

Praise of Ruin

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ABSTRACT

Praise of Ruin

Lise Gaston

My project interrogates linguistic and visual representations of landscape and of the body, examining the tension of encountering the “natural” through a proscribed set of cultural and aesthetic expectations. The implicit discourse that informs these poems is the picturesque, the eighteenth-century aesthetic movement that situated itself alongside categories of the beautiful and sublime, and determined how artists and tourists viewed and evaluated landscape. In conversation with the major theorists of this aesthetic, my poems question the role of the modern viewing subject in unfamiliar or encountered landscapes and in scenes of contemporary environmental decay. Each section applies a loose framework of representation to diverse landscapes of the river, the coast, the city, and the “bonescape” of the body. The first section challenges the picturesque's privileging of ruin as an aesthetic imposed by the viewer on the landscape; the second section uses the frame of the convex mirror as a technology of sight that renders the view unified and contained; the third shows how the body invites and resists narratives of medicalization as it performs its own decay; finally, the poems in the last section move toward a coastal landscape, pushing up against the aural demands of the listening subject and of the land itself. In dialogue with historical and cultural acts of writing and seeing, the speakers of the poems attempt to establish a subjective position within nature while acknowledging their lack of solid ground: voicing a desire for the possibility of home within conditions of homelessness.

For Millicent Crane and Mary Jean Gaston

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PREFACE: HOME-SCAPE

In *Living in the World as if it were Home*, Tim Lilburn writes that “[p]oetry is consciousness dreaming of domicile at the core of the foreign world, the mind deeply homesick and scheming return” (164). Homesickness, desire, and the self-consciousness of representation are the poetic concerns of my project. In these poems, the speakers’ desire for home is a longing to be present in the natural world—landscapes of river, woods, city, and the physical body—as anything other than foreigner, interloper, voyeur; but this approach is necessarily mediated through language, with its own gestures of appropriation, of naming and claiming the world for its own. And yet—these poems approach and re-approach the land, perhaps paradoxically, still searching for a semblance of home: in the play of words, maybe, in the leaping of metaphor, or in the blank spaces on the page.

The eighteenth-century artistic movement of the picturesque functions as a thematic and formal thread through this work; it interests me in its focus on proscribed ways of seeing, the political implications of its romanticized depiction of ruin, and its role in an aesthetic hierarchy alongside categories of the beautiful and the sublime. In its concern with visual representation and physical manipulation of landscape, the picturesque also speaks to the question of home. The vogue for the English picturesque—rugged hills, thatched cottages, winding rivers, and twisted oaks—escalated in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as war restricted travel on the European continent. Artists and tourists, including a commercial class with growing means of leisure and wealth, started to turn instead to Britain for their charming views and fine prospects. The picturesque, developed within and for British landscapes, was in part an attempt to reconfigure “home” into an artistically viable scene, as well as bring those “wilder” yet highly

picturesque regions, such as Wales, Scotland, and the north of England, into a national aesthetic unity.

Physically, the picturesque's contribution to landscape gardening constructed the home as intrinsic to the natural landscape. By converting the earlier, careful geometry of hedges and flower beds to landscapes where clumps of trees, small lakes, and the odd stone ruin seemed to spring organically from the land, improvers like Humphrey Repton designed estates where the vestiges of home-making were erased, and home itself was naturalized and historicized as part of the land. The faculty of sight was a defining factor in this process, and was carefully manipulated (Repton writes at length about angles of vision and the study of optics). For example, the ha-ha, a sunken fence, could essentially eliminate the visual presence of estate boundaries, allowing the landowner to imagine that all the land encompassed by the eye was also in his possession (Bermingham 14).

William Gilpin defines picturesque objects as “those, which please from some quality, capable of being *illustrated by a painting*” (3); these poems are concerned, in various ways, with the artificiality, subjectivity, and manipulation of viewing. The first section, “Ruining,” moves from inquiries into the unstable and potentially violent relationship between nature and language, into embodied experiences of the “foreign” landscape of Ireland—an “older,” historicized, and (personally) less familiar landscape. The second section holds a literal and figurative mirror up to landscape, through the tool of the Claude Glass, further investigating the technology of seeing. Here, the manuscript's preoccupation with “natural” landscape is disrupted through the presence of urban views. This disruption continues into the third section, which reorients the picturesque's focus on architectural ruin onto the female body. The speaker of “Bonescape,” a sonnet crown, turns the sonnet's blazoning gaze onto her body breaking down. As the body invites and resists

medical definition, this sequence highlights the visual and nominal objectification that language can perform. After the disruptions of the landscapes of city and body, the final section, “Praise,” is in part a return: to the relationships between representation, vision, and the “natural” landscape. This section does not offer a solution, or the comfort of “home,” but in moving from inland to coast, and to a focus on voice, the poems perhaps step closer to what home could mean, in the play between the speaker and the speaking land.

Originators, proponents, and developers of aesthetic theory and the picturesque, whose definitions, validations, physical manipulations, conservations, and trepidations have deeply influenced these poems, include but are not limited to Gilpin, Repton, Jane Austen, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, John Ruskin, and William Wordsworth. I have (perhaps recklessly) put these voices into conversation with contemporary critics and poets including Christine Battersby, Jill Casid, Elizabeth Grosz, Tim Lilburn, and Don McKay. Works that have inspired and informed, but do not appear within the manuscript or in the notes, include Susan Glickman’s *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), John Macarthur’s *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust, and other Irregularities* (Routledge, 2007), Uvedale Price’s *Essays on the Picturesque* (1794), and Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* (1800-03).

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Infinity, power and wildness were invoked, but nature was managed, manicured, framed and filtered so as to keep at bay any 'abyss' in understanding. Intermediate between the sublime and the beautiful, the picturesque sets out to reassure us that—even where there is disorder—man is in control, and that nature has been constructed for human delight.

- Christine Battersby, *Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*

RUINING

The picturesque is therefore sought in ruin, and supposed to consist in decay.

- John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849

Winter Deer

Between split cedar rounds, and a dormant lawnmower,
her fur grey and brown and tufted with hunger
or disease, her head twisted backwards over

her body. Knees loose, I stare
through the shed's wood slats at the nested figure,
the spindled bone of her legs. Her eye open, the glare

of her long face.

Is this useful? I've pinned her, etched
an irreversibly curled body, the cramped space,

her neck always broken
in its turn. My father carries her, hunched,
into woods for ravens.

Will her limbs splay when she's lifted, or will
she stay a folded bundle in his arms? Still:

I denied her smell, chose the colours of her
fur, I opened her eye. (I couldn't
tell in the half-light, refused to move closer,

but for clarity I write: it's open, a fine
staring.) Admit it: I wouldn't
have looked but for the weight death could bring to a line.

It's always slick with intention,
this pen, again and again.

Fact of Art I

... a distinction ... certainly exists, between such objects as are *beautiful*, and such as are *picturesque*—between those, which please the eye in their *natural state*; and those, which please from some quality, capable of being illustrated by a painting.

- Gilpin, *An Essay on Picturesque Beauty*, 1792

so hard to be masters of anything
draw for me when I draw my thumb
hangs over the pencil and bobs it's too
silly draw graphite darker shading
pastel smudged greenbluebrown eyes
looking another way in faces like the
beautiful faces heads of women like
tulips blown open heavy and pink

draw arms made only of bone draw
hips pencil crayon charcoal hips all
chalice and shadowed
nooked hips all flesh stretched
and invisible hips
hips the colour of harvest
of fallowed earth of cool night
and frozen ground
draw hips shimmying
over the page and then
tear it out

Ruin of Dunluce

Should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps.

– Gilpin, *An Essay on Picturesque Beauty*, 1792

This is nothing new, is it? The invitation
you never requested.
Well, here: enter me.

I'm not all hard edge and mottled rock,
my skirts are up—you can see
my purpling carrageenan veins. I'm yours to take down,
again and again: the temporality
of rock and mortar. Do I seem old to you?
You're standing in time's moving courtyard.
I'm engaged
in infinitesimal descent over cliffside,
parapets years in the angling, stones
arrested in continuous tumble—
Oh, but you're falling too, and faster.

Come. I am sighing this whole time.
Once I heaved my kitchen over the cliff, in minutes a handful
of servants in black Atlantic.
I scared my lady away from the sea.
I know you like that story.

So many dark spaces, my pores
ooze snails, sweet wet scent.
Wind moans through me.
Windows no longer windows keep nothing out.
I'm what you wanted, right?

Sublime

The seduction may be complete, the eye may lose itself, and the observer may be absorbed into and transformed by the observed.

- Kim Ian Michasiw, "Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque"

I'm trying to fall.

Look at the photograph.
Remember the wind,

vertical, the pull of
feet from rock. Moss
grassing the cliff-face.

The sea, there. Breath in,
breath out, the coat exhales
from my shoulders. Bare
spiderwork of fences. The sublime,

they say, is permanent
withdrawal from annihilation,
deferred inevitable perdition.

They say fear of heights is
you don't trust yourself
not to jump—
you don't trust yourself.
They say fear of heights is

deferred inevitable perdition.
Withdrawal from annihilation,
they say, is permanent.

Spiderwork of fences: the sublime.
From my shoulders, bare:
breath out, the coat exhales.
The sea, there. Breath in.

Grassing the cliff-face,
feet from rock, moss,
vertical, the pull of—

Remember the wind.
Look at the photograph.

I'm trying to fall.

Terror

In his late writings Kant makes a merely passive response to danger—a block to the appreciation of the sublime which is now described as involving terror and its simultaneous transcendence. Since Kant also insists that women . . . either cannot, or should not, transcend fear.

- Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror, and Human Difference*

Everything can be explained. Splash in the silent pond: fish jump.
We're outside: no face at the window.
We're two women slung out in fleece jackets, reclined into the heavy
forehead of night, two women stargazing the milky way
stapled to the sky over this island, stars eyes looking right at us. No,
they're looking somewhere else, but keen and gleaming because
no lights, no
streetlights, no house lights, no highbeams from the road.
A scratching at the spruce to the left, a panting in the lilacs.

The deck's cool and empty as a plate
but for our two chairs. They creak as we lean.
A donkey honks strange violence into the night, obscene machinery sounds.
Everything can be explained.
Ferns wear their rustling like water.

The cold tongues the bare space between pant-leg and sock, clenches
the tendons of our wrists—

A crashing now, inside—the fridge smashes water into ice—blood slams back to our heads.

Now a crunch on gravel—the firs rise up, rise up, bitten with stars.
A scream like metal scraping metal but we've heard that bird before.

Snap, shirr, where is it, where is it, our necks strain in turning, that sound—listen
no lights, no one else?

The night air wild in our mouths, our pulses tuned to another whisper in the grass—

Trees rear into dark teeth of sky, wind and rattle and the sharpeyed stars and a shuffle
under the deck, under us, now—

Unseen and heaving. Breathing, gigantic cock in its hand.

I Hide, and Watch

. . . a new habit of pleasure will be formed . . . arising out of the perception of the fine gradations by which in Nature one thing passes away into another, and the boundaries that constitute individuality disappear in one instance only to be revived elsewhere under a more alluring form.

– William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, 1835

Spring, when everything pales.

A mother and her child walk the bridge,
the child delighted with her boots' soft claps
on metal slats, little shouts carried by the water.

Rocks and dirt clump the shallows
and breed brittle trees; on the banks
dry scrub twists to heron forms.

A man stands in this brush, fishes.
His vest dark green, a sudden lushness under the sun.
He doesn't know how visible

he has become, the elms behind him
shucked of pigment, nest clotted
in the branches another pale cluster.

The grasses of the highest banks
are caught in memory of motion,
static waves of December floods.

They are waiting: the woman, watching
her child stamp in the quiet heat.
The child, for her movements to rattle back.

The angler, eyes willing the clean tremor of the line.
Brown grebes shelter in reedbeds, throats
thick and ready. All the living things are waiting.

Only the river seems to know where colour has gone:
its tumbled bottom bright as rust, its waters dense
with jade. It laps on, sluicing the margins, glutting itself.

Vision of Love (For the World's Death)

Tell me how the day enters.

A river, yes, and on its banks a rat,
back slicked open, stuck in its blood

to the gravel, squirming and squeaking.
Koi scales shining line the paths:

one orange cheek-plate glints its currency.
The fish, thick muscles of sun, swim under

the ferryman's boat, flit long tails, half
their faces chewed away and water slurring in.

One sleek otter head streams through:
sun-muscle flaps in its jaws, mouthing a panic of lost sound.

And the night, what's the night like?

The river rushes full with birds, their beaks open
and eyes black

and the cold water rushing—
starlings clutter the current, their little pointed tails spiking

the surface like twigs; cormorants flow by choking,
webbed feet splayed.

River of silent wings.
Ducks press cold breast to breast.

The bloated body of a swan sweeps downstream, and
its beautiful neck drags under, slaps thickly on the rocks.

The River

Limerick, June 2011

The field opens and closes its great green eye,
flutters thousands of eyelashes.

Ruined forts rise in dull fangs above clumped trees,
while ivy swallows up the aggression scrawled on man-thick stone, then belches it back
out as black cloud over the green country.

Swans slice the river open with great wide wings.

*

Signs near the university warn foreign students not to walk by the river alone.

The signs don't say why.

Fear cupped in the space between the letters:
deep belly of the D; O's sharp inhale drawing the dark breath back.

*

Spring's pale green lies twitching on the path, hit and
run over by summer. Everywhere are dogs mouthing plastic bottles;
saliva drips from them like weird rain.

We drink warm gin with lime-flavoured tonic on our cement deck, watch the neighbours
overcook their food.

*

The sun slides its belly down a river all amber and light—
or down the sky, saucepan grey and smelling of garlic.

Incredibly, no one tires of talking about the weather.

*

Girls hang off boys in the gum splotched streets, baby-pink tracksuits and dyed hair, roots spreading like a clown grin. Girls that say *ya look like a good fuck there so—how much ya sellin'?* They cackle while their jerseyed boys toss lit cigarettes into the wet land
like they hope
it will, finally, catch flame.

*

Chilled women walk the rain under leopard-print umbrellas, their four-inch stilettos leaving penny-sized punctures in the water. The musk and sweat of peat clots the air.
Women's thin
red lips
smack together under jezebel trees.

*

You have your hand down my jeans in the kitchen, I'm pushing my ass back against you and drying the dinner plates. Our wall is all glass:
a cormorant flies into it, a thin man in a black trenchcoat, winged arms held out in
blatant crucifixion.
He wants to play it that way, signal himself
as pure allusion? Fine. We'll give him that.

*

I like the enter button on the keyboard, entering down the page until it's like I've written something.

Here, the days enter down. The river enters, its great white page. Bridges enter, all steel tendon and growl. Ducks winnow down out of the sky. Geese fight, bleating unseen in the willows. Cows enter down. On the warmest days they lumber lowing into the river. Too scared of the heat.

*

I saw a donkey at a gate. The horses were rummaging the field but the donkey was at the gate, big ugly head

*

Some days we stay inside, watching t.v. where lean men in skinny ties and women in nothing much smoke cigarettes and have affairs in beautiful hotels. We never smoke cigarettes. You studied lung cancer last week. We don't have affairs. Our furniture is stain-proofed. Questions of whether we are better people than these lean men (as we hunch in front of our screens) are nonsensical: for we are not a fiction.

*

*Doctors in nineteenth-century London dissected
the body of a man from out of town
and were astonished to find lungs so strange, so pink and plump they glowed.
They called this curious condition "farmer's lung"—some medical deviation from
the pinched black organs found in normal cadavers.*

*

In layers and layers under dampened grass, the ground sounds out names to shudder the cool well of the ear, names that leave us turning in sleep later, our soft beds uncanny, our blankets breaking apart into goose feathers that weight the pink indentations of our closed eyes. Our mouths fill with down and go dry.

*

The land either doesn't want us or pulls us to it: like the ivy that dismantles grey stone and takes *Brits Out* slogans for its own. Alders wave hello over my shoulder and the river waves shyly to anglers, hip-wader deep in shallow waters, dreaming of white fish flesh falling from forks in the chip shop, white and gold potato flesh of Rio's (best chip place in town), big red store front combusting over the roundabout, big plastic sun.

The grass heals its third degree burns, again and over again.
(A stapled page on our kitchen wall instructs us re: grease fires: a stick man dies violently, body riddled in black flames.)

*

The river's just gone biblical, running all gorgeous with blood.
It's Catholic Land, you see. These things have a tendency.
The Angelus on RTÉ Radio 1 bells the evening in from downriver: open windows heave
warm breath through lace blinds.
The sun drags its skinny-jeaned ass along the bank.

*

The great dark mysteries
of the grebe hunkered down and of the black and white bird that preens on death
and of badgers listed on Nature Walk signposts but unseen in the run and muck of it.
The great dark mysteries of the badger claw tearing
the sky into night, its never-seen nose snuffling the warm mist in over the river.

MIRROR

... the convex mirror . . . improves upon nature as to the unity of the object in vision: All objects that are seen there with one glance of the eye, make together one whole, and a whole much more agreeable than that which the same objects would produce in an ordinary glass, or, I will venture to say, even in nature itself.

- Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes avec un balance de peintres*, 1708

The grass is a mirror that clouds as the bright look goes in.

- Tim Lilburn, "In the Hills, Watching"

The Anglers

The memory of pike glasses their calves.
That quiver of rod tip. Weight known

in the payout of line, palms heavy with the pull of it.
The silver fat of recollection: their mouths are dry with the taste.

Nets and rods antennae from their backs: they're fallen satellites,
feet pulsing for the cold, lost rhythms of the fish.

All day their jerkbait lures flash in the moving water. The river grey in the wasting light.

Claude Glass

I first catch its sibilant name in Jill Casid's *Sowing Empire*. Defined:
a convex mirror, used by artists in the eighteenth century to bring
the reflected scene into the "frame" of a picture.

But I am on an island.

We have no internet. I do no further research. I look
at the Douglas firs, at the clay-filled pond,
fill thrush feeders with peanut butter and seeds.

Wikipedia calls it a Black Mirror, says tourists used it too,
hunting the picturesque, tiresome detail reduced to unified scene.

To see the land, put your back to it.

I am in a recall war at the library for Arnaud Maillet's
The Claude Glass, which states, among many things, that in 1805 Charles Gough
fell to his death, searching for his scene, a Claude glass found
in his pocket, his hat ripped
in two. Then his dog Foxie lay three months beside the body.
It is strange: someone doing the same
research, inexplicable, obscure, a play
of reflection, of notes scrawled in reverse on another page.

The library staff are rude, penned in their maroon
metal box. They thump books through, snap fingers at the next in line. I say,
*That one—look behind you, over your shoulder—that book
I want.*

In "Picturesque Mirrors," John Dixon Hunt introduces Claude Lorrain,
seventeenth-century artist whose scenes of mellow oak and ash—those
foregrounds of buttered light, the gentle gods lounging there—
gave his last name to the glass.

Though perhaps he never used one. *Perhaps he never had to,*
I write in the margins.

I lied about that last part. I don't write in the margins of library books.

In 1 Corinthians 13: *For now we see through a glass, darkly,
but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even
as also I am known.*

I lied again, before. I do write, a little, in the books: pencil
only, faint lines and arrows. A spidered star in the top corner, half-
erased.

Lars Kiel Bertelson (“The Claude Glass: A Modern Metaphor between Word and Image”) labels it the first optic machine of modernity.

John Ruskin called it a veil of perversion.

In the park, today, I find that if the user has astigmatism,
it’s difficult to focus the mirror without covering the (left)
afflicted eye. How often I catch my own eye in the frame, wandering.

I have to return Maillet again. The book has a black matte cover.
The woman at the desk stabs her arm straight up, snaps her fingers, barks *next*.
On page 49, a word’s underlined twice.

Thomas Gray uses a Claude Glass

Straggled out alone to the *Parsonage*, fell down on my back across a dirty lane with my glass open in one hand, but broke only my knuckles: stay'd nevertheless, & saw the sun set in all its glory.

- Thomas Gray, Letter to Thomas Wharton, 1769

Gray falls
on his back
glass in his palm in the air a darkened sun
and the landscape behind him in his black sun lit up in black
fires of black
 falling
and he glories in the black and blooming
trees all burnt up by his own dark sun
and the ash-blooming heathered hills and the other sun
behind him expiring in orange the sky filled with

the holiness of black he sees
his knuckles raw with it he falls
 to glory
the ground soft and black with dirt
his head on rock and neck stretched up
hot the ground and dry
 looking
straight into the little black sun
 let the light in little palm sun
 let the night in oh the constellations there
 through the glass that's gleaming, darkly

The Poet Builds a Claude Glass

1. Bike rear-view mirror, broken at the elbow, swivel-ready. Circle cut from plastic black folder, stuck inside.

Results:

Convex glass lends authenticity.
Low visibility, scratched plastic blurry like
smudged glasses, which the poet also wears.

2. (Possibly) Antique Elizabeth Arden compact (made in Switzerland) purchased for \$10 at a junk store. Gold (in colour), rectangular, two bars of shining rhinestones. Satisfying weight.

Results:

Pointless. Is a compact, and nothing more.

3. 3" x 2" glass rectangle sprung from a second-hand picture frame, glossed on one side with black varnish (varnish origin unknown, found in the poet's laundry room).

Results:

The poet's walk to the paint store (for \$0.97 brush) detoured
into a high-end thrift shop.
Wool skirt and merino sweater
unexpected and costly outcome.
Hands sticky and poisoned
with varnish. Nail-polish remover (used to remove
varnish—mostly successful) also removed poet's
"Passport Blue" American Apparel nail-polish.
Apartment now toxic. Air could (possibly) alight.
Aesthetic compulsion or toddler impulse to varnish the eyes
of dew-skinned Gucci models
in October's *Vanity Fair*: magazine ruined.
Final result inconclusive. Varnish yet to dry.

4. Samsung Galaxy SII smart phone (screen turned off): aesthetically sleek, clearly reflective, blank black eye, dark hole of the ear, deep maw, cold dry tongue on the cheek.

Results:

Inconclusive: the poet can't afford one.

Influence

If there was a picturesque moment in practice, it occurred whenever a tourist looked into his “Claude Glass,” called after the French painter, Claude Lorrain, although it is fairly certain that he himself never used one.

- John Dixon Hunt, “Picturesque Mirrors”

Lay it down, the shimmering glass—

I’m always looking over my shoulder at him, through each scrap
of blackened glass—that upright figure
in the foreground—an almost-shadow beside the softening oak stump—

I unclasp the lid to rearticulation of his name, this mouth open
and astonished at its own acquiring eye
that watches the shapes of things struggle into
dusk—light envelopes the middle-distance, washes over the men there—I see

him, the sun catches on his smock, the bright threads of his cap—
I glimpse his face in the window of a tower, through the wounds of its stone walls—grey
husk of power—

birds circle—leaves threaten to whirl free of the frame—

I wait for him to pop up behind me with a hum of aesthetic disapproval—
torqued beeches paint the unrelenting presence of the wind—there, in the lake—a mirror
weighted with trees—his face a violent ripple—has he grown older,
or is the water unsteady in its green bowl

—beech leaves alight, shaken like brush strokes from the aged artist’s hand—the glass
in mine brings the night—

A bigger dark comes in from a farther place

Night Scene through my Kitchen Window
(A History of Assumption)

brick, dark brick, the scales
of a silver watch, time etched into
the walls, linoleum melts through

*Nature came to be
understood as timeless,
unchanging raw
material.*

*Dynamized and
rendered historical.*

to the deck, right angles
everywhere—except the parabolas
of reflected necklace, of sweater,
of breasts—mine—slumped under the wool,

what else... oh yes,
the sky: pale gray, some would say
romantic, and rain, caught

*It came to be regarded
as romantic or
nostalgic anachronism.*

*Correlatively, culture
become the active force
molding and reworking
nature to make it
amenable...*

in the yellow glove of the streetlamp while
clothes lines ghost the courtyard—
that's what they call this jumbled
rectangle of no-yard—nothing moves

but smoke into a deck light,
Bell satellite dish and the dark, secret brick,
and grey snow and the sockets of windows

*to individual, social,
and collective use.*

Culture tames nature.

in walls and the side of my face, watching
all this—so much of it!—muted
through a screen to keep mosquitoes out,

but they're gone now, anyway, those
buzzing pinpricks of blood.

*Culture writes on and
as nature, making the
natural its inscriptive
surface.*

Cityscapes in Mating Season

I.

Car alarm bird-calls blare the dusk and seagulls wheelie the burnt sky. Crickets stridulate their four types of cricket-song, rioting the cement field under Atwater Ave. overpass. The whole city thrums with it, ready to blow. Summer calling. Night fogs the windows with its warm breath. Fingers unbend from the blurry dark to trace crooked hearts on every pane. Like you, night has a lovely mouth.

II.

Death in his black dress plugs the parking meter at the end of my street. He'll stay as long as he damn well likes, but he still has to pay for it. His huge black engine idles—squirrels throw themselves at its sweet moaning flame. The engine runs its tongue over their small bodies, under their skin. Little skulls pop beneath tires on the road. Death counts his change to the penny: he likes the new ones, how they shine.

III.

Was it that moment of my mouth over yours, drawing our breath out? In my apartment we engage in wonderful destruction, while below us the girl with the red dress and violent lips walks down my street and angels spark from her eight-cylinder rib cage, holy and obscene, rending red cloth in the warm night. The maples, ablaze, pull from their roots, and scatter panic through the city like foxes with tails on fire...

IV.

At a park, in the rain, dogs lick quartz specks from stones, lick their owners with spiked glittering tongues. Under the clouds, silence thickens, catches in air vents and storm drains and screeches choking through the metro. It takes my breath away, this ground. And in the park, I see Buddha's head on a stump, areolar pouches of blood dripping down his neck, the whole head red like blood and gleaming in the wet air.

V.

A dame walks into a bar on the corner, all tall on the ruin of her long legs. The sidewalk drools on itself, giggles and retches with civilized scents of terrier shit and apricot beer, the sweetness of deep-fried meat and salt and—the ocean, the ocean I miss its smell, its muscular, furred tongue. The dame stumbles home. Guilt curdles in the bar walls, then one night burns the dark place down.

VI.

The city is full of beautiful boys—in doorways, on bicycles, long hair swept from delicate faces. But I keep finding the empty shape of you, over my shoulder, lined in the earth-rot under cedar boughs. Your body stretches in the spaces between parked cars that wait for the light. You've drunk half my beer, you bastard, I know it. Otherwise, whose lip-marks there, and whose thumb-print on this frame?

Fact of Art #2

Poem found in *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, by Humphry Repton, Esq., 1816. Line breaks and (some) punctuation added.

One of our most eminent landscape painters was desired
to make a portrait of a gentleman's seat: he saw the place

during a land flood, and, when
the whole valley was covered by vapour,

he made a beautiful picture of a fog (after the manner of Vernet);
and thus he painted

an atmospheric effect, when he should
have painted a landscape.

In like manner, a beautiful woman, (represented)
during a fainting fit,

may display great ingenuity (by the artist);
but, surely, this is sickly picturesqueness.

BONESCAPE

Sonnet Crown

in a world where pain is meant to be gagged
uncured un-grieved-over The problem is
to connect, without hysteria, the pain
of any one's body with the pain of the body's world

- Adrienne Rich, "Contradictions: Tracking Poems"

1.

Oak branches splay tight as nerves in the white
sky looming out the window. Thin pink blinds
diffuse our room, your face in rosy light—
you're rosier still under skin that winds
its strata over bones and blood-whelmed flesh:
cell after cell ascends to the surface,
where each dies and falls away. Once enmeshed,
we're always changing. Your hand warm on my face
tries to hold us to the moment. My skin
divides and divides again under yours.
You are emphatic. Elsewhere, the earth begins
to buck and break black waves on other shores.
A burl of pain in my sacrum. A pinch.
Concurrent events: just coincidence.

2.

Concurrent events: just coincidence
my trapezius seizes, cervical
nerves clenching metaphoric fists, while, tense,
my sacroiliac flares vertical
pain through my left leg's twitching muscle. But
the doctor cannot find a cause. Blood test
inconclusive: vials choked with cells, a glut
of red sluicing the glass. *Low iron*. Rest
recommended. He does not touch my skin.
I picture vials shattering: a crisis
on the clean floor, screaming haemoglobin.
My thighs crinkle the neat paper of his
sterile bed. The doctor says there's nothing wrong.
Under my skin pain rises like a song.

3.

Under my skin pain rises like a song
unnameable, the words static, tune hummed
off-key. Gaze focused inward now, a strong
microscopic need to know my wracked, dumb

body. Today, sternomastoid muscle
fibres isolate the neck, ache rising
to the skull, burrowing to clavicle—
like pond weed in water: roots striving

to sediment, shoots to air. So you
offer massage. Your hands mute too. Your touch
worth nothing—I want, I want, I want to
feel fine. You turn on the TV: so much

debris. Cities, unhinged. Wail of lack, lack.
Desire has become a selfish act.

4.

Desire has become a selfish act.
Picturing your hands is imagining
your hands on *me*—the median nerve, fat
and blooming from your wrist to lingering

fingers, is secondary to the sweet
sensory neurons of my thighs: before
body grafts to body, my mind, replete
with myself, enters your mind, white shore

of your eye. My breasts resting on your thin
lumbricalis muscles, hands cupped and cool.
A mirror of self-love: narcissistic sin?
But our nerves communicate one-way too:

dendrite and axon, their twinning intense,
un-reciprocal, but ripe and thick with sense.

5.

Un-reciprocal, but ripe and thick with sense,
all muscle stiff with myotonic
pleasure. Pink flushes my skin (blossom blends
with stream, pink under rippling water)—quick,
quick, thudding blood fills tissue, arteries
dilate, a building—corpora—building—
lover, you unlock me, the white skies
pool around us—and the thrumming
ache begins again behind my eyes
as I turn away.

The new doctor
says it's psychosomatic. He says
he's seen women like me before:
(the word *hysteria* echoes; his lips, silent)
I'm canvas brushed with the mind's darkest paint.

6.

I'm canvas brushed with the mind's darkest paint,
the black and white of me splayed on screen:
cumulus grey of tomography scan
punctured with the dark fillings in my grin.

My white spine flashes like a halved fish.

On another slide: organs plump as loaves
in a basket. Miracle. The radiologist
reads no symptoms: soft tissues shelter in coves
of bone. Complacent. Miracle.

A new
coronal view of my chest shows twinned
lungs, cool corralled pools. I offer you
this picture for your office. You remind
me what the doctors said. I call it art.
We say nothing of the grey, lurking heart.

7.

We say nothing of the grey, lurking heart,
its doubling and doubling again: two pumps,
their two cupped chambers, valves in sets
of two, and each persistent note: lubb dubb,
lubb dubb, iambs beating us into the world—
the left ventricle larger: always this
imbalance. Which of us is stronger, who'd
lean on whom? Reciprocity aside,
you know the answer too. On the news we watch
the mud-racked country find itself out
of steel, green rubble of trees. Some days I can't
leave the bed, back riven to sheets, boat
of my body scuttled and shored.
You walk so straight out the bedroom door.

9.

Over oceans, the wild tar-black water breaks,
scattering people like neurons
snapping connections and
through empty tumbling
spaces of the far-gone

body. Or so I imagine. My x-rays
show their empty places, the hollows
that hide illness so well doctors say
and say again they cannot find it. What follows:

terms like brain fog, vertigo, the room
folding in on itself. Dopamine
accelerates and cochlea crack open
in the inner ear or so I imagine.

I lay down my head.
The skin of my eyelid is dark and thick with red.

10.

The skin of my eyelid is dark. And thick with red
I've painted my lips, blooded protuberances.

This doctor gives me sickness, pronounces its
polysyllabic name. I offer him glances:

teeth bared in a grin. He says, *chronic*,
progressive. My blouse is open
just enough. He prescribes. Vocabularies slip
from his parted lips to mine.

Lover, you'd tried, in nakedness
and seclusion, to call me yours—but
now this man names me.

I accept with two hands his damaged fruit,

for I'm fallen, failed seductress,

desperate for other flesh.

12.

Under the table:

our feet brush shyly.

Your cheeks stiffen in their grin.

You ask me how I am, you look
down, each eye complacent on its cushion of fat.

Your sclera are white with health.

Your suspended lenses take me in, what new
strain there, the rose light

of flushed skin,

hair dye faded like winter bark—

I enter your retina, rush

to occipital lobes that don't like what's arrived:

the clench of your quick jaw shows me—

though you try to relax, reinstate the grin—

I am not sorry for you. My back spasms refresh.

I answer that I'm fine.

14.

Lover I gave you my chest blown open and you lost it:
your attempt to explain
pain only through what you saw. I, tacit—
an image all I gave you.

My condition

is reversible: so *this* doctor says. The news
shows again cities cropped like shrunken
spines; a man crushed in concrete, his one bruised
hand in its green sweater cuff; a woman

reading names, wilderness of hope caged in
her eyes' dark, distracted stare. My body
carries the weight of its pale skin
and what blossoms under: a steady

keening silence; bronchioles, winnowed like
oak branches, splay tight as nerves in the white.

PRAISE

A last word. . . . Even if, when it moves from listening to speaking, all it can utter is elegy. Even if it is all lament.

- Don McKay, "Great Flint Singing"

Silence

Tympanic membrane
still.

Ossicles
still.

Fluid cools in the pond
of the inner ear.

Hair cells at attention.

Silence gambols in the rumble

rushrush

and screeeeeeeeak of wheels.

Air bellows the tunnel in long hollow sound.

We brush shoulders; mouths
hold back the shout of meeting
another person's eye.

On rue Rachel, the bells
of Immaculée Conception measure time

in units of
silence.

Quartered,
invisible fences,
gates clanging.

We're watching

when, leaping
from the swing,

he lands

wrong.

His small, shocked limbs
held
in our inhalation.

The circled surprise of his mouth.

My parents met at Naropa Seminary
an hour above Boulder, Colorado

on a day of silence:

only necessary words
to be spoken.

She asked him for a cigarette,
she said her name.

Behind the still pines

of a raven the body

with signals itself
 flap flap:

storm winds
 made rhythm and condensed to

black feather and hollow
 bone

I'm not
always comfortable

with silence,
need to keep

talking,
chewing food or
my nails, spitting out
their little crescent moons.

This task of being
face to face and
quiet—

Where the Research Goes

I. *What the Books Say*

Day 1. Landscape is ideological.

Day 2. Earth's carved up to political allegiance, hedges and juniper bushes signify the bank account, apple trees pollinate creed into the grey sky.

And those are just the estate men,
ones who sow and reap nothing
but visual delight. Code it as rape, code it
as patriarchal power, as sprinkling seed:
the earth is wet and gagging for it.

Day 3. Acts of landscape are violent. The notorious ha-ha.
Villagers pushed into cities for a faux Grecian temple,
for the cottage ornée, for shit-stained sheep bleating
at the picturesque trees.

Day 4. Travellers
undermine the fallible tenet of ownership;
return of the Repressed; their stubborn landlessness
causes heartburn under many a cravat.

Day 5. Sight enacts a violence. Annexation pencilled into
the appropriately jagged line of limestone etched in graphite
on thick, scented paper.
And other cruel acts of the hand.

Day 6. There are disagreements.
About the cultural work land can do. About money, as usual.
About the subjective role of beauty,
that's a doozy, generative
of angry treatises and port-fuelled debates on
the ruinous uniformity of Scotch Pine.
Such bloody right angles.

Day 7. Hedgerows, hardly hedgerows:
some beg to differ, and do.

II. *Dialogue*

Both languages and species contain within their present forms rudiments or residues of their own previous historical forms, vestiges that inscribe their present form with the traces of their past.

- Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time*

Listen: the winds are up in Drumbeg Park—
skinny firs lean into the rushing off the sea.

Now, at Sotherton, we have a good seven hundred,
without reckoning the water meadows.

Dead trunks twine around each other like English ivy: the wind
groans through them.

Repton, or anybody of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down.

Thin limbed trees creak like doors,
the sound they'll carry down.

(The avenue that leads from the west to the top of the hill you know.)

Austen, 200 years ago, insisted her drawing room door be left unopened:
the squeal of a visitor: her words under blotting paper. Etiquette, yes.

There have been two or three fine old trees
cut down that grew
too near the house—

The firs scratch their noise into the sky:
a script already written?

—and it opens
the prospect amazingly.

III. *What the Land Calls Out*

Day 1. Raven croaks to welcome me back here. Sure.

Me and my notebook, my chewed up pens.

The island forgets it's an island, this far into the woods.

Day 2. Douglas firs in the wind swishing like ocean in their big black bowl under the sky, big black boughs like waves swishing rolling through like breakers in the wind, wind in the branches the ocean caught wild in the trees.

Swish. Out here it's like a drowning.

Day 3. Nothing much. Banana slugs lug their stricken bodies over the land. Gary oaks vacillate between beauty and disgust—those pockmarked limbs,

gnarled in all the right places.

Day 4. Rain falls on these woods I walk through, in the night. Above me, the wind, the ocean on the firs, the ocean three miles away in any direction. I'm underwater, under wind. Rain drips from branches and plinks on poplar leaves that lie gleaming on the path under my flashlight like slugs—that rain. It sounds only like itself.

Day 5. Inside. Ice, now. Slathered on the roof. The skittering of raccoon feet up there: sound magnified in the cold, in the night, in the ice so it scratches like something larger on the roof, the house echoes with feet. It's a raccoon, grey hunchback body.

A raccoon. A raccoon. It is. Only that.

Day 6. Overcast. Visibility 15. Winds east 22. Gusting 28. Pressure 1006.3 and falling. Seas two foot chop, moderate. The woman on Victoria Coast Guard Radio has the sexiest voice.

Day 7. Hatchback loaded with bags. Holly berries bleed off the bush, the mash of tangled green along the road. Wild turkeys chortle the brush, their made-up faces bright blue against winter's grasses. Pack up and—go. Between the balsam, the ocean, there.

Night Room

The low wail of night and its unseen chitterings, sweeps of tail
on dead leaves, the slow
rustle and creep up ferns.

The dark, on its own terms, and us
racked out in a room
reeked with cedar and shaved wood, this hand-made cabin.
Two windows: the pitch

of hot night: the creaky lean of spruce and fir. We're restless,
years stacked behind like kindling.
Where have we left to go, together?

Two shrieks pack the dark: bird-call, a human
timbre and panic. The night endures, slips onward, becomes
the slick of stream-burrowed branches, seepage, rivulets tunnelling
thin-skinned trucks: drip, slide—

but outside's parched and brittle, holds its breath, still
waiting for rain. We sleep in a cedar box of brook and trickle,
in a dry wood.

At light, under the rattle and gab of waxwings and crows,
we find the river's source in swells of sawdust
like sugar on the russet floor: carpenter ants,
glossy heads big as thumbnails.

Morning expounds this
mystery—but what of those other walls
we'll plummet an arm through.

The Water's Coming

I am speaking to you from the bottom of a well
in the dry season. I'm here to feel

the wet dirt, smell the iron
residue of hardwater.

My arms are turning to rock,
to snakeflesh stiffened in its coil.

You may ask me why I've come. I am afraid of fire.

Did you know a willow sapling has sprung
from my spine?
It doesn't know how deep this well is.

I am speaking this for you in case you are worried.

It's been a busy day.
This sapling's not going to make it.

I am wearing your sweater,
the one with the black salmon knitted on it.
I'm sorry. The boiled egg in the pocket has cracked.

Did you know shell fragments glow in the dark?
This dark, anyway.

Love, leave off your searching.
For the water's coming first,
and then the fire.

The Return of Fear

I.

The Globe and Mail, Saturday, August 6, 2011

A truce in **the battle over** the U.S. debt ceiling was supposed to have calmed markets that have been rattled by Europe's debt crisis. But **fear** of a new recession in the U.S. and the realization that Europe **is failing** to solve its problems has global investors hitting the sell button. As stimulus programs wind down and governments slash spending, hope for global growth is fading fast.

It was supposed to be a good week for investors. Facing an Aug. 2 deadline, U.S. leaders reached a last-minute budget **compromise** and raise the country's \$14.3-trillion (U.S.) borrowing limit. That paved the way for a relief rally in stocks, since the U.S. had **narrowly avoided defaulting** on its debt.

But the rally didn't happen. Instead, investors ran for the exits, selling stocks with abandon around **the world**. The S&P 500, the key measure of U.S. stocks, plunged more than 7 per cent on the week, the worst weekly performance since late 2008 when the global financial crisis **exploded**. The S&P/TSX index **sank nearly 5 per cent**.

For investors, it was the week that **fear returned** with a vengeance. Rather than **celebrating** the move to avert a U.S. debt crisis this week, investors confronted an unsettling question: Is the world going back into recession?

Instead of giving the all-clear for companies and consumers to get back to business, the close call **on the U.S. debt ceiling** only served to put the spotlight on what a fiscal mess the

U.S. is in....

Stocks plunged around **the world** Thursday,
“the day that markets finally **woke up to the
very real**

II.

but somehow, a deer
stands on its hind legs in late August gloom
to pluck an unripe apple
from a branch
with her square teeth

the dog rolls on a snail shell, dead snail
wrinkled inside it—the smell!
or maybe just to scratch her back

the bloody line has fallen
off the graph,
arrows accuse one another
of the unseen

closest to the trunk,
sycamore needles turn
to useless gold

Utility

I trust, from these studies, we have both acquired not only picturesque ideas, but this useful lesson; *that the landscape ought to be adapted to the beings which are to inhabit it.*

- Humphry Repton, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening*, 1795

January, 2011, residents in a Vancouver suburb protest against a proposed neighbourhood hospice, don't want no pollution of property values, death pervading their healthy west coast air.

They'll have to keep their blinds shut, sure of what they'd see.

Beds hitched to the sidewalk, rasping bodies shovelled into a gilt building, flowers thrown onto their juddering limbs. Hard moaning takes place of wind through fir trees, dogwood blossoms bloom out in bedsores. Stench of flesh betraying flesh, the un-endless regulatory antechamber of delights. Mulch in the earth and pines succumbed to pine-scented air fresheners freshening bedpan swill and clotted metal of coughed-up blood. Lawns peel up like skin off lips, the opioid sun recoils, a pin in the sky: the sky rent with portent, seraphim and lions out of the *Book of Armagh*, raging winged and chequered, fingered with opposable thumbs—and the manes of the dying splayed over pillows, collective breath knocking ribs of the building through the night.

The residents petitioned.

Building has been postponed.

Story

summer

the cold
and fiery koi
latch their
O'd mouths
to the pond banks
and with great
gasping sucks
draw algae
from the clay into
the cavities
of their sun-wild
bodies

winter

it is
while sliding sharp
spears of
carrot
and onion with
a knife from
cutting board
to oiled and
hissing pan that she
realizes
she is no longer
in love

autumn

the birch
is a burning
ruin:
for hours
the leaves have cupped
the night's blue
flame until
their glossy
arterial skins
stiffen and start
to blister in
the cold

Song

The herring are back. The herring and along with them
the hubcap-gleaming coho and skinny lemon sole and the incomprehensible weight
of finbacks rolling through. And the eagles, with claws out.

The millpond bays with their cedar lining. The sun
is back over the dimpled strait. Observations on the feeling
of the beautiful. I am tired out by the cynicism

sidewalks demand. And the otters are back, with their sweet dead smell
and vicious eyes and the ducklings are back, all fluffed-out otter-fodder.

Ravens are back, their wings shucking the air off,
the sky present around them. The pointed swooping swallows.
The mulberry tree under its riotous weight of bees.

Notes

- p. 11 “Sublime” contains some text from *On Spiders, Cyborgs, and Being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime*, by Joanna Zylińska, Manchester University Press, 2002.
- p. 21 Quote from Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes avec un balance de peintres*, in English translation, found in Arnaud Maillet’s *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, translated by Jeff Fort. Zone Books, 2004.
- “In the Hills, Watching,” by Tim Lilburn, from *Desire Never Leaves: The Poetry of Tim Lilburn*, by Tim Lilburn and Alison Calder, Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007.
- p. 25 “Thomas Gray uses a Claude Glass.” Epigraph: Gray’s letter to Wharton found in Maillet (see above).
- p. 27 “Influence.” Lines in italics taken from Tim Lilburn’s poem “Pitch” (published in *Desire Never Leaves: The Poetry of Tim Lilburn*, by Tim Lilburn and Alison Calder, Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007).
- p. 28 “Night Scene through my Kitchen Window.” Marginal glosses taken from Elizabeth Grosz’s *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, Duke University Press, 2005.
- p. 33 “Contradictions: Tracking Poems” by Adrienne Rich, from *Your Native Land, Your Life*, Norton, 1993.
- p. 48 Don McKay quotation taken from “Great Flint Singing,” introduction to *Open Wide a Wilderness: Canadian Nature Poems*, edited by Nancy Holmes, Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2009.
- p. 52 “Where the Research Goes: I. What the Books Say.” “Hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows” quoted from “Lines: Composed a Few Miles about Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798,” by William Wordsworth (1798).
- p. 53 “Where the Research Goes: II. Dialogue.” Un-indented text taken from Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814).