rest of Nature" (Sessions x), it might seem counterintuitive to argue that Dillard's Christian themes and rhetoric express an ecological awakening. Yet, in the Introduction to *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Lynn White Jr. is quoted saying that, "since the roots [of the ecological crisis] are so largely religious, the remedy must also be religious, whether we call it that or not" (qtd. in Sessions x). When applying this perspective to *Holy the Firm*, and reading it through the lens of Deep Ecology, it

---

<sup>29</sup> Smith, Pamela A. "The Ecotheology of Annie Dillard". *Cross Currents*, Fall 95, Vol. 45 Issue 3, p.342

becomes conceivable that Dillard is seeking to solve the problems posed by Judeo-Christian duality and anthropocentrism from within.

While Dillard's Christian themes have led Pamela A. Smith, Dana Wilde, and Sue Yore to be among the many critics who address her work through a theological critical framework, Dillard's "approach to Catholicism and Christian spirituality" in *Holy the Firm*, which Sue Yore addresses briefly in her essay 'In the Footsteps of Julian Norwich', is "somewhat eccentric".<sup>30</sup> More than this, I would argue that in some instances Dillard, when referring to God as "a brute and traitor" (46) and the communion wine as "Christ with a cork" (64) might be regarded as downright blasphemous. Therefore, while I do not deny the presence of Christian contemplation in *Holy the Firm*, critically engaging with the text through a Deep Ecological framework reveals that Dillard's interpretations and expressions of Christian faith are at a certain distance from the dogmatic teachings which have been associated with mankind's destruction of the natural world. Further, I argue that through the craft and narrative of *Holy the Firm*, Dillard directly critiques and rejects Judeo-Christian duality.

Dillard's method shares a common current with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1964). In this seminal, environmental text, Carson responds to a cultural climate which prizes progress over preservation. She exposes the dangers of the chemical DDT and uses a fable to tell a tale of the deterioration of the natural world as a result of human impact. Carson's writing illuminates the cost of environmental destruction, but also, by blending scientific research and facts within literary prose, subverts the dominant system of oppression by using a voice of scientific authority to speak out against the production and use of pesticides. This text ultimately calls for a radical reconsideration of the human place in the natural world as part of an ethical and cultural overhaul within American society, and the world more broadly. Like Carson, who uses the voice of science to illuminate the destructive power of technology, Dillard uses the language and subject of Judeo-Christianity to address, from within, the duality of divine and earthly that Deep Ecologists believe lie at the root of the problem of anthropocentric attitudes towards the environment.

Whilst recognising the elusive nature of *Holy the Firm*, which Dillard claims has been criticised for being "too obscure, too symbolic, too intellectual" (*Writing* 54), I propose that what Dillard's interrogation of Christian faith in the Western landscape illuminates is a Deep Ecological understanding of human place within the natural world. By using and transmuting

---

<sup>30</sup> Yore, Sue. "In the Footsteps of Julian Norwich." *The Way*, 48.1 (2009): 37-56. Web. 18 August 2014. p. 37

Christian imagery, symbols and rhetoric to reunify spirit and matter, Dillard is able to turn the problem of Judeo-Christian philosophy into a remedy, thereby healing from within. This transference of energy is aided by the structure of the narrative and Dillard's use of poetic device which allow the writing to transcend the merely representational. As a result, Dillard is able to linguistically re-create her encounters with the Western landscape and her Deep Ecological awakening for the reader.

### **Beyond Tinker Creek**

Shortly after the publication of her Pulitzer Prize winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Dillard, in 1975, moved to the remote corner of the Pacific Northwest where she wrote *Holy the Firm*. While very few critical readings of these texts focus on Dillard's change of geographical location as fundamental to the shift in the themes and forms between these texts, I see geography as imperative. In order to understand how her move from East to West shaped the narrative of *Holy the Firm*, it is necessary to provide a brief comparative reading of these texts. Exploring the differences between these texts and the geographies they describe allows for the consideration of how the transformative power of the Western landscape shapes a writer and their writing.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard explores the natural surroundings of her rural Virginia homelands. Applying close attention to the fine detail of the natural world, in this text each encounter with flora or fauna functions as a revelation, as if her home terrain represented an endless frontier of discovery. Wilde argues that following the publication of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "a general critical agreement" emerged that claimed Dillard was "a mystic" because her purpose for engaging with the natural world "might be described as an effort to catch glimpses of God anywhere possible".<sup>31</sup> As a result, Wilde places *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* "in the literary tradition of Thoreau and Emerson, particularly in their view of nature" (31). When reading *Holy the Firm* against *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, then, Wilde asserts that "Dillard's mysticism is more directly revealed in *Holy the Firm* than in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and her disposition to modern forms and distinctly modern themes, and the difficulties those things expose, takes its first clear shape there" (31). I argue that Dillard's form and themes in *Holy the Firm* are not simply a modernised version of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, but representative of Dillard's move from East to West and, further, that her Deep

---

<sup>31</sup> Wilde, Dana. "Annie Dillard's "A Field of Silence": The Contemplative Tradition in the Modern Age." *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2000): 31-45. JSTOR. Web. 21 February 2014. pp. 31

Ecological awakening occurs through encounter with this landscape. Given this reading of *Holy the Firm*, I place it within a Deep Ecological subset of Western American literature which explores matters of the human relationship to the environment.

In *The Writing Life* (1989) Dillard describes the process of choosing her new location in the Pacific Northwest by looking at an atlas, where the cartography/topography made it clear that “you could row in the salt water and see snow-covered mountains; you could scale a mountainside with an ice axe in August, skirting green crevasses two hundred feet deep, and look out on the islands in the sea” (101). From this passage we see Dillard illustrating this landscape in terms of its imposing scale, but also, by stating the possible ways it can be experienced through the senses she acknowledges a deep understanding of the relationship between her body and the landscape. Given that “language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence” (*Practice* 18), the impact of this geography on Dillard’s physical being, consciousness and imagination plays a central role in shaping the narrative and themes of *Holy the Firm*. Dillard’s use of metaphor, symbolism, imagery and affect in *Holy the Firm* are evocative of the complexity of expressing her relationship to the landscape of the West.

While Yore acknowledges the power of Dillard’s use of imagery and metaphor, stating that they function as a “bridge between what can be observed in the real world and what lies beyond it” (45), I would argue Dillard utilises these devices to demonstrate that there is no divide between the real world (the material) and what lies beyond (the spiritual). Given this, whereas Yore goes on to state Dillard’s writing “adopts an almost surreal form of writing that often resorts to magical realism” (41), my interpretation, rather than denying the validity of Dillard’s experience, regards the use of poetic device in *Holy the Firm* as intentionally transcending the merely representational. True, Dillard’s witness of flaming gods, flaming islands, the baptism of Christ and the entire world in a drop of water, do extend beyond what one might comprehend as ‘real’. And while Yore might argue that the passage in which Dillard states, “I open my eyes. The god lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from the pastures; his fingers are firs, islands slide wet down his shoulders,” pushes the boundaries of comprehension, I see this as symbolic of her witness of the landscape through her senses.<sup>32</sup> By employing imagery, symbolism and affect, Dillard does not seek to imitate what she sees, but to textually transcend the dualities of subject and object, spirit and matter. Her words are charged with mystery and power. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard’s encounters with the landscape of the West dramatically re-create the feeling of being present in an animate, spiritual and affective landscape.

---

<sup>32</sup> Dillard, Annie. *Holy the Firm*. 1977. New York: Perennial-HarperCollins, 2003. Print. p. 12

The geography of the West, one of power and intensity, presents different possibilities than her former, “rather tamed valley”.<sup>33</sup> The West Coast’s terrain, for Dillard, borders on the sublime, being “buoyant, and cloven, lucent, and missile, and wild” (*Holy* 21). If *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is an “explor[ation] [of] the neighbourhood” (*Pilgrim* 11), then *Holy the Firm* is a pilgrimage to the “western rim of the real...the fringy edge where elements meet and realms mingle, where time and eternity spatter each other with foam” (*Holy* 20-21). Throughout *Holy the Firm* Dillard’s writing seeks to demonstrate the complex relationship between language, consciousness and the experiences of the body in space. Whereas in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Dillard, according to Wilde, was on a mission to catch a glimpse of God – in *Holy the Firm* the entire world she occupies is charged with spiritual energy: “Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time” (11). Dillard’s West is vibrant, powerful and alive, and she is bodily and linguistically engaged in the co-creation of this vibrancy. The bodily quality of Dillard’s writing grounds her language, forms and expressions within the landscape of the West. This is articulated in the precision and musculature of her language which evokes a sense of the physical body existing within that space. Of the dawn she writes, it “clicks securely in place over the mountains, locks round the islands, snaps slap on the bay...clicks up my hand cloven into fingers and wells in my ears’ holes, whole and entire” (12). Rich in description of physical and bodily sensation of the morning, this passage conveys the power she feels emanating from the terrain and the affective power of the landscape on her self. More than recognising the Western landscape’s physical geography, however, Dillard also addresses the metaphysical implications of the West. Describing the terrain as the “brink of the infinite” (*Writing* 89), whilst making allusion to a mythologized West, also serves to express the vast conceptual difference between the East and the West and the relative role played by each terrain in influencing the consciousness of their inhabitants.

Like the “abyssal” (*Writing* 89) Pacific Ocean, one of the main features which differentiates her new terrain from the East are the glaciated mountains: “Mount Baker and the Sisters and Shuksan, the Canadian Coastal Range and the Olympics on the peninsula” (20). Of these mountains she writes:

When I first came here I...watched the mountains, thinking, these are the Ultima Thule, the final westering, the last serrate margin of time. Since they are, incredibly, east, I must be no place at all. But the sun rose over the snowfields and woke me where I lay, and I rose and cast a shadow over someplace and thought, There is, God help us, more...I moved to face west, relinquishing all hope of sanity, for what is more.

And what is more is islands: sea, and unimaginable solid islands, and sea, and hundred rolling skies. You spill your breath. Nothing holds. (20-21)

---

<sup>33</sup> Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. 1974. New York: Harper Perennial-HarperCollins, 1988. Print. p. 11

Conflating the mountains with the “western rim of the real” (20), or as it could be interpreted, Western Civilization, Dillard renders them both a physical and metaphysical threshold. On a very basic level, mountains allow for the visualization of deep time through the display of, and our subsequent contemplation of, the geologic processes by which they were formed. Witness of the mountains and her movement westward, past them, moves Dillard into a realm entirely unknown. This is evocative of a sense of falling into deep time or, in the Deep Ecological sense, time that exists beyond the confines of her human construct. For Dillard, the landscape and location are so far beyond her comprehension of a country and a culture which she thought she knew that they force her to rediscover her “place in the world,” by abandoning “habits of mind” and allowing for the “possibility of seeking *alternative* relations” (Long 33). Dillard’s encounters with the landscape of the Pacific Northwest set her on a process of un-realizing her place in the world. The otherness of this landscape renders her unfamiliar to herself, and calls into question all she thought she knew. Concluding that “I am myself, at everything I do, a backdrop to all the landscape’s occasions, to all its weathers, colors and lights” (22) Dillard acknowledges that the landscape is acting and enacting all of its states and changes upon her; it is ever-present. This breakdown between the exterior world of nature and the interior world of human culture and the self is further illustrated by Dillard through her experience of church in the West.

Whilst attempting to ground herself in the familiar ritual of attending church, Dillard’s experience of the service at the “White Congregationalist Church among the Douglas firs” (22) reaffirms that she is in unfamiliar territory. There is a *wildness* to the service which Dillard claims differs from that of the East, or “higher Christian churches” where, “if anywhere, I belong” (59). As it has with all elements of life in the West, the landscape has infiltrated the church. To illustrate this, Dillard explains, “the churchwomen all bring flowers for the altar; they haul in arrangements as big as the hedges, of wayside herbs in season...huge bunches of foliage and blossoms as tall as I am” (58). Re-emphasising the relationship between humankind and nature in the Pacific Northwest in terms of scale, the flowers are ‘as tall as’ she is, and documenting the use of ‘wayside herbs in season’, Dillard introduces the concept of a fundamental relationship between church and landscape. Further accentuating the raw and wild character of the West, she makes note of “a wretched singer [we had] once...[who] sang, grinning, to faltering accompaniment, an entirely secular song about mountains” (58).

At first Dillard’s hierarchy of high and low churches, and her identification with the high church, seems to reveal an attitude of snobbery. Whilst Dillard’s tone is critical, by drawing out these connections between landscape and spirituality she also illustrates the way

Westerners, by being cognisant of the physical power of the landscape might have a deeper understanding, or as I argue a Deep Ecological perspective, on the relationship between humankind and nature. This church and the environment of the West are not at odds. It is precisely this church's interrelationship with its natural surroundings that sets it apart from the 'higher churches'. A subsequent passage suggests this positive correlation because what at first appears to be a criticism of the Western church becomes a statement of its power:

[The higher Christian churches] come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of the liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along the strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom. (59)

Whilst Dillard refers to 'God' in this passage, I argue that what she is really expressing is the scale and dynamism of Western landscape. Indeed, it is not God, but the landscape which threatens to blast the service to bits: "Every day the newspapers reported on Baker's activity: would it blow? (A few years later, Mount St. Helens did blow.)" (*Writing* 99). Through contact with these unsettling Western surroundings, Dillard is forced to think beyond the attitudes, beliefs and self-consciousness that previously got in the way of her receptivity. By stating that 'the beginning of wisdom' comes from knowing that everything could be *blasted to bits*, Dillard echoes Snyder's claim that wisdom comes from understanding the "Northwest Coast saying" that the "world is sharp as the edge of a knife" (*Practice* 19).

Given that at the core of Deep Ecological philosophy is the call to reposition the human within the natural world and not beyond it, the role of attending church in the West is significant in that it forces Dillard to question the value and meaning of human life and the relationship between spirit (God) and matter (nature). Being exposed to the existence of the awesome power of nature in the West, Dillard is forced to accept the vulnerability of humankind and, consequently, her own mortality. To understand why this is important, it is useful to consider Robert P. Harrison's discourse on the relationship between the natural world and mortality in *Towards a Philosophy of Nature*. Though this theoretical text does not refer to *Holy the Firm*, it provides a framework for interpreting how contact with the Western landscape facilitates Dillard's reconnection to the wild within and helps her to re-envision her connection to the earth in a Deep Ecological sense.

Harrison states that we "relate to ourselves by reaching out beyond ourselves," and "when we surpass ourselves the most, we reach out toward our death. The irony is that when

we reach out toward our death, we in fact reach out toward nature, for nature, ultimately, is the place where our death is at home”.<sup>34</sup> Given that “the surrounding world of nature, which preceded us and will succeed us, offers us the spectacle of a longevity and endurance that are denied us”, Harrison argues that nature can be both “a source of anguish or of reassurance, depending on the relation we maintain with ourselves” (436). Knowing that Dillard’s purpose for living on the West coast was “to study hard things – rock mountain and salt sea – and temper my spirit on their edges” (19) – it is clear that her encounter with the West coast is for the purpose of self-discovery, redefining herself and her relationship with the natural world. However, for Dillard, accepting herself as part of nature is, indeed, a ‘source of anguish’. It causes her to look at the “world of stuff appalled, at the blithering rock of trees...at my fist opening and closing, so that I think, have I once turned my hand in this circus, have I ever called it home?” (46). While demonstrating the unsettling implications of adopting a Deep Ecological view of the world, it is by acknowledging her inevitable death and accepting her mortality as a shared bond with existence that Dillard, in *Holy the Firm*, comes to be at home within the natural world.

### **Finding Home**

Coming to be at home in this world in a Deep Ecological sense means recognising a “spiritual and ecological interrelation with the land” (*Practice* 57). In *Holy the Firm* Dillard achieves an earthly grounding as a result of her ability to deconstruct the duality between spirit and matter and subject and object, and comes to ultimately see herself as part of nature. Remediating the problem of Judeo-Christian duality from within, Dillard uses Christian subject matter – contemplation on the role of communion wine which she offered to purchase for the church and her witness of the baptism of Christ – to demonstrate that spirit and matter are not divided, but twined. Building to a moment of illumination that is both spiritual and ecological, this series of events leads Dillard to a communion with the landscape.

When used in this text, the communion wine and Christ’s baptism become potent metaphors for communicating and illustrating Dillard’s perceived collapse of the duality of spirit and matter. Having contemplated “are there holy grapes, is there holy ground, is anything here holy?” (63), were she to believe that there was indeed a distinction between the divine and the earthly, then the wine, a product of the material world, would be powerless in the spiritual world. But the wine is powerful. Purchased from a corner shop, though it is no

---

<sup>34</sup> Harrison, Robert P. “Towards a Philosophy of Nature”. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. Print. pp. 436

different in substance from any other wine, it is, like the Western landscape, charged with spiritual energy: “Here is a bottle of wine with a label, Christ with a cork. I bear holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God, the sempiternal silence personal and brooding, bright on the back of my ribs” (64). Reading this passage through a Deep Ecological framework suggests Dillard’s acknowledgement that ‘holiness’ is not something that descends from, or is imbued by, a higher authority, but that is a quality inherent in the natural world, inherent in the grapes and in the ground.

Dillard’s body while at once the subject, is also the object on which the experience of illumination is physically enacted. The wine sheds “light in slats through my ribcage... [filling] the buttressed vaults of my ribs with light pooled and buoyant” (65). Tracing the use of ‘light’ back to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* sees Dillard using it to recount the story of a newly sighted girl who, when seeing a tree for the first time, took “hold of it” and named it “the tree with the lights in it” (28). Witness of ‘light’, then, becomes the means by which Dillard expresses her own moments of illumination. Of ‘seeing’ the fish of the creek, she writes “flash!” they became “linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time” (29). Dillard’s use of ‘light’ and brightness to describe the physical sensation of the illuminative power of the wine expresses more than just new-sightedness, but a transformation of mind and body. Whereas in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Dillard remains the distant observer of the natural world, in *Holy the Firm* the transformative experience becomes a deconstruction, or merging, of self and landscape, subject and object.

Not just the stage where events happen, the Western landscape is charged, vocal and alive:

The world is changing. The landscape begins to respond as a current upwells...It is starting to utter its infinite particulars, each overlapping and lone, like a hundred hills of hounds all giving tongues. The hedgerows are blackberry brambles, white snowberries, red rose hips, gaunt and clattering broom. Their leafless stems are starting to live visibly deep in their centres, as hidden as banked fire lives, and as clearly as recognition, mute, shines forth from the eyes. (64-65)

In contrast to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard’s illumination evolves to a state of heightened sensitivity and perception that documents her own series of responses as well as those of the landscape. The mountains above her are “raw nerves” and “the trees, the grass, and the asphalt below are living petals of the mind” (65). Through these passages which highlight the reflexivity between human and nature, Dillard expresses the complexity of the relationship between herself and the Western landscape. Just as she is witness to the light that shines from the hedgerow, the hedge is bearing witness to her through its eyes. Rather than being momentarily illuminated by what she sees, as in the case of the fish, Dillard is consumed into

the luminous gaze of the landscape. She transforms: “I am light. I am prayer and I can hardly see” (65). The dissolution of distinction between subject (self) and object (nature) evokes a sense of Dillard’s consciousness merging with the landscape. It causes the world, as she knows it, to burst into flames:

I see, blasted, the bay transfigured below me, the saltwater bay, far down the hill past the road to my house, past the firs and the church and the sheep in the pasture: the bay and the islands on fire and boundless beyond it, catching alight the unravelling sky. Pieces of the sky are falling down. Everything, everything, is whole, and a parcel of everything else. I am myself falling down, slowly, or slowly lifting up. (66)

Though eclipsing the lit tree, this vision of flaming islands and the falling sky – the shattering of the world as she knows it – reaches its crescendo when she witnesses, in the bay, the baptism of Christ: “Christ is being baptized...Christ is coiled and white under the water” (66).

Dillard’s witness of this symbolically potent event draws together spirit and matter. It also goes against anthropocentrism, depicting Christ as existing only as *potential energy*, ‘a coiled spring’, whereas the water is charged and powerful:

Water beads on his shoulders. I see the water in balls as heavy as planets, a billion beads of water as weighty as worlds, and he lifts them upon his back as he rises...Each bead is transparent, and each has a world, or the same world, light and alive, apparent inside the drop: it is all there ever could be moving at once, past and future. (67)

Not only a witness of, but participant in this event, Dillard, too, achieves communion with the landscape through the water, entering into one of the water droplets: “[I] see all that time contains, all the faces and deeps of the worlds and all the earth’s contents, every landscape and room, everything living or made or fashioned, all past and future stars, and...faces like the cells of everything, faces pouring past...And I am gone” (67). Through the power of the water she transcends the boundaries of subject and the object, entering into “the one glare of holiness...bare and unspeakable” (68). In this realm Dillard finds “there is only everything. There is only this” (68). As highlighted by the materiality of the subsequent passage, ‘this’, which is everything, is the real world of real things. Having collapsed the binaries of spirit and matter, Dillard becomes spiritually and ecologically grounded in the world: “I seem to be on a road, standing still. It is the top of the hill. The hedges are here, subsiding. My hands are in my pockets. There is a bottle of wine on my back, a California red. I see my feet. I move down the hill toward home” (68).

Through the symbolism of the baptism of Christ and her own merging with the water, Dillard is able to render visible the unification of spirit and nature, while also reunifying human and nature. Revealing that the purpose of life is not to transcend the material world, but to truly be in it, Dillard’s process of illumination arrives at Snyder’s conclusion that, in

order to live according to Deep Ecological philosophy, “Home – deeply, spiritually – must be here” (*Practice* 44). Further, like Snyder’s claim that through the reunification of spirit and nature “we [might] give up the hope of being eternal and quit fighting dirt” (*Practice* 26), Dillard’s illumination emphasises the intrinsic sacredness of nature in and of itself. Grounded by the physicality of her body, and calling this place, at last, ‘home’, though everything – the hedge, the hill, the road – are the same as before the epiphany, the landscape and her relationship to it are changed. The “uncharted” islands far at sea, once feared for their representation of the unknown and of wildness, both of the terrain and of the mind, these Western-most pieces of land are now luminous, “salt stones on fire” (68). Having collapsed the Judeo-Christian duality of sacred (spiritual) and profane (material), Dillard at last embraces nature as her physical and spiritual home.

### **The Arcing Narrative of *Holy the Firm***

While I have predominantly addressed the way in which the themes of *Holy the Firm* are representative of Dillard’s Deep Ecological illumination by breaking down Judeo-Christian and Cartesian duality, it is important to turn my attention towards how the craft and form of the narrative express these ideas. In this next section, I will consider the way in which the cyclical structure of Dillard’s narrative marries theme with craft and form, and I will argue that as a result, the reader may be transformed through Dillard’s process of illumination.

In Wilde’s reading of *Holy the Firm*, he states that it differs from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in the way it “builds up its force by assembling various narratives and philosophical forays in distinctly nonlinear ways” (31). Split into three sections – “New Born and Salted”, “God’s Tooth” and “Holy the Firm”, each chapter representing a day – this apparently linear structure gives way to disjunction through its interweaving narrative threads. Addressing the narrative structure of *Holy the Firm* in his essay, “Narrative Fringe”, William J. Scheick takes the idea of nonlinearity further to suggest that the narrative is circular:

The total, circular configuration of this narrative structure suggests that the two upward arcs are veiled in mystery but nonetheless apparently meet in a divinity *which gives meaning, purpose, and design to all of creation* abiding in the lower half of this mystical circle.<sup>35</sup>

Like Scheick, I argue for reading this narrative as circular, but take this idea further to suggest that through its ability to enact the process of breaking down the concept of linearity, the circularity of the narrative overcomes, and thus reunifies the binaries of spirit and matter,

---

<sup>35</sup> Rainwater, Catherine, and William J. Scheick eds. *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985. Print. pp. 62

human and nature, sacred and profane. The circular narrative allows Dillard to collapse the Judeo-Christian duality of the 'real world' (material) and 'what lies beyond' (spiritual) and the dichotomy between herself (subject) and the natural world (object). The circular narrative allows Dillard to approach key concepts (e.g. circularity, innocents, sacrament, rebirth) holistically through their reinterpretation. Embedding these concepts in specific and corresponding images or symbols (e.g. globes, wings, flames and water) that are transfigured throughout the events of the text through a "complexity of rhythm" that is built upon "force, movement, repetition, and surprise" (*Writing* 98), Dillard creates points of resonance between concept and images and the events which they describe. When vested with complexity and meaning through repetition and reinterpretation, specific objects or ideas blur the traditional subject/object duality. The most poignant example is that of the burning moth. Dillard introduces the image of a burning moth in the beginning of the text: "the moth's head was fire...She burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning – only glowing within...like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God" (17). Before long the image returns, reinterpreted as Julie Norwich the "little flamfaced [child]" (61), the artist whose "face is flame like a seraph's" (72), the hedgerows with "their leafless stems...starting to live visibly deep in their centres, as hidden as banked fires live" (65) and the world which she refers to as the "general flame" (66). Ultimately collapsing the subject/object boundary, Dillard, too, becomes the moth: "I am moth; I am light. I am prayer and I can hardly see" (65). While moving the writing beyond the purely representational and embedding into the wider narrative a sense of circularity through the repetition of imagery, the reappearances of the moth also demonstrates that self and nature, spirit and matter are not at opposite poles, but one and the same. Through the use of this device Dillard's text is able to act out her deconstruction of the binaries of spirit and matter, and a reunification of self and nature.

Dillard makes visible her movement away from Judeo-Christian duality and linearity towards a Deep Ecological "resolve to be whole" (*Practice* 24), not only through theme and imagery, but through the structure of the narrative. As a symbol and expression of wholeness and interconnectivity, the circle is representative of Dillard's embrace of a Deep Ecological consciousness. Circular imagery and the cyclical nature of the narrative make manifest Dillard's recognition of the complex interweaving of spiritual and material existence. To explore how circularity is used to express and enact Dillard's process of transformation I will examine three key narrative threads within the text, the first of which focuses on matters surrounding the substance, Holy the Firm; the second salt, water and the baptism of Christ; and the last on the power of fire and flaming as sacrament.

In the following two passages Dillard interrogates the image and the concept of the line as it relates to Judeo-Christian belief. In the first passage in which she asks, “Did Christ descend once and for all with no purpose...pulling his cross up after him like a rope ladder home?” (47) the rope ladder represents the line, and does so with quite negative connotations. In the second passage, though she addresses the matter more directly, she uses the banner as the central linear image:

Scholarship has long distinguished between two strains of thought which proceed in the West from human knowledge of God. In one...the world is infinitely other than God, furlled away from him like the end of a long banner falling...This notion makes, to my mind, a vertical line of the world, a great chain of burning. (69)

Ultimately rejecting this doctrine of duality, or linearity, Dillard resolves that the natural world and the sacred world are not opposite ends of a linear trajectory but rather that “matter and spirit are of a piece but distinguishable” (71). This is made tangible through Holy the Firm:

a substance...lower than metals and minerals on a ‘spiritual scale,’ and lower than the salts and earths, occurring beneath the salts and earths in the waxy deepness of places, but never on the surface of places where men could discern it; and it is in touch with the Absolute, at base. In touch with the Absolute! At base. The name of this substance is: Holy the Firm. (69)

Holy the Firm is the unseen, always present ‘substance’ that cycles through, and binds, the spiritual to the material, the sacred to the profane, and the divine to the earthly. Asking “Does something that touched something that touched Holy the Firm...seep into ground water, into grain; are islands rooted in it, and trees?”, she responds with “of course, and straight on up, til ‘up’ ends by curving back” (69). When completing the cycle of the question with ‘curving back’, Dillard renders visible the arc of the circle. Throughout the text, Dillard’s use of a rhetorical structure of question and answer forms a part of, and further enhances, the circularity of the narrative: the answers are always already present and, when given, like Holy the Firm, complete the circle. Holy the Firm, from which the book’s title is drawn, provides an over-arching expression of circularity by which Dillard deconstructs Judeo-Christian duality.

Circularity is also made manifest in the correspondence between Part One, ‘Newborn and Salted’ and Dillard’s witness of the baptism of Christ in Part Three. By linking her encounters with this new saltwater landscape (salted) to religious ceremonies surrounding birth (newborn), already we see Dillard implying a symbolic transformation of self: “Armenians, I read, salt their newborn babies. I check somewhere else: so did the Jews at the time of the prophets. They washed a baby in water, salted him, and wrapped him in cloths...In the Roman church baptism, the priest places salt in the infant’s mouth” (25). When these

concepts of newborn and salted are then reintroduced through the baptism of Christ, it is possible to argue that their import comes full circle. Having depicted Christ as a circle, “coiled and white under the [salt] water” (66), Dillard further links him, and, thus, her own transformation, to Holy the Firm which also exists “underneath salts” (70). In the case of this text, both Christ and Holy the Firm allow Dillard to express that matter is not void of, but is indistinguishable from, spirit.

Interwoven with, and of equal importance to the narrative of “Newborn and Salted”, is a narrative arc of burning, or flaming. Salt water and fire, wonderfully juxtaposed but intimately twined in this narrative demonstrate, once again, how the craft of Dillard’s narrative breaks-down imposed binaries. Also interrogating the spiritual and the material, Dillard introduces this strand through telling a story of a camping trip during which she watched a moth fall into her candle and “act as a wick” (17). She goes on to write that “she burned for two hours without changing...only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled” (17). This poignant image of the moth gains significance over the course of the text through its transformation into and fusion with a flaming god, a burnt child, Dillard, and the land itself. In the first of these renderings Dillard is confronted with two wounded, winged creatures:

Startled, the yellow cat on the floor has carried in a wren, I suddenly see, a wren she has killed, whose dead wings point askew on the circular rug. It is time. Out with you both. I shoo the cat from the door, turn the wren over in my palm, unmoved, and drop him from the porch...

When I next look up from my coffee, there is a ruckus on the porch. The cat has dragged in a god, scorched. He is alive. I run outside. Save for his wings, he is a perfect, very small man...I cannot breathe. I run at the cat to scare her; she drops him...

Quickly I snuff the smouldering fire in this yellow hair. (26)

As with her detachment from the suffering of the moth, Dillard is unmoved in the case of the wren, which belongs to the material world of ‘time’. Compassionate in the case of the god, moved to breathlessness, Dillard uses this instance to render visible an attitude which elevates the spiritual realm over the earthly. Whilst Pamela Smith regards this encounter with the wren as evidence of Dillard’s “ambivalence toward the natural world” (6), I see this encounter as the point from which Dillard begins to move closer towards an ecocentric worldview.

Like the moth that kindled her reading, the flaming god illuminates the landscape in which Dillard feels alien. It becomes a guide “calling things real, calling islands out of the sea” (28). Exclaiming, “I see it all! I see it all! Two islands, twelve islands, worlds, gather substance, gather the blue contours of time” (28), Dillard demonstrates the way in which the

landscape is revealed and called into being through naming, but also, how it is just as quickly concealed:

If I throw my eyes past the rim of the hill to see the real – stars, were they? something with wings, or loops? – I elaborate the illusion instead...I stitch the transparent curtain solid with bright phantom mountains...with blank, impenetrable sky. The dream fills in, like wind widening over a bay. Quickly I look to that flat dream's rim for a glimpse of that old deep...and, just as quickly, the blue snaps shut...The sky is gagging on trees. I seem to be on a road, walking, greeting the hedgerows, the rosehips, apples, and thorn. I seem to be on a road walking, familiar with the neighbours, high-handed cattle, smelling the sea, and alone. (28-29)

Dramatizing the limitations of subject/object duality Dillard suggests that the process of naming – objectifying – is only surface level knowledge. Ascribing names is not derived from communion with the land, but through dictation. It is a linear process of the subject asserting its power over the object. Because she has yet to deconstruct the subject/object boundary between herself and the terrain, the land she comes to know is not the land, but a replica, an artifice. As a result, Dillard is unable to access that deeper awareness of her place in the landscape. Her sense of alienation from the landscape and her inability to see things as they are is expressed through the landscape's affective capability: exuberance becoming foreboding. This change in atmosphere also foretells of the events of the following day.

The flaming moth, the winged god and the sensation of the sky gagging on trees are assembled and transformed in Part Two, 'God's Tooth', when Julie Norwich<sup>36</sup>, a local girl, is severely burned in a plane crash. The opening lines of this section introduce this third phase of burning, stating:

Into this world falls a plane.

The Earth is a mineral speckle in trees. The plane snagged its wing on a tree, fluttered in a tiny arc, and struggled down.

...There was no reason: the plane's engine simply stilled after takeoff, and the light plane failed to clear the firs. It fell easily; one wing snagged on a fir top, the metal fell down the air...the fuel exploded; and Julie Norwich seven years old burnt off her face. (35-36)

As well as being another victim linked by flames, Julie also functions as a mirror for Dillard: "she saw me watching her and we exchanged a look, a very self-conscious look – because we look a bit alike and we both knew it...Her face is slaughtered now, and I don't remember mine" (41). Creating a reflexive relationship with Julie, Dillard further links the events of the moth, god and crash to the loss of self she experienced as a result of being in the new and unfamiliar terrain of the Pacific Northwest. The loss of self and loss of face, though

---

<sup>36</sup> Susan Yore's essay 'In the Footsteps of Julian of Norwich' explores the name Julie Norwich as a direct reference to Christian anchoress, Julian of Norwich. This naming is a significant point, and one which has also been explored by Denise Baker in her essay on this relationship between Dillard and Julian in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy* (2009).

unsettling, are not negative in the context of this passage. Rather, they symbolise Dillard's awareness of *shedding* old ways of being and embracing a new way of living. She makes reference to this notion of shedding as a command given by these events and her surroundings, writing: "Today's god said: shed" (62). She also addresses the way in which inhabiting this terrain, the transformative realm of flame and water, creates a sense of a fractured identity, whereby she is at once the 'nun', 'artist' and 'thinker' caught between, but attempting to transcend, the dichotomy between spiritual and the material worlds:

A nun lives in the fires of the spirit, a thinker lives in the bright wick of the mind, an artist lives jammed in the pools of materials. (Or, a nun lives, thoughtful and tough, in the mind, a nun lives, with that special poignancy peculiar to religious, in the exile of materials; and a thinker, who would think of something, lives in the clash of materials, and in the world of spirit where all long thoughts must lead; and an artist lives in the mind, that warehouse of forms, and an artist lives, of course in the spirit. So.) But this room is...empty. Of itself it is nothing...The room where I live is plain as a skull. (22)

Dillard's expression of this trinity of the self represents her belief that the self is not static, but constantly responding to, and reforming, in relationship to her surroundings. However, whilst her deconstruction of her many selves at first renders them distinct, they soon become muddled. This confusion and loss of identity is representative of her sense of displacement, and a part of her process of redefining her fundamental beliefs about the world and her place in it.

Unifying herself and bringing the narrative of flames full circle is a final sacrament which draws together the spiritual and material realms which these three figures inhabited: 'the fires of the spirit', 'the bright wick of the mind' and 'the pools of materials'. By shedding old ways of being, and through the unification of self and the landscape, Dillard ultimately becomes "the nun" that, unlike the "Seraphs...[who are] aflame with love for God" (45), is "held fast by love in the world like the moth in wax, [her] life a wick, [her] head on fire with prayer, held utterly, outside and in" (76). Dillard flames with love for, and with the love of, the world. Through the association of the death of the moth, the flaming god and Julie's crash, Dillard comes to acknowledge the "sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being" (*Practice* 20) and, as Snyder states, embrace her place in the "real world, with all its suffering, not in simple terms of 'nature red in claw and tooth' but through the celebration of the gift-exchange quality of our give and take" (*Practice* 20). Dillard's process of reconnecting human with nature through the deconstruction of the boundaries between herself and the landscape and between the spiritual and the material is achieved thematically, but also by the circular narrative structure which enacts, through repetition and the transformation of key words and images, her deeper "resolve to be whole" (*Practice* 24).

## In Conclusion

*Philosophy is thus a place-based exercise. It comes from the body and the heart and is checked against shared experience. – Gary Snyder*

At the core of Dillard's Deep Ecological awakening has been her musing on, and unification of, spirit and matter. This process of unification has been expressed through the deconstruction of Christian duality and the reconceptualization of the self in relationship to the natural world derives its strength from such poetic devices as repetition, imagery, symbol and metaphor. Considering the circularity of the narrative one last time, I return to Part One's title, 'Newborn and Salted' which communicates, in the context of this text, an experience of rebirth that occurs through contact with the region's abundant salt water. Through this rebirth Dillard comes to see her place in the world, and be in the world, through a Deep Ecological philosophical perspective. Having asked at the beginning of the text "Why should I open my eyes?" (12), it is not until she has truly witnessed the landscape and been witnessed by the landscape, shedding everything and become the light herself that she finally *sees*.

Just as Dillard's use of metaphor allows her to collapse the distinction between the spiritual and material, and internal and external worlds, her use of a circular and interwoven narrative structure allows her to match form to content. She expresses this in *The Writing Life*, stating that her "task" when writing *Holy the Firm* "was to change intellectual passion to physical energy and some sort of narrative mastery, from a standing start" (*Writing* 49). Her reference to feeling as though the writing began from a 'standing start' demonstrates the imaginative implications of being new to a region and her sense of approaching the writing from the tip of the unknown. Dillard's 'narrative mastery' achieves what Scheick describes as "a calculated and unified narrative manner that exemplifies the intrinsic artistry of language and of nature" (52). This he argues "evoke[s] in her readers a mode of seeing equivalent to her own experience of rapt concentration on the mysterious mute cipher of natural beauty" (52). And whilst this statement is valid in the sense that Dillard's narrative of transformation evokes in readers a sense of also being transformed, Dillard's Deep Ecological literacy in this text is working to communicate more than an experience of natural beauty.

In *Holy the Firm*, there is surprisingly little description of natural beauty – one need only think back to some of the text's key events: a burning moth, a flaming god, a burnt child, a white and coiled Christ. And when nature is present, or the natural world presented, it is certainly not beauty which Dillard seeks to communicate. Dillard highlights those elements of the landscape which are more in keeping with her actual experience of it, rendering it animate, fearsome, powerful and transformative. Evoking the intensity of experience and encounters, in *The Writing Life*, Dillard states:

So that island haunts me. I was not in prison there, but instead loosed on the shore of vastness. As I walk about this enclosed bay on Cape Cod, or as I scroll down a computer file to a blank screen, then from time to time the skies part ahead of my path, or the luminous photons on the screen revert to infinite randomness, and I balk again on the brink. The irrational haunts the metaphysical. The opposites meet in the looping sky above appearances, or in the dark alley behind appearances, where danger and power duel in a blur.

...Once I saw phosphorescent seas...in the black night black seas broke in wild lines to the horizon and spilled green foam that glowed when the wind's pitch rose, so I wept on the shore in fear. (89)

As a result of her encounter and experiences in the Pacific Northwest and her adoption of a Deep Ecological philosophy, *Holy the Firm* differs greatly from narratives whose aim is to present the majesty of a landscape or deliver a personalised natural history of a specific geography. By choosing not to engage in purely representational writing or place nature on a pedestal, treating it as an entity that exists in some perfect realm as distinct from humanity, Dillard is better able to evoke her experience of nature and thus communicate a stronger environmental message which is not hinged to a flimsy, idealised nature but the one real earth which is home, to which we and all other matter are connected.

If, as readers of *Holy the Firm* we are reading “in hope of ... life heightened and its deepest mystery probed,” desiring literature which, “seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered” (*Writing* 72-73), then it is the role of the writer to probe these mysteries, to illuminate. Being aware of Dillard's attitudes to the role of literature renders her engagement with the landscape as a writer all the more powerful and important. Inherent in this Deep Ecological discovery is her desire to share with others. In this act of being both the illuminated and illuminator, she engages in the key role of the Deep Ecological writer by becoming the *mushroom*, a metaphor which Gary Snyder uses to describe the way artists and writers nourish their communities. He writes:

When we deepen or enrich ourselves, looking within, understanding ourselves, we come closer to being like a climax system. Turning away from grazing on the ‘immediate biomass’ of perception, sensation and thrill; and re-viewing memory, internalized perception, blocks of inner energies, dreams, the leaf-fall of day to day consciousness, liberates the energy of our sense-detritus. Art is an assimilator of unfelt experience, sensation, and memory for the whole society. When all that compost of feeling and thinking comes back to us then, it comes back not as a flower, but – to complete the metaphor – a mushroom: the fruiting body of the buried threads of mycelia that run widely through the soil, and are intricately married to the root hairs of the trees. ‘Fruiting’ – at that point – is the completion of the work of the poet, and the point where the artist or mystic reenters the cycle: gives what she or he has done as nourishment, and as spore or seeds the ‘thought of enlightenment’. (qtd. in Bate 247)

In her pilgrimage to the Western landscape and her account as written in *Holy the Firm*, Dillard not only bears witness with fresh eyes, giving new expression to the landscape of that region and its representation in literature, she also provides a new way of understanding and interpreting the role of Christian rhetoric in Deep Ecological literature. *Holy the Firm* is more than a text; it is a representation of the power of communion with the landscape of the American West, and the spores it posits are multiple in their import. It is a book of resonance that reverberates like a beaten bell: “in touch with, in touch with, in touch with; spanning the gap, from here to eternity, home” (*Holy* 72).<sup>37</sup>

By confronting the American West Dillard moves beyond the Eastern, Transcendental rendering of nature, breaking ties with Thoreau and moving into the realm of Meloy and myself, for whom the landscape of the West is not a myth, but a tangible, physical reality. Reading *Holy the Firm* in relationship to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *The Writing Life*, it is clear to see the impact and lasting influence of the Western landscape on Dillard’s consciousness. Always on the quest for evidence of the presence of God in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard only engaged with the material world in as much as it would reveal something else beyond it. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard’s acceptance of nature’s sacredness as inherent, and not as an entity beyond it, or that simply speaks through it, differs from the Transcendental view because she comes to understand that communion with the natural world is the *ultimate* experience, not just a means to transcend the human condition. As a result of these positions, I argue for reading *Holy the Firm* within the context of Western writing which embraces a Deep Ecological position.

While Dillard’s engagement with Christian themes in *Holy the Firm* has eluded or evaded most Ecocritical readings (evidenced by the fact that a majority of its critiques stem from a theological approach), this reading of the text through the lens of Deep Ecology and in the context of Western literature has aimed to illustrate the way in which her encounters with the Pacific Northwest worked to shape both her craft and consciousness. Reading the text in this way it is possible to see how Dillard’s new ways of conceptualising, imagining and expressing her physical relationship to the landscape of the West laid a firm foundation for subsequent writers.

---

<sup>37</sup> Dillard first refers to herself as a bell in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at the moment I was lifted and struck” (34).

### Chapter Three

#### Learning to Find Home: The Place of Deep Ecology in Ellen Meloy's *The Last Cheater's Waltz*

*My geography savors a delicious paradox: Home – a grounding – found in unearthly beauty...Every day, every season, I taste these colors and the intricate flavors of their unaccountable tones and hues. I have yet to earn this land. Perhaps I never will. Home is a religion. Sensibly you understand the need for it, yet not even sensible people can explain it. – Ellen Meloy*

#### Introduction

Though *The Last Cheater's Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest* (1999), like Meloy's other works (*i.e.* *Raven's Exile* (1994), *The Anthropology of Turquoise* (2003), *Eating Stone* (posthumously, 2006), explores the natural history of the Colorado Plateau as a way of celebrating its beauty, it also documents the spiritual, aesthetic and sensory crisis she suffers during the process of building a home in a terrain which is steeped in atomic history.<sup>38</sup> Fearful of the consequences of settling down in one place – she had always regarded herself as nomadic, “encamped but not yet established” – Meloy uses this crisis to relearn her place in the landscape.<sup>39</sup> Juxtaposing the beauty of the landscape against violence – both in climate, geography and history – *The Last Cheater's Waltz* undermines the notion that the wilderness exists as a place one escapes to for the sole purpose of achieving spiritual transcendence. *The Last Cheater's Waltz* is about coming to fully embrace that damaged terrain as home, in the Deep Ecological sense, through the process of reinhabitation. A practice pioneered by Gary Snyder, reinhabitation is the process of moving into and restoring lands which have fallen victim to ill treatment by mankind. In this chapter I will seek to more solidly define what constitutes a narrative of reinhabitation and suggest that, through her engagement with this practice, Meloy in *The Last Cheater's Waltz* expresses a Deep Ecological practice.

Divided by her desire to embrace the aesthetic qualities of the landscape of the Desert Southwest and the reality of its role as the proving ground for atomic weaponry, Ellen Meloy in *The Last Cheater's Waltz*, engages with the difficult task contemporary writers of the West face. For Meloy, this “morality-charged wallop [of] the desert's strange paradox as the natural terrain of the spirit and the proving grounds of mass death” (*Last Cheater's* 142), has meant

---

<sup>38</sup> The book derives its title from a country song by T.G. Sheppard, ‘The Last Cheater's Waltz’ (1979). The song title echoes Meloy's perception of the desert as a duplicitous lover: “The land to which I devoted my most fervent loyalty ran a gossamer tightrope between beauty and violence. I felt betrayed. My lover, my pure and faithful desert was cheating” (101).

<sup>39</sup> Meloy, Ellen. *The Last Cheaters Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999. Print. pp. 7

abandoning representations of the fabled, mythic or ‘pure’ wilderness of the West. However, through her physical process of creating home, Meloy comes to see beyond the beauty and aesthetics of the idealised version of the terrain which first drew her there. Thus, Meloy’s illumination is achieved through her reinhabitory process. She comes to understand the land as a whole, as a complex network of spirit, terrain and history. In doing so, Meloy breaks down the “dichotomy between the civilized and the wild” (*Practice* 24) in herself and in her perception of the landscape, and thereby resolves, in the Deep Ecological sense, to be whole.

In his comparative reading of *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* and Terry Tempest Williams’ *Refuge: An Unnatural Family History* (1991), John Beck in *Dirty Wars* (2009) highlights the key narrative of both texts as being “the concealed presence of military power in a landscape otherwise considered in some way to be redemptive”.<sup>40</sup> By confronting this relationship between landscape and history, between tangible and perceived, Meloy and Williams’ work is able to interrogate the region’s other juxtapositions of beauty and violence, sacred and profane, public and private, human time and geologic time, creation and destruction, community and individual. As Beck states, these works strive to “celebrate the powerful fact of the natural environment, its forms, scale [and]...beauty” through a “political, economic and...military-industrial” (205) filter. What the work of Meloy and Williams demonstrates is that there is no way, as a Westerner, to write about the contemporary Western landscape without acknowledging the effects of such structures of power. *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* further addresses the politics of ownership, since Meloy has come to identify herself as a land owner.

Breaking down the myth of a virginal wilderness, Meloy’s text engages directly in a discussion of the presence and impact of humans and human culture on the landscape. This discussion covers a wide stretch of history – from the presence of the first Paleo-Indian, to Oppenheimer’s occupation at Los Alamos, to her present attempt at creating a permanent residence. The terrain which she now occupies was once the site of a large Native settlement dating back to A.D. 500-600, but she also makes a note of the fact that evidence of human inhabitation of this region dates back to around 9500 B.C. Further, she argues that a large portion of what appears to be uncultivated land or ‘wilderness’ is, in fact, owned and maintained by the United States military – uninhabited, but far from untouched. To understand the ways of the terrain, then, is to also understand the ways of the people who have inhabited it.

---

<sup>40</sup> Beck, John. *Dirty Wars*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Print. p. 203

As a result of addressing these matters in her work, Beck claims that Meloy “corrupt[s] the genre of ‘nature’ writing...since [she], however reluctantly, must include the effects of power on the land, and indeed, [herself], not just as a blight produced from elsewhere but as a constitutive of Western space” (205). I see this as a *positive* corruption as this text addresses pertinent environmental issues and does not hide from the *dirty* history of the Western landscape. In this way, *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* works to “dismantle certain mythologies about American wilderness while still retaining faith in both art and landscape” (Beck 159). By not simply elegising or praising the wilderness, Meloy’s ‘corruptive’ narrative provides a “vision for the future” (Beck 168) of environmental writing by reconceptualising and reconnecting with terrains – wildernesses created by human interference – that have been exploited and abandoned. By coming to reclaim the land in this way, Meloy’s work resonates with ‘Good, Wild, Sacred’, in which Gary Snyder examines how these titles are ascribed to the natural world.<sup>41</sup> By deconstructing these terms Snyder suggests that the natural world, whilst it can be all these things, is fundamentally home and therefore, all of it, worth our care. Meloy’s lived practices and her writing, both of which restore beauty where once was violence through the process of creating home, work to undermine these evaluative categories of good, wild or sacred. *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*, by providing new ways of seeing and relating to damaged landscapes, is invaluable to the study of the relationship between Deep Ecology and contemporary Western writing.

In her essay ‘The Art of Ecological Thinking’ Dianne Chisholm, a leading critic of Meloy’s work, regards Meloy’s process of deconstructing and reconstructing her relationship with the Desert Southwest as a process of reterritorialization. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of the postmodern theorists Deleuze and Guattari, Chisholm highlights the way in which Meloy’s

art of composing territory with and against a chaos of dynamically abutting, colliding, overlapping and intertwining molecular assemblages of heterogeneous (physical, organic, inorganic, semiotic, linguistic, etc.) materials into a singularly evolving territorial assemblage...lends itself to a cosmic deterritorializing movement toward new ecological horizons that Deleuze and Guattari sometimes invoke as ‘a new earth and a new people’.<sup>42</sup>

In this passage Chisholm makes a similar claim to Dana Wilde in his reading of Dillard’s *Holy the Firm*, in which he states the work “builds up its force by assembling various narratives and philosophical forays in distinctly nonlinear ways” (31). As it did for Dillard, what this approach allows Meloy is a new way of imagining and transcribing the terrain. In

---

<sup>41</sup> Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990. Print. pp. 84-103

<sup>42</sup> Chisholm, Dianne. “The Art of Ecological Thinking: Literary Ecology”. *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment*, 18.3 (2011): 569 - 593. Web. 28 February 2012. pp. 579

*The Last Cheater's Waltz* Meloy is indeed working to break down binaries, tropes of nature writing, myths of wilderness, and common human-nature relationships. The process of deconstructing existing ways of relating to the territory and finding new methods of interpreting the human relationship with landscape Chisholm refers to as deterritorialization.

Chisholm believes Meloy's writing deterritorializes the terrain by turning "conceptual motifs into a style of territorial expressionism" through her work as an "artist-naturalist" (580). By presenting new ways of visualising or reading the environment, Meloy frames the landscape, not as a static terrain, but as a territory of 'becoming'. Chisholm argues that by way of deterritorialization the desert's nuclear history "no longer blocks [Meloy's] vision of desert habitability but is absorbed into a chaosmos of ecological infinity" (583). Her conclusion that Meloy's coming to understand her role in that landscape is "to take part in the desert's becoming, instead of framing it with dreams of reclamation" (583) very much echoes Beck's sentiment. However, as an abstract term which places both natural change and manmade change on the same plane, it is arguable that the term 'becoming' might do more harm than good for the environment, in that it potentially removes from individuals the need to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Though dreams of reclamation might be futile for Meloy, surely what her text demonstrates is the need for a code of environmental ethics and cultural practices that keep 'becoming' from becoming the total destruction of the natural world.

Adele H. Bealer in 'Performance and Ecocriticism' also draws upon the term 'becoming' in her criticism of Meloy, stating that her writing demonstrates the conflation of "nature and culture, being and becoming".<sup>43</sup> 'Becoming', however, in the case of Bealer's work is rooted in Performance Theory and the relationship between the "cocreative performances of actors (human and nonhuman) and audiences (materially or virtually present), and of the places-as-space within which those performances are enacted" (3). She regards the "corporeal muscular presence" (13) in Meloy's language and writing as evocative of the performance of her body in a specific geography, a "performance [that] occurs between the constructions of culture and nature, in the very moment of their construction" (3). Arguing for the inclusion of "performance-centred methodology" (17) in Ecocritical studies, she writes:

If ecocritics can think beyond the concretely spatial, environments could be read and experienced as temporal mapping, performed into being by actors for audiences who share with them a lively awareness of the conditions that both determine and authorize

---

<sup>43</sup> Bealer Adele H. "Reading Out Loud: Performing Ecocriticism as a Practice of the Wild" *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment*, 19.1 (2011): 5-23. Web. 5 September 2012. p. 13

their coproduction. In this way, environment is not restricted to an objective place over there or over here; instead ecological space that coheres around cultural performers is more readily understood as an enviroing, enveloping and dialogically potent partner. (4)

Whilst differing from Chisholm's argument in that it is at once concerned with the tangible role of the individual in the dynamic interplay between human and nature, and also with the co-creative space between the writer, landscape and reader, Bealer's argument does not address what elements of Meloy's 'becoming' constitute sound environmental practice. Lacking the substance of an environmental philosophy, such as Deep Ecology, these approaches do little to suggest what tangible legacy or environmental impact texts such as *The Last Cheater's Waltz* might yield.

Collectively, what Chisholm, Bealer and Beck suggest is that Meloy's work is doing something new, that it is striving to move writing about the natural world in a direction which more strongly acknowledges human presence and interaction within the natural landscape. I am aligned with these critics in a belief that *The Last Cheater's Waltz* finds new ways to address the relationship between humans and nature which confront contemporary environmental issues. However, more than creating new literary territory by reimagining the human relationship to the physical terrain of the Desert Southwest, Meloy's writing, and the lived practices it describes, examine the complex process of creating home in the post-nuclear West through a process of reinhabitation. Her text explores what it means to accept responsibility for one's geography and fully dwell – deeply and spiritually – in place. *The Last Cheater's Waltz*, read from a Deep Ecological critical perspective, provides the imaginative material from which a debate over how environmental texts should be constructed and structured can emerge.

### **Reinhabitation as Practice and Poetics**

Reinhabitation as process and poetics has long informed Snyder's writing. Katsunori Yamazato, in his essay 'Kitkitdizee, Zendo, and Place: Gary Snyder as a Reinhabitory Poet' considers Gary Snyder's physical practice of reinhabitation, its philosophical grounding, and its literary representation in his poetry, proposing that *Turtle Island* (1974) and *Axe Handles* (1980) demonstrate most strongly his reinhabitory practice. Though published over a decade before his decision to settle in the Sierras, *The Back Country* (1957) is also an essential part of the development of the philosophical roots of Snyder's practice and highlights the experiences

which led to his leading a “life committed to place and the community of all beings”.<sup>44</sup>

Yamazato draws out several key reinhabitory practices and demonstrates how those practices are reflected in Snyder’s writing. I will focus on the process of reinhabitation as it relates to matters of home, spirit, body and story.

Though only loosely defined as the process of “moving back into a terrain that has been abused and half-forgotten – and then replanting trees, dechannelizing streambeds, breaking up the asphalt” (*Practice* 191), reinhabitation is the cornerstone of Snyder’s Deep Ecological philosophical practice. For Snyder, this practice involved “moving into the Sierra foothills of Northern California in the 1970s into an area that had been devastated by hydraulic gold mining” (Yamazato 51). There “he built a house, planted trees, raised children and explored the terrain” (Yamazato 51). Though there are similarities between the process of reinhabitation and reterritorialization, whilst reterritorialization *conceptually* deconstructs the terrain in order to rebuild, reinhabitation involves both physical practice and conceptual processes; its emphasis is on the creation of home and the restoration of damaged terrain. In reinhabitory practices, home pertains to the dwelling and the construction of the dwelling, but also to how the home is integrated in the region and works to develop a sense of place and belonging. Home is about being at home on this earth. Yamazato refers to Snyder’s naming the dwelling Kitkitdizze as being part of this process of grounding. Using the Native name for a native plant, through naming the house kitkitdizzee Snyder makes an outward statement of his desire to learn from Native cultures what his home terrain “is”.<sup>45</sup> Snyder approach has, and continues to be, “to learn a sense of the region, and what is possible in that region, rather than indefinitely assuming that a kind of promiscuous distribution of goods and long-range transportation is always going to be possible” (*Real Work* 25). The name Kitkitdizze signifies a sense of intimacy with, and knowledge of, the local and the regional.

Given that central to the process of creating home, in a Deep Ecological sense, is a “spiritual and ecological interrelation with the land” (57), home is a spiritual matter. Just as Meloy states, “home is like religion. Sensible you can understand the need for it, yet not even sensible people can explain it” (109), Snyder’s relationship to home carries an equally weighty spiritual, conceptual and metaphysical connotation. Snyder’s spiritual relationship with the landscape, whilst aligning him culturally with other Western Americans, also reflects his study and practice of Zen Buddhism. His fusion of Zen Buddhism and Western attitudes has led to the creation of a distinctive spiritual practice that, whilst still relying upon seated

---

<sup>44</sup> Yamazato, Katsunori. “Kitkitdizzie, Zendo, and Place: Gary Snyder as a Reinhabitory Poet.” *Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and the Environment*, 1.1 (1993): 51-63. Web. 4 October 2012. p. 55

<sup>45</sup> Snyder, Gary. *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks: 1964-1979*. New York: New Direction Books. 1980. Print. p. 25

meditation that grounds the body and mind in place, rejects dogmatism in favour of “drawing upon the spirit place” (Yamazato 57). Similarly, Meloy writes of a practice of lying against the earth as a “posture of intimacy” that “evokes emotion” and “leads to meaning, then understanding” (36). For both writers, the body allows for the physical, sensory and spiritual experience of place and is the vehicle by which reinhabitory practices are put into action. Two additional key physical practices which Yamazato highlights in the case of Snyder, and which I will address in relationship to Meloy’s work, are the “turn and return” (54), a process which she refers to as the *walzen*, and “intensity of exploration” (58).

More than providing physical and spiritual grounding, the body is also the source of language: “Language is a mind body system that coevolved” (*Practice* 18). This interconnectivity means that the language and the forms used to tell or write the story of reinhabitation are the products of the complex relationship between body, spirit and home. Just as Yamazato’s essay makes connections between Snyder’s physical movements and his poetic craft, I will consider how Meloy’s writing is informed by the relationship between her body and the landscape. More than simply producing a record of the body, however, texts such as Snyder’s *Axe Handles* and Meloy’s *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* ensure that the wisdom and information gained during the reinhabitory process is passed down. These texts and the practices they detail are the product of the author’s desire to share knowledge and to incite change. They do their part to “tell the good story” (*Practice* 26) and, doing so, demonstrate a Deep Ecological understanding of the role of literature as environmental activism.

### **The *Walzen***

Though home and ‘grounding’ are central to the text, as the title implies *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* is not about being still. This text is about movement. To be more specific – it is about turning. The *walzen*, from which the term ‘waltz’ is derived, is used by Meloy to allude to her previous nomadic tendencies: “in this red-boned desert, I have always known the *walzen*, the turning, to be passionate and obsessive. It had all the trappings of a biological imperative, and innate engagement with the environment that asserted itself in varying degrees of physical intensity” (212). Describing the *walzen* “as a rootless, half-baked nomadism, a displacement that feels singular although it is also a regionally distinctive trait” (188), makes it possible to better understand her work in relationship to Snyder’s, as both sojourned extensively in the West (and Snyder beyond) before coming to claim a specific geography as home.

Though it preceded Snyder’s reinhabitory process, Yamazato indicates that “wandering and searching” also referred to as the “turn and return” (54) are fundamental to the process of self discovery. This process of wandering is what took Snyder ‘off the trail’: “I

first stumbled a bit off the trail in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest at twenty-two, while in a fire lookout in the North Cascades” (*Practice* 162). Asking in *The Practice of the Wild*, “So what’s off the path?” (155), Snyder roughly defines it as everything that is *not* the path. In that sense ‘off the path’ is the ability to see the world beyond a linear trajectory of ambition or self. It is the awareness of the unknown and the willingness “to learn and memorize the field...holding the map in mind” (*Practice* 155). Leaving the path is the willingness to move into the wild:

One departs from home to embark on a quest into an archetypal wilderness that is dangerous, threatening, full of beasts and hostile aliens. This sort of encounter with the other – both the inner and outer – requires giving up comfort and safety, accepting cold and hunger, and being willing to eat anything. You may never see home again. Loneliness is your bread. Your bones may turn up someday in some riverbank mud. It grants freedom, expansion, and release. Untied. Unstuck. Crazy for a while. It breaks taboo, it verges on transgression, it teaches humility. Going out – fasting – singing alone – talking across the species boundaries – praying – giving thanks – coming back. (192)

Clear from this passage is the belief that entering wild territories also allows one to enter the wilderness of the mind. It was indeed this process of wandering and going ‘off the trail’ which, Meloy writes, brought her to eventually settle in the Desert Southwest:

I first came to this mesa nearly twenty years before. It was not my destination but words on a map, a formal graphic notation of a place that I planned to pass through during a trip from Montana to California. On that trip I pulled off the road to stretch my legs among the mesa’s pinons and junipers. I stayed a month...Over the years, I came back to the mesa again and again, from my home in Montana and eventually from closer locales when I moved to southern Utah permanently. (198-99)

Leaving the road (or the path) behind, Meloy’s discovery of this terrain parallels Snyder’s commentary on his own experiences, and the usefulness of going into the wild. Linked not only by the life-altering effect of these departures from the path, Meloy and Snyder’s experiences are also similar for the terrains in which they took place. These vast geographies, comprising large areas of wilderness, exposed these writers to the possibility of living a truly wild life, as Meloy writes:

My sojourns took up all the free time I could muster, and my hikes lasted as long as my food supply, which was measured by the water available in the canyons and the weight I could carry on my back. My clothes and skin acquired a red tint, the color of sandstone. (199)

Meloy’s backpacking expeditions required her to live simply, practise self-reliance and attune herself to her surroundings, so much so that she began to physically blend into the landscape. Given that Deep Ecologists attribute environmental problems to a growing alienation from

our wild nature these periods of pilgrimage that brought Snyder and Meloy closer to nature and the wild brought them closer to understanding what it means to be at home on this earth.

Though it took nearly twenty years of wandering before she came to settle in the place that she would ultimately call home, these initial nomadic *turnings* allowed her to temporarily dwell in that landscape and enabled her to gain knowledge of that landscape and of herself that she would not have acquired had she remained ‘on the trail’. But it is not these wild wanderings which render Snyder and Meloy’s work unique among their Western contemporaries. Rather, it is their ultimate commitment to be in place – their reclamation of “the home” as “the place that humans had lost in modern industrial civilization” (Yamazato 61). While this process starts by fostering “a keen sense of kinship with the land” (*Last Cheater’s* 188), building home in the reinhabitory sense has deeper connotations. Snyder writes:

If you do know what is taught by the plants and weather, you are in on the gossip and can truly feel more at home. The sum of a field’s forces becomes what we call very loosely the “spirit of place”. To know the spirit of place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. (41)

This deeper relationship means not only being knowledgeable about the landscape, but also being in situ, a quality which comes from earning the terrain by knowing the whole community – developing a “spiritual and ecological interrelation with the land” (*Practice* 57). But as Meloy’s text indicates, it is not enough merely to learn a terrain’s geography, flora and fauna; one must also learn about the impact of human culture and human history on the landscape. To view nature and culture as separate entities is to deny the reality of human existence – this is one of the problems of environmental writing which fails to examine human/nature relationships. In choosing to root herself in an environmentally-damaged place where the “uranium rush in the fifties” left “airstrips across remote mesas and roads cut up and down steep talus slopes[,] [b]roken machinery and scattered heaps of core samples” (117) and build a home there, Meloy makes a commitment to break down the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild and live as part of the wider geographical and psychogeographical community. But this transition from engaging with the landscape as an aesthetic pilgrim to becoming a resident is not without consequences. Meloy’s growing knowledge of the region’s role in uranium mining erects metaphysical and spiritual boundaries between herself and the landscape: “the landscape to which I had so profound an attachment – had recently acquired tones of distance” (6). Yamazato recognises the awareness of toxicity as one of the factors responsible for “twentieth-century alienation” from the landscape that has led to a growing sense of “homeless and placelessness” (53). In the case of Meloy, the knowledge of the landscape’s role as the proving ground of atomic weaponry and the atrocity it caused to

humanity and environment renders her “helplessly unmoored from my Self or hopelessly lost in the murk of Self...[and] no longer able to make the distinction between the two” (3). This sensation of a ‘murk of Self’ demonstrates a clear link with Dillard’s experience of confusion and loss of identity due to her sense of displacement experienced as a part of her process of redefining her fundamental beliefs about the world and her place in it. Like Dillard, this sense of confusion marks a need to shed old ways of being and embrace new ways of living.

Seeking to physically and mentally reground herself in place, Meloy quite unexpectedly turns away from her immediate surroundings to a fold-out map which first brought her to this place 20 years before, a “visual syntax of remembered journeys” (5-7). Allowing her to once again see the land from a nomad’s perspective, at first the map enables her to ignore the implications and impact of nuclear testing, and appreciate the beauty of the landscape. But she writes, “Memory purifies experience, a map distils place, but neither memory nor map is blood. The silent chemistry of this desert lay deep within me” (8). Meloy’s recognition of her deeper connection to this terrain, and her willingness to confront its history rather than purify or distil it down, are where her reinhabitory process begins: “to reinhabit my own body, I had to traverse, again and again, the desert’s cruel and beautiful skin” (8). For Meloy, like Snyder, the physical actions of the body are central to developing an understanding of what it means to be in place. Perceiving little division between her interior and her exterior surroundings, “the sole difference between me and the land was a membrane of skin” (6), to truly understand herself (i.e. “what it means to be human” (Yamazato 61)) and her own body, Meloy must also understand the land.

Meloy’s decision to engage again in the *walzen* in the context of this text is not necessarily a biological imperative or a search for beauty, but a conscious effort to find answers to her questions about what it means to live in place and gain deeper knowledge of the landscape and its history. In *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*, Meloy completes roughly six *walzen* within the 500 square miles which surround her Utah home. Each of Meloy’s turnings begins at, and returns to, the home terrain. These turns allow her to physically and metaphysically trace and retrace her ‘steps’, but also expand her knowledge and create a new experiential territory, one which she has witnessed with her own senses. Meloy’s traverses not only explore the relationship between her body and the landscape, but between her body and language, and between language and the landscape. The writing enacts, and actively performs, Meloy’s bodily process of turning. As a result, the reader is privy to and part of Meloy’s process of transformation and reinhabitation. These traverses, or *walzen*, are inherent to the text’s overall structure and craft.

The *walzen* allows for a constant sense of turning, folding and enfolding, within an otherwise linear narrative by creating functional juxtapositions between the home terrain and unknown terrain, and ultimately collapsing the two. Like Dillard's use of a cyclical narrative in *Holy the Firm*, Meloy's *walzen* makes it possible to examine her subjects from all angles, thus creating room for expansion, discovery and revelation. It also gives *The Last Cheater's Waltz* its sense of "rhythm...force, movement, repetition, and surprise" (*Writing* 98). Further, by reintroducing and re-examining key concepts and symbols the turning allows for the accumulation of meaning and significance through repetition. Each turn reveals something new and moves Meloy closer to reinhabiting her body and nearer the heart of understanding what it means to be at home in that landscape. Exploring the "turn and return" as part of Snyder's reinhabitory and poetic practice, Yamazato notes that *The Back Country* documents, in a structural and thematic sense, Snyder's return to the West from the East which "led to his permanent return to Turtle Island to test and put into practice what he had gained" (Yamazato 55). Like Snyder, this process of turning and returning enables Meloy to reinhabit her home terrain.

### **Boiled Lizards**

*How was a person to heal her numbed soul amid these fretful, querulous phantoms of mass death? Then I remembered the promise of the boiled lizard: to look closely and burn hotter, to forge the desert's sweetness and ferocity into my own, to find beauty.* – Ellen Meloy

On the morning that Meloy's growing physical and spiritual alienation from the landscape pitches her into deepest, discordant despair, she accidentally boils alive a lizard that was sleeping in her coffee mug (*Last Cheater's* 3). Like Dillard's flaming moth, as a symbol, the meaning of the boiled lizard is multiple, and through Meloy's relationship to the lizard the human impact on the desert and the human relationship with the desert is explored and expressed. While regarding herself as a creature of adaptation that, like the lizard, can survive in "one of the continent's extreme landscapes" and "fit flesh to rock" (6), Meloy recognises that she is nonetheless an intruder and a threat. However, the lizard – by taking up residence in an object which had become familiar, provided shelter and which then turned lethal – also echoes Meloy's estrangement from the land as a result of its toxic nuclear legacy. She recognises that whilst she has become resilient to the desert topography of stone and intensity of weather she is, like the lizard, also at the mercy of humanity. By aligning herself with the lizard in this way Meloy is forced, through its death, to acknowledge her own fragility and physical transience: her own mortality. Meloy makes clear links between these two concepts

through the repetition of key words used to speak of the death of the lizard, “its belly the pale blue of heart break” (3), and of the anxiety of her own death, “what I knew broke my heart. Someday...I would leave it all” (213).

What the boiling of the lizard also forces Meloy to acknowledge is that what might be at the heart of her malaise is not something “neurological, but aesthetic, a dulling of the imagination” (5). This dulling, of course, is the result of trying to silence and suppress the knowledge that this place of “spare beauty” where “the nights are coal-black and water-deep, the light often too bright to understand...this abundant space and isolation,” is also where “the energy lords extract their bounty of natural resources, and the curators of mass destruction once mined their egregious weapons and reckless acts” (7). Indeed, it is this disconnection between the beauty which called her to the land and its secretive, violent history that is at the core of her breakdown.

Trying to make sense of this terrain, and place herself within it, Meloy embarks on the creation of a map, which she refers to as ‘The Map of the Known Universe’. This practice recalls Dillard who, in *Holy the Firm*, charted and named the islands on a hand-drawn map as a way of rooting herself in an unfamiliar place. With this map, Meloy’s intentions are not meant to be merely representational. Chisholm regards this mapping as part of the process of reterritorialization and states that, by doing so, Meloy reclaims “land mapped by the square of the imperial grid” and creates “an abstract and sensational territory” (579). Whilst guided by the senses, Meloy’s rediscovery of the territory through her own perception, and representation as such, appears to enact a desire to make it *less* abstract. It goes deeper than being an alternative interpretation of the landscape: it is directly linked to her experiences of, and relationship to, the landscape and attempting to “merge metaphysical with physical boundaries” (108). I liken Meloy’s charting of this terrain to Deep Ecological mapping which, as defined by Snyder in *The Practice of the Wild*, creates a new “kind of visualisation” that “prepares us to be at home in this landscape” (43). Her desire to make the landscape home, deeply and spiritually, exists in opposition to the previous generation’s exploitation and exhaustion of its resources that lead to “families [being] uprooted and relocated, scary messes left behind, and no one to take responsibility for cleaning it up” (*Last Cheater’s* 116). Meloy’s re-mapping is meant to heal the sense of dislocation that was created by those practices. Rebellious against a culture of environmental degradation, Meloy’s map is meant to replace alienation with intimacy by serving as a “witness of the senses” which ties “ephemeral aesthetics, the subtle and the private, to concrete spaces” (135-136). With the hope of developing a new understanding of these fraught relationships between humans and landscape, Meloy’s map is meant to bodily and spiritually ground her, and through the

process of its creation, build a complex web binding self, place, history, geology, emotion, spirit and beauty.

Non-traditional in its concept, the map is also non-traditional in design. At the centre of the map, a series of concentric circles made of sand and then transcribed into a sketch book, on the “the home *O*” (8) Meloy places the boiled lizard. Binding the lizard to home, the event of its death, and its presence in the text takes on significance beyond ‘the actual’. As a mirror for Meloy, and the object around which meaning is accumulated, in many ways the lizard is comparable to Dillard’s Julie Norwich in *Holy the Firm*. Indeed, *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* functions in a way similar to *Holy the Firm*, as events and elements of the world accumulate meaning by their emergence and re-emergence throughout the text. This layering of meaning through symbols which emanate from the natural world, or which bind themselves to the natural world, echoes Deep Ecological thought in that it calls for acknowledgement of the complex interweaving of life on earth.

### **The First Three *Walzen***

The first of Meloy’s *turns* responds to what Yamazato argues is one of the key elements Snyder uses to enact the reinhabitory practice in his writing. This is the expression of the “intensity of exploration” (58). This, he claims, demonstrates that “the poet wants to know accurately where he is and how to be in place” (58). As evidence for this claim Yamazato uses those of Snyder’s poems in which there exist “possibilities of a deadly mistake when, for example the poet attempts to learn the nature of an unknown mushroom” (58). Demonstrating the relationship of the body to its surroundings through the ingestion of a part of the landscape shifts the focus away from the human impact on the terrain, to the effects of the performance of landscape on the body.

A sense of danger and the effects of the landscape on the body are felt in the first section of Meloy’s text, ‘Tse Valley I: Alien Pebbles’ in which Meloy travels to a place where she is able to experience first-hand the desert’s inherent pairing of beauty and violence – the blooming of the claret cup cactus. Though in the case of Snyder the nature of the mushroom was unknown – making it a point of discovery, but also danger – the claret cup cactus is a species which Meloy is familiar with: “any day, any time, I would without complaint travel seventy miles to see a claret cup cactus in bloom” (11). It is not, however “botanical interest,” that drives Meloy to see out this bloom, but the desire for sensation and sensory intensity that borders on “sodomasochistic pleasure” (11). Describing the claret cup flower as resting in a “nest of needle sharp spines...deterrent to your lips and the tongues of herbivores” (11) it demonstrates the “wild and transient beauty of sweet, precise torture, an incarnation of the

thin threshold between what the Zuni [an indigenous people of the region] call the beautiful (*tso 'ya*) and the dangerous (*attanni*)” (12). The cactus provides the perfect fusion of beauty and violence to shock her into her senses.

Rather than observing or keeping a safe distance, Meloy attempts to enter the landscape, writing “I made myself into a very small bug, hovered over a bloodred cup, and, little bug heart pounding, dove in” (15). Illustrating the tactile and intimate relationship she has with her surroundings, this passage also highlights her desire to physically transform, longing to inhabit each part of the desert landscape. This echoes Yamazato’s statement that reinhabitory writing aims to demonstrate how “sense of place” is evoked “out of direct contact with the land” (58). But rather than experiencing the anticipated, expected communion, Meloy writes:

Something horribly magnetic emanated from the rock. The flower’s vivid colors struck like blows. To fend off my assailant I had to reach up and seize the blade in my hand, nearly severing my fingers to save my own life.

*Wait!* I shrieked, sitting bolt upright. I was merely seeking fundamental union with primordial nature. I was only pretending to be a bug. (15)

The violent language of ‘blows’, ‘assailant’, ‘severing’ and even ‘bolt upright’ in contrast to the soft and lusciously erotic description of the flowers in the previous passage further dramatizes the beauty and danger present in both the cactus and the landscape and the way in which the familiar has become alien. Raising her head, though everything appears normal, Meloy perceives a slight shift, writing that “like the religious statue, as inert and familiar as old furniture, that suddenly begins to bleed, or the cheap postcard photograph that pushes the desert reds a bit too far, my surroundings had changed. I had the distinct sensations of a suppressed vibration in the landscape” (16). Whilst sketching this assault on to ‘The Map of the Known Universe’, her sense of unease deepens as her gaze falls on what she believes are mineshafts and a hitherto unseen road leading deep into the desert.

While the mushroom in Snyder’s poem is only dangerous because it is unknown and therefore consumed in error, the source of danger in Meloy’s landscape is known, but has been suppressed. This danger is, of course, the role the terrain played “from the early fifties through the seventies, as a major producer of uranium for the cold war’s nuclear arsenal” (20). Though fully aware of the region’s nuclear history, until experiencing the sensation first-hand through the trauma of the cactus and the witness of the uranium mineshafts Meloy “could not imagine that so serene a place could partake in so unquiet a century” (20). Whereas Snyder’s ‘intensity of exploration’ involves him eating the mushroom and becoming ill, Meloy’s deepening gaze takes her down an unknown road – closer to the perceived physical danger. Reaching its end, she discovers a fenced off plot of land containing a plastic lined pond which

fills her with “unspecific dread” (18). Arising from the potentially toxic substance being held within the pond behind the fence, the dread she feels is an affective response to the landscape, an affective poisoning. By drawing attention to the complex dynamics that exist between self and landscape, Meloy’s poisoning is capable of creating “resonance beyond our immediate human-scale perspective” (Bealer 11).

Meloy’s encounter with human infrastructure, the fenced pond, in a landscape which she generally conceived of as being remote and wild renders the familiar unfamiliar. Having first introduced fences and fencing-off as symbolic of her new land-ownership this fence emphasises the discomfort she feels shifting her relationship with the terrain from nomad to resident which, Beck argues, allows “no refuge from the facts of history” (*Dirty* 221). However, whereas her act of fencing-off was in hope of improving the natural conditions of the landscape, this fence represents toxic terrain unfit for habitation. In this sense, the fence serves as a doubly potent symbol, the juxtaposition and convolution of what constitutes inhabitable and uninhabitable terrain. Feeling that this encounter might bring her closer to the desert’s history she concludes:

I was not lost...[but] how was a person to heal her numbed soul amid these fretful, querulous phantoms of mass death? Then I remembered the promise of the boiled lizard: to look closely and burn hotter, to forge the desert’s sweetness and ferocity into my own. The immediate task was to seek the beds of fossil rivers removed from their deep burial in eternity, to find the valley’s missing pieces...I opened the Map of the Known Universe to a new page. (21)

While seeking a holistic understanding of the region’s atomic history, given her deeply physical relationship to the land, this desire to find the ‘missing pieces’ also represents Meloy’s need to piece herself back together, to restore her body’s “sensory intensity” (4) and reconnect herself to the landscape.

By way of “reverse geography...approaching home from the outside in” (27), Meloy’s second *walzen* takes her to Trinity, ground zero of the atomic bomb project or, as she refers to it, “the terrain of strategic death” (55). Just as Meloy realises she must explore home by looking beyond home, in his poem “Building” Snyder probes matters of culture, politics and history alongside his own practice to demonstrate the sharp divisions between reinhabitory life and American culture:

Now in the year of the Persian Gulf ,  
Of Lies and Crimes in the Government held up as Virtues,  
    this dance with Matter  
Goes on: our buildings are solid, to live, to teach, to sit  
To sit, to know for sure the sound of a bell –

This is history. This is outside history. (*No Nature* 366-7)

Not a call for ignorance or denial of contemporary society (i.e. a return to primitivism), but a call for a different way of living that is inside history and which looks beyond our current history, Snyder's use of the 'solid' building demonstrates sustainability, wholeness. His firm, Deep Ecological understanding of his connection to the earth is reiterated in the practice of seated meditation which grounds him on the earth. In the case of Meloy, however, the solid material of the earth that would bind her to place, the ground itself, is charged with the awfulness of its atomic history:

Dwarfed by this windy ellipse of scrub and sand and the vast open basin around it, the dark obelisk-shaped cenotaph takes memory and rivets it to the landscape. My impulse is to lie down on the seam that joins the two, to drape myself over the desert as I so often do at home – as respite from the motion of a long walk, a way to fit muscle, bone and flesh to a five-foot-nine curve of earth. The posture of intimacy and sensation evokes emotion, one hopes, which leads to meaning, then understanding. On this place of nativity, where meaning is needed so desperately, and physical contact carries a degree of risk, the separation anxiety becomes acute. Both of us – woman and land – are orphaned. (36)

Denied the ability to ground herself or intimately connect with the earth, at Trinity it is impossible for Meloy to perform the redemptive, reinhabitory act. Encountering this damaged, potentially toxic arena further alienates Meloy from the terrain, her senses and her natural way of relating to or experiencing the world. But what is more terrifying for Meloy is that while the Trinity site represents human impact on the landscape in extremis, as creating land for which there is little hope of redemption and no hope of reinhabitation, the history and the reasons which make it dangerous are more or less invisible: "Here at Trinity the land itself is the carrier – austere, at times bleak, a space so vast it absorbs all silences but its own. If no one tells you what happened here, nothing in the desert itself would give it away" (84). This aspect of the landscape as co-conspirator in suppressing and silencing the atrocity further alienates her from the land, from her senses, from her sense of self. Meloy, however, does not run from these facts, but returns to the message of the lizard, *look closely and burn hotter*, stating, "if who I am is geography as well as blood, if living where I do matters, then this place, too, is blood and home" (84).

Further collapsing the distance between home and Trinity, in this third *walzen* Meloy floats down the San Juan River, a body of water "so familiar it is more bloodstream than place" (91). Bound to Meloy as an extension of the body and of the home, the river is bound to Trinity because its point bars, sedimentary deposits that "form on the insides of meanders" (91), were a source of uranium that was mined for the creation of atomic bombs. With this new awareness she writes: "bodily, I am slipping down the exquisite, sunlit San Juan River, but my mind lingers on a single geologic metaphor: fossil river...When uranium is involved,

you cannot simply float in an ambient curiosity about how various Earth forces put together and disassemble your neighbourhood” (94). This separation of body from land and mind from body leads to a sensation of fracturing so deep, she can no longer make sense of the land around her: “Old landmarks were decipherable but canted with new meaning. Herein lay familiar territory but territory husked and stripped bare, torn by flagrant episodes of the unfamiliar. I wished to deny the Colorado Plateau’s own history. I was ready for refuge” (100).

Lost within a landscape and body which had once been familiar and uncertain of how to proceed, feeling as though she had become mired in a labyrinth, Meloy writes that “to turn around,” she needed an “entirely different musculature” (101). In this turning, rather than venturing away from home Meloy attempts to change her course: “I looked under the lizard’s belly. I tried to find Home...I denounced further nomadic compulsions and became a homebody...these eight acres were all of the Known Universe I could manage” (101). Moving from one ground zero, to another ground zero – the ground zero of home – Meloy begins a circling inward.

### **The Home O**

Though it is Meloy’s physical turns and returns which guide the narrative, central to the reinhabitory process is the construction of the home. Just as Snyder, in *The Practice of the Wild*, states “The heart of a place is the home...All tentative explorations go outward from there” (28), Meloy’s home plot is the place from which all explorations commence and return. Introduced in the Prologue, and always in the background of *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* is the knowledge that Meloy and her husband are in the middle of the construction process. Very conscious of the natural surroundings in which she is building, Meloy writes, “The main event – deserts, river cliffs, canyons, mesas, and our incessant roaming of them – occurred outside the walls” (186). Yet, the physical dwelling has a real purpose in the reinhabitory process.

In order for a dwelling to be reinhabitory, its building practices must provide a model for how “humans and their homes can be self-sufficient and integrated with the bioregion in which they are placed” (Yamazato 51). Yamazato makes the claim that Snyder’s home serves as the “model for living a reinhabitory life” in the sense that it utilises “basic forms and wisdom of various inhabitory traditions, exploring at the same time the possibilities of renewable, decentralized energy sources” (54). As a result, Snyder’s Kitkitdizze is the place where he explores the questions of “what it would mean to live carefully and wisely, delicately in place” (Yamazato 51). A similar attitude is expressed by Meloy, when she states, “all shelters require care (we called ours Paradise with Maintenance), although once occupied

the house would remain dwarfed by the vast expanse of land around it, and we would look upon it with disbelief rather than possession” (186).

Two elements of this passage, the emphasis on the dwelling as being dwarfed by nature – the walls merely serving the necessary purpose of ‘shelter’ – and the sense of wonderment rather than ‘possession’, demonstrate Meloy’s Deep Ecological understanding of the place of the human within the larger community of nature. Her desire to dwell sympathetically in this place is reflected by her rejection of practices which attempt to conquer nature: “This place was in the act of reforming itself, biologically intractable but not “wild” (110-1). In this case, Meloy’s use of ‘wild’ refers to pre-human wilderness, not the wild consciousness that the reinhabitory process attempts to nurture. Whilst she believes that her practices will have a positive impact on the landscape, she writes, “I had no delusion that this land could be restored to a purist’s notion of pre Columbian wilderness” (103).

Her work with this plot of land is what she refers to as “a reclamation of sorts” (102). Having “divorced” (102) her land from the surrounding ranches, Meloy allows it to undergo a change from grazed land to “a weedy sere best described as Unchewed” (112). In this act Meloy takes a cultural stance by rebelling against a long and unsustainable history of cattle ranching, but also, by not interfering (i.e. refusing to lay a lawn or have a garden full of decorative, non-native species) she allows the land to reclaim itself. For her, this carries great weight, as she states, “if healing my estrangement from Place meant bonding with weeds, then so be it” (112). While letting the land take its desired course, she also plays an active role in its restoration by spreading the seeds of native species of grasses and plants, “Indian ricegrass, blue flax, pentsemon” (115). This act of reintroducing native species demonstrates Meloy’s commitment to developing knowledge of the region and working to aid in its development as a holistic organic system.

While the house is being constructed, Meloy is the occupier of a one room screen house. As a dwelling Meloy’s is one of minimal impact. If the fence demonstrates Meloy’s desire to separate herself from her surroundings whilst nurturing what is held within, this structure, which only provides a thin layer between interior and exterior worlds, is representative of Meloy’s desire to be deeply connected to her surroundings. The screen house’s blurring of the boundaries between inside and outside is representative of Meloy’s porous boundaries between self and landscape and her desire to live gently and “avoid unnecessary catastrophe to the desert” (103). Unavoidable, however, is Meloy’s need for running water: “I had lived in the desert long enough to know that the waltz of survival is danced with two partners: the desert’s water and your life” (118). Though deeply troubled by the “ten-ton drilling rig...[that] stamped massive tread marks into the soft red sand and

crushed rabbit brush and saltbrush into fan-shaped roadkills” (103), Meloy acknowledges the necessity of its presence, and the impact caused, for her survival in that place. However, whilst having made it possible to live in this terrain, the well does not make Meloy feel closer to inhabiting it. Of the night following the drillers hitting the aquifer, she writes, “several times I left our bed and visited the wellhead, tempted to shut off the valve. Never did my desert bones allow me to take water for granted. Running it this way seemed profligate and insane” (118). The consequences of land-ownership and the moral burden of living in an arid landscape affect her deeply. But rather than ignoring or downplaying the fact of her impact, Meloy’s text resonates with Snyder’s claim that if we are to remedy the culture of the twenty-first century, we must accept that we are also part of it.

Despite her efforts to reclaim and reinhabit this territory through the building process, Meloy remains disconnected from the landscape and herself: “I have yet to earn this land. Perhaps I never will” (109). Reconsidering her approaches to reinhabitation she concludes that:

to rechart my own terrain, I simply had to explore it with reflexes, not reason, with lips on the scarlet velvet of claret cups, bones and skin absorbing every molecule of sand, river, rock and lucid desert air. All I had to do was savor the desert stillness, that spare landscape of absences and seeming nothingness that in the end I knew to be so potent and full. (136)

And yet, this stillness she craves – a return to things as they were before – is not possible given the knowledge she has gained. This is illustrated by the way in which, whilst attempting to “reclaim the conditions for beauty” by becoming “an organ of perception [which can] pass through the surface of things [and] listen to the unexplained spaces” (144), she is confronted by beauty’s counterpart: violence. This pervasive violence is represented by the howls of a pack of coyotes that keep her awake with “cries of bloodletting and torn flesh” (144). While she is physically unable to shut out the noise of the coyotes because their fight takes place beside their screen house, she is also emotionally unable to shut out the violence. Just as she travelled to Trinity in attempt to understand the madness of the region’s atomic history, Meloy seeks to better comprehend the coyote fight by surveying the terrain. But like the absence of evidence of the atomic testing at Trinity – “If no one tells you what happened here, nothing in the desert itself would give it away” (84) – there is no solid evidence which explains the cries she heard in the night. Fear of the unknown and fear of the security of her home terrain are further expressed when she discovers “a fence post that had not been set deep enough” (145). Looking to pound it in further, symbolically sealing off her known land from other, she picks up a rock which to her horror she believes to be “Hydrous potassium

uranium vanadate. Carnotite. The raw ore for yellow cake”: the implement of evil “there under the lizard’s belly” (145).

No longer safe at home, fearing the threat of contact with the landscape as she did at Trinity, Meloy suffers “a collapse of faith” (188). Left “on the verge of an apostasy of place” she feels there is but one option: “to dismantle and relocate...to run away from home” (188-189). Just as Dillard’s loss of faith in *Holy the Firm* steered her directly to the Church, familiar terrain, Meloy’s loss of faith sends her running to the familiar; she once again becomes the nomad. Quoting James Duncan, she writes “one of the harsh but deep consolations of watching a loved homeplace slip away from you is that, without the loved home, you’re suddenly naked enough to feel the blood, begging direction” (196). The direction Meloy’s blood begs is that of the mesa which first gripped her soul some twenty years ago.

### **The Final Walzen**

Allowing an “ill-defined instinct” (196) to guide her rather than reason or the map, Meloy’s final turning takes her back to the beginning – the mesa where she pulled over to rest, but stayed a month – to complete the circle. But in trying to return to the place which had once showed her “the worth of what it means to be human” (205), she quite fittingly travels down “the wrong canyon”. Losing her way in this case does not refer only to Meloy’s physical state, but to her cognitive, emotional, spiritual, moral relationship with the landscape. However, considering the praise Snyder gives to ‘going off trail’, being lost is not necessarily negative in the process of reinhabitation. Meloy writes of being lost as “the ultimate metaphor of discovery. Fairly quickly you find out who you are and what you can do...In few other situations does the dialogue between the internal and external landscapes run so intensely. After losing home there can be no better condition than to be lost again” (201). By becoming more and more lost within the terrain – moving away from the familiar – Meloy plunges deeper into the wilderness of herself.

Passing the night in deep philosophical musing, Meloy attempts to make sense out of the “incongruous geography of eternity and apocalypse” (212). She fills the “empty space in the Known Universe with bits of Triassic point bars and channel sediments from my beloved homeland,” stating that “from the air these pieces of Home took forty-three seconds to reach Hiroshima” (212). Like an implosion, this final linkage of home to Hiroshima breaks down the dualities of intimate and vast, geologic and human time, beauty and violence. Attempting to find new ways of putting the terrain “back in order, and...set[ting] the Known Universe right” Meloy stands and begins to “move to a slow waltzing rhythm” (208). The dark night as

her companion, she begins turning, hoping that through her physical engagement with the space, she might find the answers she sought on her broader *walzen*. But these steps she dances are merely an abstraction from the process of turning she has enacted all along.

Wanting to reject everything and start afresh, feeling the despair of alienation and disillusionment at having attempted to create a map which illustrated the beauty of the landscape through her own physical experience, but instead producing a document representative of the trappings of war, violence and human impact, Meloy readies herself to “fling the Map of the Known Universe off a sheer, thousand-foot-high cliff” (212). She walks to the edge of the canyon to fling the map to its depths, where she falls to the ground, the victim of “brain-screeching vertigo...a sickening, whirling fear” (214). This dizzying spell, the scattering of ‘The Map of the Known Universe’ and her scramble back from the edge coincide with the arrival of a seemingly apocalyptic storm. In this moment of what becomes a revelation, forces beyond her control are acting upon her, making her aware of her own fragility and mortality. Ultimately, it is the shock of how finite life is that draws her back to her senses.

Unlike Dillard, whose moment of illumination occurs through a moment of witness, Meloy’s occurs through what she hears. And what she hears is the sound of the pinon jay, about which she writes, “nothing is more inseparable than this red desert and the sound of a pinon jay. Remove one from the other, and the air would fill with the terrible silence between toad song and the end of the world” (214). This acknowledgement and awareness of another inhabitant of the desert who, like the lizard and herself, is intimately bound to this terrain, makes it clear to Meloy that this is home. Of this moment of revelation, she goes on to say:

the pinon jays had returned. The sound of their cries was, like the desert itself, edged, wild, and so familiar, I could hardly bear them. In a single moment the birds pitched me into a chasm of deepest, aching sorrow, sorrow because what I knew broke my heart. Someday...I would leave it all; all those glorious ways to feel the world – the hearing, smelling, seeing, touching, loving, wondering – would end in nothing.(216)

In hearing these jays, the landscape re-enters her, it inhabits her body once again. In Snyder’s sequence, ‘Little Songs for Gaia’ (*Axe Handles* 49-58) it is also a bird call, that of the flicker, which signals a connection to the landscape. He writes in quite animated form:

#### THE FLICKERS

sharp clear call

THIS!

THIS!

THIS!

For both Snyder and Meloy, it is as if the landscape is calling out to reawaken the senses. And, given their commitment to the practice of reinhabitation, they are able to finally listen.

In hearing this and coming to the realisation – that her time is limited, that her sensory attachment to the land is finite – Meloy is reminded of what it means to be at home in that landscape – not through intellectualism, history or abstraction, but through her own senses, through the finite existence of her human body. And rising, rather than mine shafts or a desolate scene for war games, she sees:

river polished stones, broken cliffs, skirts of talus clad in ricegrass and claret cup. Red dune fields marching to Colorado, weeds invading from Arizona. A river of inestimable grace, devout in its persistence to reach the sea. Sinuous red-rock canyons, sweet emerald jewels of springs, arroyos flowing with nothing. A sawed rib of sandstone, mountains packed together on the horizon like islands of prayer...Tales of unimpeachable blessings, the path of a single life made visible. (216)

Though she sees what was there all along, the aesthetic landscape which called out to her spirit, she witnesses *it* – the desert itself – with new sight. This moment of illumination shows Meloy not the violence which had come to permeate her vision, but beauty – her *walzen* comes full circle. In this revelation she comes to understand: “there was but a single way to exist here, to make my way through this land with grace: take it into myself and rediscover it on my own breath” (217). This communion with the landscape, the willingness to be inhabited by it pulls her “right down below the surface of the world as [she] knew it” (217). Finally achieving the communion with the landscape which she sought, but could not previously attain, the merging of self and land demonstrates the actualisation of the process of reinhabitation.

### **In Conclusion**

While Beck reads the final passages of *The Last Cheater's Waltz* as an admission that “attachment to place must in the end be the necessary nausea experienced by the waltzer, always cheated on but always returning to the dancer's embrace...a kind of perpetual ambivalence produced by the legacy of violence and a threatening past” (224), I read the closing of Meloy's text much more positively. By engaging in the process of turning and returning Meloy finally passes through to a mode of being in place which allows her to move forward by making the commitment to a reinhabitory lifestyle, the commitment to place. In grounding herself *there*, in that terrain, and sharing the experience through her writing, she makes a positive statement to the wider world.

Passing on her knowledge, in the form *The Last Cheater's Waltz*, is the final tenet of the reinhabitory process. As Yamazato writes, “reinhabitory persons shape a culture of place,

transmit knowledge gained in the land” (61). In documenting her process of self-discovery and what she learned along the way, Meloy poses, just as “Snyder proposes in his poetry and prose” a new set of “ways to solve existential problems born of modern civilization” (61). Just as Yamazato believes “the dialogue among all beings will continue in Snyder’s writing, and Kitkitdizee and the Ring of Bone Zendo will certainly help the poet deepen his meditation on place and what it means to be human” (61), Meloy’s ‘Slut’s Walden Pond’ and *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* demonstrate a commitment to probing the deeper mysteries of what it means to be reinhabitory. The place Meloy arrives at is one of love, humility, passion and forgiveness – not ambivalence. Her message is one of Deep Ecological wisdom and literacy.

Voicing and learning to inhabit the shameful, but inescapable, narrative of the desert allows Meloy, as an environmental writer, to be the force – as she had wanted to be at Trinity, but could not – which reconciles the desert’s beauty and its violence. Reaching this place of wisdom allows her, as she writes, to “fret less about a malaise of the soul, rely more on simple motion and instinct as ways to tend the territory” and live “as if there is no other place and it must last forever. It is the best we can do” (224). Simple, but soulful in its activism, this statement about her beloved home and the way in which she will defend it, resonates with Dillard’s devotion in the closing line of *Holy the Firm*: “So live. I’ll be the nun for you. I am now” (76). Just as “each new generation of writers [in the West] struggles to create a new way of telling the story of the people and the place,” Meloy’s work becomes a narrative of reinhabitation which embraces the “materials of the past...to create a new, contemporary voice” (*Writing the Southwest* x-xi).

## **In Conclusion** Writing Home

*I think there's a kind of desperate hope built into poetry now... One is trying to say everything that can be said for the things that one loves while there's still time. I think that's a social role, don't you? ... The world is still here, and there are aspects of human life that are not purely destructive, and there is a need to pay attention to the things around us while they are still around us. –W.S. Merwin*

### **Introduction**

In the critical component of this thesis I have suggested that within contemporary Western American writing a literature of Deep Ecology is emerging, and explored the ways in which the themes and tenets of this philosophy have been adapted into principles of construction in Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm* and Ellen Meloy's *The Last Cheater's Waltz*. Preceding my discussion of Dillard and Meloy's work, in Chapter One I explored geographic, historic, cultural and aesthetic conditions of the West. In Chapter Two and Three I examined Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm* (1977) and Ellen Meloy's *The Last Cheater's Waltz* (1999) respectively. Through these texts I sought to critically examine, and discuss, how the principles and tenets of Deep Ecology can be expressed in literature through theme and craft.

In my close reading of *Holy the Firm* I considered the ways in which Dillard's encounters the landscape of the Pacific Northwest proved instrumental in transforming her consciousness and the imaginative capacity of her writing, and considered how her use of poetic device and a circular narrative express the text's Deep Ecological themes of the deconstruction of Judeo-Christian and Cartesian dualism, and unification of spirit and matter. In Chapter Three I explored the ways in which *The Last Cheater's Waltz* engages with the Deep Ecological practice of reinhabitation through Meloy's decision to move onto, and restore, lands which have been damaged by human impact. By engaging with contemporary Western history, and its impact on the landscape, in her process of building a home in the Desert Southwest Meloy refuses to propagate a vision of a mythic or 'pure' wilderness of the West. Repositioning the human within the natural world through her process of reinhabitation, *The Last Cheater's Waltz* documents Meloy's efforts to break down the "dichotomy between the civilized and the wild" (*Practice* 24) and presents a new way to read the West as a complex network of land, animals, spirit, humans and history.

Through my research I have gained a deeper understanding of how my writing has been shaped by this terrain, and how it is positioned alongside the works of other Western writers. Opening the discussion outward I will introduce and discuss the work of several other contemporary Western American writers whose work I regard as literature of Deep Ecology. While this critical study has sought to provide a context by which to read and evaluate *All*

*These Rivers* and to position this creative body of work within a wider literary tradition, it has also been an important component of my creative process.

Through my critical engagement with *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater's Waltz* among other works of Western literature, I sought better understand how I could creatively and imaginatively render a personal narrative in a way which evokes, rather than provides an account of, my lived experiences. By conducting scholarly research on Western literature and on my home terrain, examining the conditions which have been responsible for shaping my creative consciousness and imagination, I have engaged in a process of self-reflection and self-discovery. Writing *All These Rivers* has allowed me to reimagine, and find new expression of, my relationship with the terrain of the West. The distillation of experiences into linguistic expression has been an act of reconnecting to these places through an imaginative, spiritual and metaphysical inhabitation. I believe that this process has been Deep Ecological. Drawing this study to a close I will reflect on, and provide a brief critical reading of, *All These Rivers*.

### **Other Voices**

Though by no means an exhaustive list, some of the key contemporary Western writers I regard as being part of this Deep Ecological idiom in which I have sought to position Dillard, Meloy, and myself, include William Stafford (b. 1914 – 1993), Richard Hugo (b. 1923 – 1982) David Wagoner (b. 1926), W.S. Merwin (b. 1927), Barry Lopez (b. 1945), Susan Zwinger (b. 1947), Brenda Peterson (b. 1950), Robert Wrigley (b. 1951) and Terry Tempest Williams (b.1955). Some, but not all of these authors are native Westerners. A good number have come to reside in the West from elsewhere and have stayed long enough to call it home. Like Dillard, for many it was the landscape of the West which drew them in. The poet David Wagoner is famously quoted as saying “[w]hen I came over the Cascades and down into the coastal rainforest for the first time in the fall of 1954, it was a big event for me, it was a real crossing of a threshold, a real change of consciousness. Nothing was ever the same again”.

The works of these writers span both essays and poetry. As I have attempted to indicate throughout, my definition of what constitutes a literature of Deep Ecology is not rigid, but fluid. While it takes into consideration how, through theme and craft, the writing engages this environmental philosophy to linguistically re-imagine the natural world and the human relationship to it, as well as its ability to affect the consciousness of the reader by engaging them in a transformation of the imagination, it is not bound by genre.

Like Dillard and Meloy, essayists Terry Tempest Williams and Brenda Peterson grapple with what it means to live in place, spiritually and artistically. Their work explores the

intersection of ecology and religious faith (Mormonism and Southern Baptist respectively). Peterson's recent *I Want to be Left Behind: Finding Rapture Here on Earth* (2010) is strongly aligned with *Holy the Firm* in its interrogation of religious dogma and its collapse of the duality of spirit and matter: "If the earth is joined with heaven, if eternity with the divine is already here in this world, then we cannot leave the earth behind – ever".<sup>46</sup> Williams' first text *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Place* (1991) explores the complex relationship between Mormonism and the Desert Southwest, interweaving narratives of faith, family, nature, gender and nuclear testing. In her more recent *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2001) Williams allows for greater fragmentation of the narrative. The text is composed from William's prose and poetry, but it is also interwoven with lists of the names of Utah's redrock wildernesses and several government documents, including an abridged version of America's Redrock Wilderness Act. This highly conceptual approach demonstrates how her relationship with, and response to, the landscape is shaped by both passion and policies. Whereas in *Holy the Firm*, published nearly a quarter century prior to *Red*, Dillard employs a highly poetic prose to convey the intensity of her encounters with the landscape of the West, Tempest's work, by presenting prose and poetry alongside government policy documents, evokes for the reader a sense of how the land is divided and zoned by emotion, politics and legislation. It provides a specific lens by which the reader comes to view the landscape about which she writes.

An inherent part of these writers' process is the quest for the language and forms which express the experience of Western landscape. David Wagoner, Richard Hugo, William Stafford and Robert Wrigley are poets whose sensibilities and sensitivities are rooted in expressing a deeply felt relationship to the natural world. Their work draws upon the rhythms and cycles of the Western landscape and utilises language specific to this geography. Rivers and riparian ecosystems are common subjects among all their work: "I lie headlong on a bed of rocks, / dip my cheek in the shallows, / and see the water mid-channel three / feet above my eyes. Over head the swallows / loop for hornets".<sup>47</sup> Writing of Wagoner's work in his study of Northwest Literature, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*, Laurie Ricou acknowledges his use of the salmon as a "guide of how to relate to where we set ourselves and touch the earth" and regards the salmon cycle as a "principle of construction" in his writing.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Peterson, Brenda. *I Want to be Left Behind: Finding Rapture Here on Earth*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010. Print. p 253

<sup>47</sup> Wrigley, Robert. 'Anything the River Gives'. *The Church of Omnivorous Light*. Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013. Print. p. 85

<sup>48</sup> Ricou, Laurie. *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2002. Print. pp. 108-116

However, this desire to attune to and translate the natural world into language is not without complication. In the following excerpt of ‘An Address to Weyerhaeuser’, Wagoner writes of his experience of visiting a clear cut:

After miles of stumps and slash and the once-buried endeavours  
Of roots, all dozer-balded to their logical ends, the clear-cut  
Ends finally at a stand of firs near a creek, and for an hour  
I’ve listened to what’s left of the winter wrens  
Claiming the little they can for territory.

Which isn’t much. And I’m too mad to be lyrical about it.<sup>49</sup>

Allowing his emotional response to witnessing the clear cut to form part of his linguistic response to it, Wagoner creates an affective terrain. Wagoner’s writing transcends the representational in that it does not attempt to simply describe or depict nature, but provides an account of his experience of nature. Further, expressing the inability of language to capture verbatim the song of the wren, Wagoner instead writes of how the sound affects him and the space: “He sings, watching me. There’s no use trying to say / what the music is like, cascading out of this short-tailed genius /... / This incredibly gifted ounce was moving and reclaiming / A hemisphere of June air weighing nine tons” (180).

The final point I will consider before moving on to a discussion of my own work is the way in which, not only a relationship with the landscape, but a lived Deep Ecological practice informs the writing process of these authors. I closely align W.S. Merwin with Snyder and Meloy because of his decision to settle in and restore a terrain that was damaged through exploitative practices. This process of reinhabitation in one of the farthest reaches of the West, the island of Maui, has informed much of his writing. In his most recent collection, *The Moon Before Morning* (2014), Merwin provides a pointed critique of anthropocentrism: “in the cities the birds are forgotten / among other things but then one could say / that the cities are made of absences / of what disappeared so they could be there”.<sup>50</sup> He also challenges Judeo-Christian assertions about creation and the resultant environmentally destructive practices: “We were not made in its image / but from the beginning we believed in it /... / forests have been erased and rivers poisoned / and truth has been relegated for it” (‘Convenience’ 100). Merwin’s writing is direct and urgent, it calls upon its readers to think deeply about the human relationship with the natural world.

---

<sup>49</sup> Wagner, David. ‘An Address to Weyerhaeuser’. *Traveling Light: Collected and New Poems*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Print. p. 180

<sup>50</sup> Merwin, W.S. ‘The Latest Thing’. *The Moon Before Morning*. Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2014. Print. p. 85

So far, all of the narratives I have discussed have been written about the West from within the West. While I define myself as a Westerner, having been born and raised in Washington State, my collection differs in that it is a literary and imaginative return to the Western landscape written during a period of separation. I do not see this period of separation as a reason to devalue my ability to evoke a sense of this terrain in my writing, or as a reason to categorize it as something other than Western. Rather, like the poet Richard Hugo for whom a period of absence from homeland “somehow ‘opened’ him to his own Northwest place(s), gave him permission, as it were, to acknowledge them through feeling” (Ricou 13), by not being present in the West I have had the opportunity to more deeply question and examine my relationship to the landscape of home.

### **Returning Home**

*All These Rivers* engages with the themes and tenets of Deep Ecology in its methods and principles of construction. It considers what it means to have a profound connection to place, the effects of physical isolation of home terrain, and how landscape is carried and engaged with imaginatively. It demonstrates that landscapes are not separate from the self, but an integral part of who we are, and explores how my relationship to the landscape of home is maintained and intensified by the process of writing my experiences into existence. Whilst writing *All These Rivers* I sought to translate my experiences and memories of a life closely lived with the Western landscape into a work of Deep Ecological literature. Questions I asked myself were: what does it mean to be a product of a specific landscape, and how do we take that landscape with us? How has my writing been shaped by the landscape? Can the process of writing become a Deep Ecological practice?

While a long poem or a sequence might have in some more closely resembled the prose narratives of Dillard and Meloy, I made a stylistic choice to produce a collection of individual poems. The collection uses fragmentation to convey a sense of dislocation which is evocative of my process of writing in absence from home terrain. My use of the present tense, even when recalling events from my past, attempts to provide the writing a sense of immediacy and greater urgency while also alluding my sense of the landscape being ever-present within me and my consciousness.

Constructed through the relationships, associations and connections between individual poems, the narrative progresses by way of image, theme and tone rather than by the linear progression of time. Like *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater’s Waltz*, the overall structure of *All These Rivers* is circular and is enhanced through smaller *turns*. Working primarily from personal experience and memory, patterns, trends, obsessions and fixations

quickly emerged. Through my return to key images, geographic features, locations and themes, which the *turns* revisit throughout the collection by way of repetition and reinterpretation, I am able to place emphasis on specific locations and experiences which have been instrumental in the formation of my imagination and consciousness, thereby suggesting a sense of my unique relationship with the terrain.

The collection is divided into sections, smaller *turns* within the larger narrative, which distil focus, create tension, advance the narrative and provide space for contemplation. As in *Holy the Firm* and *The Last Cheater's Waltz*, the first section grounds the reader in a specific geography, it provides the epicentre from which all action moves away from and returns to. It introduces some of the central themes (e.g. family, natural cycles, spirituality, mountaineering); dialectics (e.g. vast/intimate, domestic/wild, descendant/resident, spiritual/material); and the flora, fauna and geographic features of the region (e.g. mountains, mountain ranges, rivers, lakes, towns).

Just as they loom over Washington State, and much of the West, mountains loom over this section and are significant to the collection. I carry their imprint bodily and imaginatively: “we are of these hornblende hills, / Pacific, salted, our faces / freckled with quartz, feldspar / and St. Helen's ash” (‘Descendant’). Beginning with a call for a return to the landscape of home – “Give me / the five rivers, at spring-melt surge, / fat on milky minerals. / With them I will force open / the turnstile of the mantle, cool my feet / as I split the hot earth in two, / make my way home” (‘Give Me’) – the collection guides the reader on a series of encounters with, and reflections, on that landscape. Mt. Rainier, the mountain to which ‘Give Me’ refers, rises over 14,000 feet and is a feature to which the collection returns again and again. Sometimes the mountain forms part of the main subject of the poem: “I am in love / with this mountain / that all summer long / threatens to kill / my father” (‘Rainier’), “It is only a white lie, / saying I am homesick / for the Mountains. / This keeps me on the surface: / granite, ice, snowfield, / the thin line of Rainier / which divides / it from clouds” (‘Mother’). Other times the mountain is merely acknowledged as part of the activity of daily life: “the mountain pink with alpine glow” (‘The Drive to School’), “lenticulars stacking thick over Rainier” (‘After the Ceremony’). Mt. Rainier is also present in other poems as fragments of the whole (e.g. glaciers, crevasses, granite, snowfields, rivers, cedars, old growth forests). My return to Mt. Rainier in the final poem of the collection, the second poem bearing the title, ‘Rainier’, brings the collection full circle: “Across a mile of moraine, / the mountain rests on its haunches – / summer-thinned, its grey ribs show / beneath feathered glaciers”.

Though Mt. Rainier is one of the key geographic locations to which the collection often returns, the title of the collection derives from the region's many rivers. Regarding the

river as “a principle of construction” (Ricou 108) one might think of the individual poems as tributaries, each becoming part of and feeding into the larger whole of the collection.

Washington’s rivers are a product of its mountainous geography and its close proximity to the Pacific, and include “the Columbia, / Chehalis, Nisqually, Skagit, / Snohomish, Duwamish, Stillaguamish, / Snoqualmie” (‘Blue’). Serving as the drainage routes from high ground to the Pacific Ocean, like the mountains, the rivers tell a story of the region’s natural history. The visual presence of these rivers and their slow steady shaping of the landscape reflects the way in which we, too, are gradually shaped by natural processes. Their vein-like snaking through the landscape reminds us of our own naturalness: “I know the veins of my arms / and the fat, blue veining / of my mother’s legs – / hereditary, she once told me. / She makes a map / of our watershed” (‘Blue’).

While the aim of the first section is to ground the reader in the landscape, and emotional terrain, of home, the second section takes the reader further afield on a series of excursions through the West. Like Meloy, I examine the relationship between movement and stasis, how home is read and defined against what is not home. Having travelled extensively throughout West, my consciousness is one of mountains (e.g. ‘Give Me’, ‘Rainier’, ‘The Great American Pastime’, ‘Thunderheads’, ‘Rainier’); one of rivers, salt water, and rain (‘Blue’, ‘Jemez Springs’, ‘Islands’, ‘Science’, ‘Skinny Dip’, ‘Hg’); and one of forests (‘What I Meant When I Said Goodnight’, ‘Descendant’, ‘Baby’, ‘Clear Cut’). It is also one of aridity. Within my home State of Washington there exists a threshold where Douglas firs give way to ponderosa then sage, where water gives way to arroyos, and granite becomes basalt: “Beneath bare cattle country sky / we drove I-90 East / to where water is contained in rivers – / Columbia, Cle Elum, Yakima – / fed fat by Cascadian glaciers. / Passing ponderosa forests / we joined the ranks / of rattle snakes and sagebrush” (‘Desiccant’). And though my father spent most of his time in the North Cascades, his predilection for the Desert Southwest, the terrain of Meloy, eventually became my own: “Each year, when the weather turns black he packs the car, / pulls out of the driveway heading south, / seduced by red canyons, petroglyphs, dry river beds / where the wind blows prickly as cactus” (‘Affair’). To fully understand myself and my home terrain is to understand my relationship to both coastal and arid terrain. In this section roads, redrock canyons, cacti, dry river beds, sage and dust replace old growth, rain, coastlines, rivers and mountains as the primary scenic imagery.

While I use these juxtaposed geographies of rain and aridity to better define home, I also allow it to be defined by its absence. It wasn’t until moving to England that I realised the extent to which I have been shaped imaginatively, physically and linguistically by the varied terrain of the West. The third section of the collection documents my experiences of moving

to, and living in, England. Like Meloy and Dillard's narratives, physical and geographical displacement causes a sense of personal displacement and loss of self. Positioned at the centre of the collection, this section's themes of loss, homesickness and displacement highlight, and make personal, the wider sense of 21<sup>st</sup> century alienation from the landscape.

Similar to Meloy's fear over the concealed presence of the desert's nuclear history, 'The Adjacent Field' expresses my fear of the impingement of military activity on the countryside: "And though for the time they are blocked by leaves, / the red flags warn of machine guns and mortars. / The tanks are just a field away / and enough to make me long for the fear / of wolves or bear". In its expression of longing for the wildness of home, this poem is also evocative of the negative effects of the loss of the wild and its impact on the imagination. This reaches a climax in 'A Letter to My Mother' which evokes a sense of despair and loss of self that is the result of being absent from the home terrain: "My husband tells me / I am not well. / Mother, I have forgotten / the direction our blood / and rivers flow, / the many names for salal / and the outer islands / of the San Juan archipelago." Rivers are central to this poem; the salmon's innate compulsion to return to their natal stream to spawn is echoes my longing for my mother and for home: "Sometimes I dream / I am held in your arms / or the salmon are returning / from the ocean". But just as "the salmon, / though they scale ladder / after ladder and thrust / against current and rock, / never reach the stream / of their birth," I remain unable to find my earthy grounding.

Just as Meloy found herself lost and uncertain of how to proceed after the third *walzen*, conceding that, in order "to turn around" she would need an "entirely different musculature" (101), in section four I find myself in need of finding new ways of expressing and defining my relationship to the natural world. Whereas much of the collection takes place outside, section four responds to interior spaces: the Great North Museum: Hancock and the Hatton Gallery. Rather than venturing away from the terrain I am inhabiting, this section focuses on what is around me in an attempt to change my course. In the poems of this section I draw parallels between myself and the animals, either preserved as specimens or depicted in works of art, that have been displaced from their natural surroundings. In 'The Living Planet' I mirror large scale environmental displacement with my own sense of geographic displacement: "none of us are where we ought to be – not this auk, / racoon, lynx, beaver, fulmar, grey wolf or bison". I also engage with ideas of extinction and the atrocities committed in the name of scientific research: "I would like to know / who fired the felling shot and what happened / to their eyes, hearts, lungs and bellies that would have been full / on flesh or grass". As in Wagoner's poem 'An Address to Weyerhaeuser,' 'The Living Planet' utilises negative emotions (i.e. anger and distress) to communicate its message:

I carry this syntax strange on my tongue

and wear their death-pelts. And when I come home  
and beg you to make love to me (your words, not mine) –

what I really want is to have these furs and feathers  
taken off my shoulders; the hooves, beaks, claws and horns

removed from my side; have all use of language  
stripped from my mouth. Help me forget

the red deer fawn and the *ovis aries* taken from their mothers  
by joining me in this one act of creation.

The desire to purge myself of language is evocation of a desire to abandon the ways in which it has been used to support environmentally destructive practices. As in *Holy the Firm*, in which Dillard uses Judeo-Christian rhetoric and imagery as a means of healing the disconnection between spirit and matter from within, language, of course, is ultimately not abandoned. Through the creative power of poetic expression, it is used to linguistically undermine the language of anthropocentrism, and thereby reposition the self within nature. While the poems in this section convey despair, as ‘The Living Planet’ indicates, they also contain an element of resolve. This section climaxes with ‘Hancock Geese’ which uses the relationship between the museum’s taxidermied geese and an experience of going to see the snow geese in the fields of Mt. Vernon. The poem speaks of migration and homing, and bridges the gap between interior and exterior, England and the American West. Through sustained contemplation and reflection, ‘Hancock Geese’ turns the collection homeward as I embark on an imaginative return to home terrain, lifting with the geese “in winged crescendo”.

Returning to the American West, the landscape of home, the final section of the collection demonstrates a sense of agency found through reaffirming my connection to, and imaginatively grounding myself in, this terrain. Through the process of writing juxtapositions of familiar and unfamiliar, tame and wild, home and its absence I come to see that the wild was always within: “the imprint of basalt / and granite on your palms, / your skin, a map of wrinkles / as creased as the Cascades, / and altitude-thickened blood – / all these are mine already.” (‘Inheritance’). I merely had to “traverse, again and again” (*Last Cheater’s* 8) the page in order to find my spiritual and earthly grounding. And like Meloy and Dillard, whose transformative experiences enable them to experience a sense of merging with the landscape, I too become part of my surroundings: “I flowed with the mercury / from krill to whale, to the ocean / and back in November’s / run of chum as they searched / the Nooksack for their natal stream” (‘Hg’).

While the poems in this section do celebrate the terrain, as ‘Hg’ indicates, they do not shy away from addressing the environmentally destructive practices which have left visible and invisible traces on the landscape. Like Meloy’s ultimate acceptance of the history of the atomic bomb as part of the history of the desert, I come to recognise the “morality-charged wallop” (*Last Cheater’s* 142) of the human presence in the Northwest and the resultant impact on the environment. The subjects of these poems, road kill (‘The Doe’), deforestation (i.e. ‘Clear Cut’, ‘Baby’), and the pervasiveness of mercury in the region’s waterways (‘Hg’), in no way romanticize the natural world or attempt to present it as pristine sanctuary, but embrace it and celebrate it as it exists. Like *The Last Cheater’s Waltz* and *Holy the Firm*, the collection does not end with despair, but with resolve.

The collection concludes by returning to the place it started, the slopes of Rainier. However, whereas the collection opens with a display of the violent potential of the mountain “that can bury me waist-deep / in mudwash, ash, lava, pumice; / from whose finned ridges, sharp and black / as obsidian, I can throw myself to the welcoming / white of glaciers –” (‘Give Me’), the closing poem invites the reader to appreciate the wonder and beauty of the mountain that rises: “Up from the river valley, from the yawn / of farm land, second growth, moss-laid floor / and the trunks of cedar. / From salmonberry, huckleberry, / neon yellow lichen and the orange boom / of mushroom” (‘Rainier’). This expression of wonderment ends with the extension of a gesture of love: “Here I pull you close to feel the bones / of your fingers between mine” (‘Rainier’). The collection closes with an invitation to the reader: to love, and appreciate, the world with me.

## Bibliography

- Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968. Print.
- Abrams, M.H.. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. Print.
- Anaya, Rudulfo. Foreword. *Writing the Southwest*. By David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, eds. Boston: A Plume Book – Penguin, 1995. (ix-xvi). Print.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Print.
- Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print.
- Beck, John. *Dirty Wars*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Print.
- Berleant, Arnold. *The Aesthetics of Environment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992. Print.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Henry David Thoreau – Updated Edition*. New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2007. Print.
- Burnside, John. “Strong Words”. *Strong Words*. Eds. W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis. Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000. (259-261) Print.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1962. Intro. Lord Shackelton, Pref. Julian Huxley, Aftw. Linda Lear. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.
- Cologne-Brookes, Gavin; Neil Sammells and David Timms; eds. *Writing and America*. London: Longman, 1996. Print.
- Cronon, William, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. Print.
- Cowan, Bainard, and Joesph G. Kronick, eds. *Theorizing American Literature: Hegel, The Sign, and History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.
- Dillard, Annie. *Holy the Firm*. 1977. New York: Perennial-HarperCollins, 2003. Print.
- . *The Living*. New York: Harper Perennial-HarperCollins, 1992. Print.
- . *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. 1974. New York: Harper Perennial-HarperCollins, 1988. Print.
- . *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. New York: Harper & Row, 1992. Print.
- . *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*. 1974. New York: Perennial Library-Harper & Row, 1988. Print.
- . *The Writing Life*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1989. Print.
- Devall, Bill, and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. Lanyon, Utah: Peregrine Smith Press, 1985. Print.

- Dunaway, David, and Sara L. Spurgeon, eds. *Writing the Southwest*. Boston: A Plume Book – Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Edwards, Michael. *Towards a Christian Poetics*. Great Rapids: Willim B. Eermands Publishing Company, 1984. Print.
- Fussell, Edwin. *Frontier: American Literature and the American West*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. Print.
- Froment-Meurice, Marc. *Solitudes: From Rimbaud to Heidegger*. Albany: State University of New York, 1995. Print.
- Goodman, Doug and Daniel McCool, eds. *Contested Landscape: The Politics of Wilderness in Utah and the West*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999. Print.
- Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1978. Print.
- Gunn Allen, Paula. Preface. *Writing the Southwest*. By David King Dunaway and Sara L. Spurgeon, eds. Boston: A Plume Book – Penguin, 1995. (xvii-xxiv). Print.
- Gutkind, Lee. *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997. Print.
- Hoff, Benjamin and Opal Whiteley. *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994. Print.
- Hogan, Linda and Brenda Peterson, eds. *The Sweet Breathing of Plants*. New York: North Point Press, 2001. Print.
- Hugo, Richard. *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984. Print.
- Johnson, Linck C. *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986. Print.
- Kerridge, Richard, and Neil Sammells, eds. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1998. Print.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as History and Experience in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975. Print.
- Liotta, Elena. *On Soul and Earth: The Physic Value of Place*. London: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Marx, Werner. *Heidegger and the Tradition*. 1961. Trans. Theodore Kisiel and Murray Greene. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1979. Print.
- Meloy, Ellen. *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone and Sky*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002. Print.
- . *Eating Stone: Imagination and the Loss of the Wild*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- . *The Last Cheaters Waltz: Beauty and Violence in the Desert Southwest*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1999. Print.

- . *Raven's Exile: A Season on the Green River*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003. Print.
- Merwin, W.S. *The Moon Before Morning*. Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2014. Print
- Miller, Brenda, and Suzanne Paola. *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Print.
- Muir, John. *The Mountains of California*. Kindle Edition, 1 November 2003. Kindle eBook.
- . *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Kindle Edition, 24 March 2011. Kindle eBook.
- . *Stickeen*. Kindle Edition, 1 March 2004. Kindle eBook.
- . *The Story of My Boyhood and My Youth*. Kindle Edition, 24 March 2011. Kindle eBook.
- . *The Yosemite*. Kindle Edition, 30 March 2011. Kindle eBook.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. Print.
- Norwood, Vera. *Made from this Earth*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Print.
- O'Connell, Nicholas. *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in the Pacific Northwest*. Kindle Edition, 1 July 2003. Kindle eBook.
- Oelschlaeger, Max, ed. *The Wilderness Condition: Essays on Environment and Civilization*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1992. Print.
- Peavy, Linda, and Ursula Smith. *Pioneer Women: The Lives of Women on the Frontier*. Rowayton: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996. Print.
- Pepper, David. *Modern Environmentalism*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Peterson, Brenda. *I Want to be Left Behind: Finding Rapture Here on Earth*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010. Print.
- Rainwater, Catherine, and William J. Scheick, eds. *Contemporary American Women Writers*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985. Print.
- Ricou, Laurie. *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2002. Print.
- Roethke, Theodore. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Anchor Books-Random House, 1975. Print.
- Salih, Sara and Denise Baker, eds. *Julian of Norwich's Legacy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. eBook.
- Sayre, Robert F. *New Essays on Walden*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Print.
- Schulze, Robin G. *The Degenerate Muse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.
- Sessions, George ed. *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995. Print.

- Seymore, John. *The Ultimate Heresy*. Bideford: Green Books, 1989. Print.
- Snyder, Gary. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*. New York: Counterpoint, 1995. Print.
- . *Axe Handles*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 1983. Print.
- . *The Back Country*. New York: New Directions Books, 1971 Reset ed. Print.
- . *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1996. Print.
- . *Myths and Texts*. New York: New Directions Book, 1978. Print.
- . *No Nature*. New York: Pantheon, 1992. Print.
- . *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1990. Print.
- . *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks: 1964-1979*. New York: New Direction Books. 1980. Print.
- . *This Present Moment: New Poems*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015. Print.
- . *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems – 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. 1959. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009.
- . *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions Books, 1974. Print.
- Spretnak, Charlene. *The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics*. Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 1986. Print.
- Stafford, William. *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*. Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 1998. Print.
- Stegner, Wallace. *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. New York: Random House. 1992. Print.
- Stone, Albert E. Ed. *The American Autobiography*. Edgewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc., 1981. Print.
- Todd, Douglas. *Cascadia the Elusive Utopia: Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008. Print.
- Teague, David W. *The Southwest in American Literature and Art*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. Print.
- Tempest Williams, Terry. *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002. Print.
- . *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Works of Henry David Thoreau*. Kindle Edition: Golgotha Press, 17 July 2010. Kindle eBook.
- Wagner, David. *Traveling Light: Collected and New Poems*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. Print.

- Wendell Holmes, Oliver. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Kindle Edition: Public Domain Books,1 July 2004. Kindle eBook.
- White, Richard. *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995. Print.
- Wrigley, Robert. *The Church of Omnivorous Light*. Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013. Print.
- Zwinger, Ann H., ed. Introduction. *Writing the Western Landscape*. By John Muir and Mary Austin. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. vii-xxvi. Print.

## Articles

- Bartkevicius, Jocelyn. "Thinking Back Through Our (Naturalist) Mother: Woolf, Dillard and the Nature Essay." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment*, 6.1 (1999): 41-50. Web. 3 October 2012.
- Bealer Adele H. "Reading Out Loud: Performing Ecocriticism as a Practice of the Wild" *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment*, 19.1 (2011): 5-23. Web. 5 September 2012.
- Bilbro, Jeffrey. "Helping People Love the World: An Interview with Gary Snyder". *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 18.2 (2011): 431-441. Web. 12 April 2012.
- Browdy de Hernandez, Jennifer. "On Home Ground: Politics, Location, and the Construction of Identity in Four American Women's Autobiographies." *MELUS*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1997): 21-38. JSTOR. Web. 21 February 2014.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. (1988): 519-531. JSTOR. Web. 14 August 2012.
- Chisholm, Dianne. "The Art of Ecological Thinking: Literary Ecology". *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment*, 18.3 (2011): 569 - 593. Web. 28 February 2012.
- . "Ellen Meloy's Deep Nomadology (How to Map the Heartland of a Nuclear-Age Desert)." *Rhizomes*, 13 (2006): n. pag. Web. 3 December 2012.
- . "Landscapes of the New *Ecological West*: Writing and Seeing Beyond the Wilderness Plot." *Journal of Ecocriticism*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011): 67-93. Web. 5 April 2012.
- Cloke, Paul and J.D. Dewsbury. "Spiritual landscapes: existence, performance and immanence." *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (2009): 695 -711. Web. 1 March 2014.
- Dawson, Jan C. "Landmarks of Home in the Pacific Northwest." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment* 2.2 (1996): 1-24. Web. 4 October 2012.
- Dougherty, James. "Theodore Roethke's 'North American Sequence'": Religious Awakening in the West." *Literature & Belief*, 21: 1&2 (2001): 177-203. Web. 15 May 2014.

- Fairlie, Charlotte. "Whispering to the Ground: The Environmental Message of the Scythe." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment* 18.3 (2011): 637-651. Web. 10 July 2012.
- Garrd, Greta. "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment* 17.4 (Autumn 2010): 643-665. Web. 14 August 2012.
- Ivakhiv, Adrian. "Nature and Self in New Age Pilgrimage." *Culture and Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2003): 93-118. Web. 20 April 2014.
- Ireland, Julia A. "Annie Dillard's Ecstatic Phenomenology." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment* 17.1 (2010): 23-34. Web. 14 August 2012.
- Landis Barnhill, David. "The Spirituality of Nature: An Interview with Scott Russell Sanders." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 20.2 (2013): 397-457. Web. 6 January 2014.
- Long, Mark C. "Affinities of Faith and Place in the Poetry of Denise Levertov." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (1999): 31-40. Web. 15 February 2014.
- Mathes McCarthy, Jeffrey. "Why Climbing Matters." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment* 15.2 (2008): 157-174. Web. 11 September 2012.
- McDonald, Matthew G., Jess Ponting and Stephen Wearing. "The Nature of Peak Experience." *The Humanist Psychologist*, 37 (2009): 370-385. Web. 3 March 2012.
- McQuillian, Gene. "The Forest Track: Working with William Cronon's the Trouble with Wilderness." *College Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2000): 157-172. JSTOR. Web. 24 July 2014.
- McFarland, Sarah E. "Exploring 'at the Edge of Things': A Conversation with Susan Zwinger." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 14.1 (2007): 161-170. Web. 15 February 2014.
- Mest, Ryan A. "Ecopsychology: The Transformative Power of Home." *The Humanist Psychologist*, 36 (2008): 52-71. Web. 15 August 2012.
- Mittlefehldt, Pamela J. "Writing the Waves, Sounding the Depths: Water as Metaphor and Muse." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 10.1 (2003): 137-142. Web. 6 January 2014.
- Murphy, Rich. "Poetry's Evolving Ecology: Toward a Post-Symbol Landscape." *Journal of Ecocriticism* Vol. 1, Issue 2. (2009): 131-140. Web. 5 June 2013.
- Kern, Robert. "Birds of a Feather: Emily Dickinson, Alberto Manguel, and the Nature Poet's Dilemma." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 16.2 (2009): 327-342. Web. 18 September 2012.
- Stenning, Anna. "The search for a common ground between science and our 'visionary images' in *Nature Cure* by Richard Maybe and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard." *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2013): 42-53. Web. 15 April 2014.

- Upton, Corbett E. "What He Assumed, We Have Assumed: "Song of Myself" as American Poetry." *Literary Imagination* Vol. 14, No. 2 (2012): 162-177. Web. 3 October 2012.
- Wilde, Dana. "Annie Dillard's "A Field of Silence": The Contemplative Tradition in the Modern Age." *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2000): 31-45. JSTOR. Web. 21 February 2014.
- Yamazato, Katsunori. "Kitkitdizzie, Zendo, and Place: Gary Snyder as a Reinhabitory Poet." *Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and the Environment*, 1.1 (1993): 51-63. Web. 4 October 2012.
- Yore, Sue. "In the Footsteps of Julian Norwich." *The Way*, 48.1 (2009): 37-56. Web. 18 August 2014.
- Young, Kay. "Erotic Natures: John Muir and I Come to California." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment*, 15.2 (2008): 41-46. Web. 18 September 2012.
- Zimmerman, Michael E. "Rethinking the Heidegger-Deep Ecology Relationship". *Environmental Ethics*, 15.3 (1993): 195-224. Web. 31 March 2015.
- Zona, Kirstin. "An Attitude of Noticing: Mary Oliver's Ecological Ethic." *Interdisciplinary Study for Literature and the Environment* 18.1 (2011): 123-142. Web. 4 August 2012.

## Websites

- Muir, John. 'Chapter I: The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West.' *Our National Parks*. 1901. The John Muir Exhibit. The Sierra Club. Web. Access Date 13 May 2016.