

BLUE MACHINE

WITH “A SUBJECT SUBJECT RELATIONSHIP: RECIPROCITY IN THE  
NATURE/CULTURE BINARY”

by

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(Under the Direction of ANDREW ZAWACKI)

ABSTRACT

In the critical introduction to the collection of poems “Blue Machine,” I develop a theory of ecopoetics based around a parallel alignment between culture and nature. In the work of poets Alice Notley and Bhanu Kapil, I read humans’ imaginative and empathic acts of transforming into animals as means of restructuring a hierarchy that posits human as perceiving subject and animal as inanimate object. The reorientation of lyric subjectivity and lyric voice towards the body and into a hybrid “humanimal” form leads to the human recognition of animal and natural world as both subject and other.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, poetics, ecopoetics, feminism, women’s studies, psychoanalysis, lyric

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A SUBJECT SUBJECT RELATIONSHIP: RECIPROCITY IN THE NATURE/CULTURE

#### BINARY

##### Towards an Ecological Poetry

The “I” who speaks in a poem and that speaker’s experience, whether emotional, cerebral, metaphoric, or otherwise, traditionally define lyric poetry. In *Lyric Interventions*, Linda Kinnahan examines this traditional definition of the lyric, which, informed by the romantic tradition, posits the self as the unifying force behind a poem. A “central consciousness or voice,” in other words, organizes the poem (10). Language poetry, Kinnahan points out, turned against the remembered experience of the lyric self and towards a “‘tense-less’ condition of language as medium” (11). In the mid- to late 1990s, however, Kinnahan notes that criticism began to deconstruct the opposition between lyric poetry and language writing, partially due to a redefinition of what lyric is. The debate changed from whether lyric subjectivity is present in the work to how that lyric subjectivity is deployed (12, 13). I see lyric subjectivity largely through the lens of the body, according to the presence of sensory perception in a literary work, rather than as a genre. While a literary work may often feature a lyric “I” who speaks the poem, I do not think an “I” is necessary for a work to have lyric qualities. An epic, for example, might have lyric qualities without being categorized as a lyric poem. I am interested in how lyric subjectivity—defined here as the presence of a lyric body that senses and in many cases speaks—can be deployed in relation to our larger ecological context and how humans function

within it. I might call my poetics Psychoanalytic or Human Ecopoetics: how can the lyric reorient humans as physical beings within the larger physical system?

This introduction will argue that one way for poetry to enact such a shift is to recognize the human body as essentially animal and as part of the ecosystem. In *Greening the Lyre*, David Gilcrest points out that nature poetry is traditionally defined as dealing with “the nonhuman aspects of the world around us,” but that we must instead define nature poetry in an ecological manner that includes the human. Otherwise, we risk reinscribing the traditional “culture/nature” binary, which masks “our existence...as sheerly physical and physiological entities” (2). Gilcrest goes on to define “[t]he ecological perspective” as “insist[ing] that a species cannot be considered independently of the evolving environmental gestalt that produces it.” He notes, further, “that the ecological poem allies itself with ecological science’s complaint against atomistic and mechanistic Newtonian science” (14, 16). Ecopoetry is then characterized by its sense of the human—and integrally, of our physical existence—as part of a larger environmental system that rejects “atomistic” conceptions of the world.

Gilcrest notes that “[m]ost ecologists would agree that revolutionary changes in human culture are predicated on a revolution in human psychology,” but he does not pursue the psychoanalytic angle he proposes here beyond citing Lawrence Buell’s belief that “the environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination” and that resolving this crisis will involve “finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity’s relation to it” (23-24). How, then, can poetry find better ways of conceptualizing the relationship between nature and humanity? The answer to this question is complex. On the one hand, one can never entirely escape our culture’s hierarchical “culture/nature” divide while using traditional poetic devices and formal structures. On the other hand, I believe that the speaker or perceiving body in lyric poems can



offer, through representations of the body and the senses in particular, a parallel rather than hierarchical orientation of the relationship between nature and culture.

I would like now to bring the psychoanalytic perspective to bear more directly on this sense of parallel orientation in ecopoetics by looking at Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love*, in which she provides some useful ways of thinking about domination—certainly an important part of the “culture/nature” divide—and the basic binary structure itself that reproduces the split between culture and nature. Benjamin begins with the gender binary, observing the tendency, even in feminist critiques of gender hierarchies, to reinscribe that basic dualistic structure. Benjamin first summarizes Freud's thinking about domination, noting that Freud believed man's natural tendency towards aggression and domination is necessarily checked by civilization, causing the ego to repress these natural tendencies, which are rooted in a “primal struggle between father and son.” In this struggle, sons “overthrow the father's authority,” only to become “afraid of their own aggression...so they reinstate law and authority in the father's image” (3-6). As Benjamin points out, women are not only absent from this model of the reproduction of domination and power, but are assumed to be subordinate to men. She states, “This assumption does more than just give sanctuary to all the old ideas, conscious and unconscious, about men and women; it also provides, as we will see, the ultimate rationalization for accepting all authority” (7). Feminist theory, Benjamin points out, has either criticized the idealization of men or reactively engaged in the “valorization of femininity.” I will quote extensively from Benjamin here because her thinking is integral to my interest in the ecological implications of complicating binary relationships:

In adopting the feminist critique of gender polarity, I am aware that it has sometimes tended to reinforce the dualism it criticizes. Every binary split creates a temptation to merely reverse its terms, to elevate what has been devalued and denigrate what has been overvalued. To avoid the tendency towards reversal is not easy—especially given the existing division in which the female is culturally defined as that which is not male. In order to challenge the sexual split which permeates our psychic, cultural, and social life, it is necessary to criticize not only the idealization of the masculine side, but also the reactive valorization of femininity. What is necessary is not to take sides but to remain focused on the dualistic structure itself. (9)

Here, Benjamin shows how even feminists who seek to criticize the model of “gender polarity” tend to recreate that polarity, rather than examining its very structure as part of the continuing inequality between the sexes. Benjamin also notes that to “persevere” in retelling “Freud’s story of domination,” we must “preserv[e] its complexity and ambiguity.” We must, she suggests, keep Keats’ negative capability in mind, making an “effort to understand the contradictions of fact and reason without any irritable reaching after one side at the expense of another” (10).

I believe that poetry can ask readers to dwell in contradiction by taking both sides of a given binary relationship into account simultaneously. To see two sides of a dualistic structure—to avoid privileging “one side over another” as Benjamin puts it—is to circumvent the either/or structure of binary and in this way is ecopoetic, focused more on a systemic vision of the world than on a split one. This integration might be one way of conceptualizing Gilcrest’s “revolution in human psychology”: to shift our attitudes towards the earth, we would have to conceive of ourselves as existing in tandem with the physical world rather than as hierarchically elevated above it.

Many critics and thinkers have written about the need for human beings to dissolve the traditional culture/nature polarity by rethinking our tendency to view nature as object and human as subject that perceives nature. As Marcella Durand delineates in her essay “The Ecology of Poetry,” “Traditional nature poetry, à la the human-subject meditating upon a natural object-landscape-animal that is supposed to function as a kind of doorway into meaning of the human subject’s life, is simply no longer possible” (116). Durand seems to react explicitly against nineteenth-century expressive ideals, ideals that Lisa Robertson characterizes in “How Pastoral: A Manifesto”: “Appearing to serve a personally expressive function, the vocabulary of nature screens a symbolic appropriation of the Land” (23). As both Durand and Robertson reveal, the psychology of nature poetry has traditionally been invested in the binary structure of subject and object, wherein human subjects perceive inert natural objects, thus elevating the human over the natural.

I will give a brief historical overview of some thinkers who define the expressive poetics to which Durand and Robertson allude. M.H. Abrams identifies William Wordsworth’s preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* as the defining point for criticism he categorizes under “Expressive Theories.” For Abrams, these theories originate in Romanticism. Wordsworth claims in his preface that “all poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which are then “modified and directed by our thoughts” (651). John Stuart Mill writes around the same time in “What is Poetry?” that the poet writes about things “as they appear, not as they *are*” (207). Both Wordsworth and Mill identify the largely subjective process through which the poet perceives and subsequently poetically alters her surroundings. For Abrams, expressive critics focus on poets’ modifications of the world upon which they turn their feelings, creating “a parallel alignment from work to poet. Poetry is the overflow, utterance, or projection of the

thought and feeling of the poet; or else...poetry is defined in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet” (21-22). The processes that Wordsworth, Mill, and Abrams all identify may or may not originate in Romanticism—surely earlier poets also interpreted the world in the image of their feelings—but these thinkers nevertheless provide useful means of showing how the human subject’s emotions are projected onto the natural landscape, thus re-making the physical world in the lyric speaker’s image.

In the late nineteenth century, the painter John Ruskin characterizes this process of human projection as the “pathetic fallacy”: “All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the ‘Pathetic Fallacy’” (204). Ruskin writes at length of how “violent feelings” cause the attribution of human qualities to inanimate things or animals, thus bringing us back to the question of how to enact a revolution of human psychology that might change the terms of the subject/object divide. How might nature become subject, rather than the fertile poetic ground that has, in traditional nature poetry, been objectified through the lens of personification? Durand suggests the following model of poetry that deconstructs the hierarchy of human over natural:

Ecological poetry...like ecological living...recycles materials, functions with an intense awareness of space, seeks an equality of value between all living and unliving things, explores multiple perspectives as an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms of mono-perception, consumption and hierarchy, and utilizes powers of concentration to increase lucidity and attain a more transparent, less anthropocentric mode of existence. (118)

In order to find this “equality of value between living and unliving things,” Durand suggests that poets animate the inanimate by engaging the French poet Francis Ponge’s “revolutionary idea of concentrating intensely upon *things* as *things*,” thus “yield[ing] some extraordinarily lucid writing” (118, 116). This model, however, maintains the split between the things that surround us, the “unliving things,” and the live human subject, reinscribing the idea that humans are responsible for bringing our inanimate surroundings to life. How, then, might we change this fundamental orientation towards the natural world as *object* and instead enact the equality Durand suggests?

In his book *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, eco-phenomenologist David Abram offers several useful alternative models for transforming this seemingly intransigent divide. Abram traces our separation from the landscape to a separation from “creaturely sensations” and “the participatory life of our senses,” and suggests a primarily psychoanalytic rationale for this separation. Abram writes that the vulnerability of “bodied existence,” coupled with the threat of “overwhelming grief” if we pause to allow our “instinctive empathy for the land and its cascading losses,” cause us to “slip blissfully into machine-mediated scapes, offering ourselves up to any technology” (6-7). Abram’s psychological revolution thus hinges on a reengagement with the senses that requires us to admit our vulnerability in the face of nature and whatever emotions might arise in connecting to the physical world through the senses (6-7). Further, similar to Francis Ponge’s conception of things as things, Abram writes that we must attend to the “strangeness of things...allowing weather and moose and precipitous cliffs their own otherness” (9). Our engagement with the world of objects and nature for Abram, though, requires us to both see ourselves as part of nature and to recognize its otherness. Encounters between the human and the natural, or the things encountered in the physical world, are thus

relationships between subject and subject. Abram also rejects the notion of projection so central to the expressive theories discussed above.

In relating an anecdote about returning to his house after dropping his partner and newborn daughter off at the airport, Abram notes that the house seems “accusatory and dejected,” attitudes he connects to his daughter’s absence. Recalling that several friends called this experience of his domestic space “an imaginative distortion, a projection of my own interior mood” upon the house, Abram rejects this interpretation, saying that it “fails to account for what it is about certain objects that *calls forth* our imagination.” He continues:

[Projection] implies that the objects we perceive are purely passive phenomena, utterly neutral and inert, and so enables us to overlook the ways in which such objects actively affect the space around them—the way in which material objects are also bodies, influencing the other bodies within their ambit, and being influenced in return. (32)

The reciprocal relationship Abram experiences between objects and humans is at the heart of his study, in which he bases our concomitant relationship with the physical world entirely in the senses—“As soon as we acknowledge that our hands are included within the tactile world,” he writes, “we are forced to notice this reciprocity: whenever we touch any entity, we are also ourselves being touched *by* that entity...Such reciprocity is the very structure of perception” (58).<sup>1</sup> The rupture between the human body’s perceptual potential and the physical world can be

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<sup>1</sup> Other thinkers who write about our relationships to physical objects share Abram’s sense of reciprocity. As Susan Stewart points out in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, “Through work, play, sex, grooming, and other activities, we use our bodies to address the natural world with an ongoing mutuality” (18). She also quotes Antonio R. Damasio’s neurological research on “the body and emotion in the ‘making of consciousness’”: “Consciousness consists of constructing knowledge about two facts: that the organism is involved in relation to some object and that the object in the relation is causing a change in the organism” (qtd. in Stewart, 19). Both Stewart and Damasio thus concur with Abram’s sense of the mutuality the senses allow in encounters between the body and the physical world.

traced, according to Abram, to the child's experience of learning to speak, a process that creates a fissure between the "sensitive and sentient body" and the "speaking self."

Abram suggests that coming to language creates the illusion that "human persons alone are the carriers of consciousness in this world" (39). But language, the author also points out, is not only a human capacity. Even if the objects and animals in the physical world do not use words, language extends to the sounds of that world—bird song, wind, or the thumping of waves (11). Abram notes that we tend to conceptualize language as something we use to "provide a *representation* of the world," forgetting that language is primarily a tool we use to communicate with other humans, and also with the natural world. That communication, furthermore, is characterized by words, but also by tones and rhythms: "This tonal layer of meaning—the stratum of spontaneous, bodily expression that oral cultures steadily deploy, and that literate culture all too easily forgets—is the very dimension of language that we two-leggeds share in common with other animals" (11-12). Our language, Abram proposes, is comprised both of words that carry specific meanings, and of "spontaneous" sounds and "bodily expression" that connect us sonically to our environment.

Abram's view of the human as animal, informed by the sensory processes that comprise our reciprocal relation with the physical world we inhabit, is a useful starting point for thinking about poetry that explicitly or implicitly engages in sensory play and in complicating frequently reified definitions of human and animal as separate entities. In the second half of this introduction, I will look at the work of two female poets, Alice Notley and Bhanu Kapil, and how they create works that engage—and complicate—the ecopoetic ideas examined in this introduction. Notley's and Kapil's work can be seen as engaging the human body in differing and at times problematic ways with regard to sensory perception and our animal state.

One major limitation in Abram's work on reciprocity becomes clear when reading women's poetry such as Notley's feminist epic, *The Descent of Alette*. Reciprocity with the physical world, Notley's book suggests, requires that women and men first attain reciprocity with each other. Jessica Benjamin's work, as noted above, also makes clear that "the sexual split permeates our psychic, cultural, and social life" and must be attended to for any change to emerge. And Notley's work implies that a split between the human and the physical world accompanies the sexual split. As Alette asks at one point, "'Was' / 'the human psyche' 'made of women' 'turned to stone?'" (71). This question creates an explicit parallel between women and objects in nature that are typically considered inert, thus revealing a connection between the sexual split and the culture/nature split. Women and objects, Alette shows here, are aligned because both are made inanimate. Further, this question implies that the objectification of women is a *human* problem, not just a female problem, so that even the question's syntax reveals how the oppression of women permeates all human psyches. With this question, then, *The Descent of Alette* begins to take on the origins of the sexual split. As the book progresses, Alette's experience and narration—which together can be seen as a deployment of lyric within the epic form—seem to offer a recuperation of gender mutuality as a necessary precursor to both mutuality with the physical world and the destruction of patriarchal systems. That destruction, in Notley's work, is accomplished through the killing of the tyrant, a figure who represents all patriarchal structures. In fact, Alette's killing of the tyrant includes her partial transformation into an owl, a process I will discuss after looking at how the book imagines both a potentially tyrant-free world and a creation story chronicling the origins of the sexual split.



Early in the book, there are hints of how the world will be transformed after the tyrant is dead. The narrative describes two people “‘fucking’ ‘behind the stairs’ ... ‘The woman & man,’ ‘fucking’ ‘had grown wings’ ‘gray / feathered’ ... ‘There’s no place to’ ‘make love’ / ‘down here’ ‘in the subway’ ‘except near others’ / ‘near all the others’ ‘Like animals’ ‘elegant animals’ / ‘As in the days’ ‘When there were animals’ ‘animals in // ‘the world’ ‘Before the tyrant’ ‘became everything’ ‘before the tyrant’” (28). The time “before the tyrant” is defined here as a time “when there were animals” and the people who are “like animals,” having sex in the subway, literally transform into animals, specifically birds with feathered wings. The phrase “like animals” is notable here because it often carries a negative connotation. Notley, however, reclaims these words, following them immediately with the further defining statement “elegant animals.” To be animal, then, is desirable in this context. To be animal is to be unencumbered by patriarchal structures that differentiate and create a hierarchical relationship between the sexes.

Likewise, in a subsequent scene, Alette characterizes a subway car as “‘fetus-flesh-like,’” where “‘all was naked flesh’” and “‘we sat naked on our’ ‘membrane-like’ ‘tan benches’” (30). Of this experience, Alette says she understands that “‘Uncontrolled by’ ‘the tyrant’ ‘someone else’ / ‘in all of us’ ‘is this lovely’ ‘fetal flesh’” (30). This pre-nascent state disappears soon enough, however, and the subway car transforms back into an ordinary car full of clothed people. What we witness in these scenes is a world without the tyranny of the sexual split—without it, humans in a sense return to an embryonic state, a return that allows for mutuality. The “fetal flesh” is in “all of us,” but at these early points in the book, is inaccessible or accessible only momentarily.

On her subsequent journey to find and kill the tyrant, Alette encounters a headless woman: “‘our mother,’ ‘first woman’ ... ‘And then I heard a voice,’ ‘a woman’s voice,’ ‘a rich

changing voice—’ ‘capable of both’ ‘high and low tones...’” (89). Before Alette relates the actual words the woman speaks here, she hears the tonal qualities of the woman’s voice, emphasizing sound undifferentiated into words. These “tones” “‘issu[e] from the throat’ ‘of this headless’ ‘body,’” which goes on to tell Alette the story of “‘the real truth of us’”—presumably “us” indicates women here—and defines that truth as “‘my decapitation’” (90). The headless woman tells Alette that the world began with differentiation between species and that “‘the sexes came to be’ ‘in pleasure’... ‘there was much of’ ‘what you’d call’ ‘obscenity’...’Much orgasmic’ ‘sensation’” (91). Then, the first woman notes, ‘something happened to the male—’:

‘perhaps because he’ ‘didn’t give birth’ ‘He lost his’ ‘connection’ ‘to the beginning’...  
 ‘to freshness’ ‘to sensation’... ‘Became a fetishist,’ ‘A thinker’ ‘A war-maker’... ‘Made  
 me dance naked alone’ ‘before all men’... ‘Made lewdness’ ‘lose its’ ‘mutuality’... ‘I  
 danced’ ‘& I danced’ ‘Nothing’ ‘but sex’ ‘My head gradually’ ‘over ages’ ‘detached  
 from’ ‘my body’... ‘My body still danced then—’ ‘but my head’ ‘played audience’ ‘to  
 the achievements’ ‘of males’. (91)

Here, we can note that in this creation myth, woman becomes associated with body and sensation, while man loses his connection to that sensation, instead becoming “a fetishist” and “a thinker.” The physical embodiment of this state of affairs is that the first woman loses her head—representative of the ability to think, fetishize, and make war, as man does—and thus is associated with sexual objecthood and passivity. The detached female head, instead of representing thought or war making as man does, “play[s] audience” to man. Further, when woman is “made” to perform for men, the “mutuality” of sex is lost. Because woman becomes object and man is elevated above her as perceiving subject, reciprocity disappears. This hierarchical structure has obvious parallels with the subject/object dynamic, discussed above,

between the human and the objectified physical landscape. Notley examines the same subject/object relationship from a gendered point of view, with her “mutuality” echoing Abram’s “reciprocity.”

Notley’s epic goes on to suggest that mutuality between the sexes must be restored in close association with a process of recuperating the female body to a subject position. After relating the creation myth to Alette, the first woman sends Alette back to a prehistoric time where she merges with a woman who holds a baby, only to be overtaken by phantoms and to wake without the baby, at which point Alette returns to the meadow with the first woman. To assuage Alette’s grief after losing the baby, the first woman creates a new baby out of lights that emanate from her neck and places the baby in Alette’s arms: “‘the lights settled’ ‘in my arms&’ ‘made a shape of’ ‘a glowing baby’” (95). The tones that emanate from the first woman’s neck as Alette initially approaches her, coupled with the lights here, both reinforce the idea that woman is associated with a heightened facility for sensation, here the auditory and visual senses. The first woman, in fact, eventually creates a man with the “‘orange light’” emerging from her throat, and that man tells Alette he must father the baby, saying “‘something in me’ ‘is only pure’ ‘does not dominate’ ‘will not hurt anyone’” (97). Here, the word “pure” echoes the embryonic “fetal” state noted in the subway scene early in the book, while the man’s promise not to “dominate” suggests the first woman’s body may produce a baby out of a sense of mutuality between male and female.

Leaving Alette with his heart, the man disappears. The first woman then asks Alette to help her reattach her head to her body, but not without first suggesting that the two women sit “‘for a minute’ ‘enjoying this night’ / ‘before we change’ ‘Change forever’” (98). When Alette then assists the first woman in reattaching her head to her neck, the two women use the man’s

heart, “‘smear[ing] blood from’ ‘the heart’ ‘on the line of’ ‘separation’” between neck and head (98). This development implies that the baby the man wanted to father transmutes into the recuperation of the first woman’s body and thus her position as subject. As her head regains color and comes back to life, she tells Alette “‘My voice has not lost’ ‘its power.’” And as she speaks, each word she utters creates a new star (98, 99). The first woman, through a joint act of creation involving Alette and the man’s heart, reclaims her whole body and subsequently creates the physical world, in the form of stars, with her voice. In telling the story *with* her body, in using her body to create a male heart that plays a part in making the female body whole, the first woman’s body emerges out of objecthood. Further, her body—composed of both male and female elements—becomes a maker of stars, a significant contrast to the male “‘war-maker’” following the loss of mutuality between the sexes. In a sense, the lights that radiate from the first woman’s neck *before* her head is reattached to her body reemerge in her words, which then produce carriers of light in the physical world.

In this way, the female body achieves a new kind of reciprocity with the physical world *after* the sexual split has been resolved. This reciprocity is distinguished from the women turned to stone earlier in the narrative: reciprocity is now characterized by creative, animate potential, rather than inertness. The capacity to create, furthermore, extends beyond the ability to bear children. Woman also bears the physical world. For Alette, this new reciprocity with the physical world carries forward to her transformation into an owl, a process that provides a complex vision of the relationship between the human and the physical world. Alette first encounters an owl with a man’s voice that she recognizes as her father’s voice. The owl tells her he does not remember who he was before he was an owl, just that his “‘spirit was released’ ‘& grew feathers’ ... ‘an ecstasy’ ‘of finding’ ‘another way’ / ‘of being’ ... ‘before I was’ ‘an owl’ ‘Such pain to *think*’ //

‘continually’... ‘It was too thoughtful / to be a man.’” He goes on to say that as an owl he sees, hears, and flies, but does not “‘remember’ ‘the past much’ ‘or foresee’ ‘the future’” (102). In other words, the owl characterizes his male experience as dominated by thinking—a process so relentlessly associated with human consciousness. His experience as a “thoughtful” man stands in stark contrast to his owl experience, dominated by sensory perception and the ability to dwell in the present moment. This creature does, however, speak with words and makes a first person account, even while in the body of a non-human species. Notley, it seems, has created a sort of hybrid creature that uses language like a human, but achieves Abram’s sense of animality through experience centered in sensory perception. By giving the owl a voice, Notley creates the possibility of language-based communication between the human and the animal.

Furthermore, because Alette recognizes the owl’s voice as the voice of her father, her transformation into an owl creates a sense of lineage where she is re-born from her own father, who both physically embodies reciprocity between the human and animal, and explicitly voices his own transformation from an identity born out of the sexual split to one informed by mutuality with the animal. This owl father figure facilitates Alette’s own transformation into an owl. During her transformation, Alette oscillates between feeling her body being eaten by the owl and feeling that she floats above her human body, watching “‘a woman pecked at by an owl.’” While she experiences this split, Alette feels overwhelmed by the noises of eating that “‘fill [her] senses,’” until finally she “‘coalesc[es]’” and falls unconscious (108). Alette’s new form is characterized, like her owl father’s form, by sensory perception; she first notes that she consists of “‘pure light’” and she then “‘shiver[s]’ ‘with pleasure’ ‘to be entrapped’ ‘by flesh’ ‘My senses’ ‘were // delectable’” (113). Her experience of being surrounded by and made of flesh harkens back to the fetal flesh of the subway car and its inhabitants early in the book. Alette

seems to transform bodily into the fleshy form that characterizes the world before the tyrant, thus embodying the world she wants to create.

After her metamorphosis—Alette now has a hidden beak and a talon—her owl father says the following to her: “‘Your // weapons’ ‘are moral’ ‘They were given you’ ‘by an animal’ / ‘Manufactured’ ‘by nature,’ ‘were made by nature’ ‘Not by’ / ‘the human mind’ ‘Not a rational’ ‘device’ ... ‘You are now part owl’ ... ‘think like me’ ... ‘Not like’ ‘a human woman’ ‘but like an owl’” (115). There are several seemingly contradictory implications in these words. First, the owl father, even as human language and an owl body coexist in his being, implies that because Alette’s weapons are moral and come from nature, nature is moral and, in contrast, humanity is immoral. In addition, in telling Alette that these weapons were *not* made by “the human mind” and that she should think not like a human woman, but like an owl, her owl father recreates not only the nature/culture divide, but also, seemingly, the sexual split. Even while telling Alette that she is “part owl”—and if Alette is only “part owl,” presumably she is also part human—her owl father denounces the human. The connotations of the word “manufacture,” furthermore, are often grounded firmly in human industrial production, yet here the owl uses “manufacture” in reference to nature. At first, these contradictions seem problematic. I wonder, however, if we think in the terms of the book’s own mythology, wherein human woman is headless and objectified while the male mind makes war and fetishizes woman, we might read Alette’s owl father as wanting for her to be separate from *that* form of humanity. He seeks a separation from the thinking mind and the objectified female, specifically, while suggesting a sort of hybrid animal-human form. Alette is, after all, still part human, so with the beak and talon she gains, she becomes an amalgam of the human and the animal.

Alette, like her father owl, still narrates in words even while she is part owl. Further, she narrates both from within and outside of her owl self while she pursues the tyrant: “‘I had no mind now’ ‘but flew and looked’... ‘Beneath a lightbulb’ ‘I saw myself’ / ‘on the surface’ ‘of the river:’ ‘unnuanced owl eyes’ ‘amid feathers’” (138). These lines privilege sight over thought: Alette sees and looks under a lightbulb. Indeed, what she sees are her “owl eyes” beneath the distinctly human lightbulb, an image that emphasizes hybridity between the animal and the human. Words, which for Abram represent the splitting off of the sentient from the speaking self, here help Alette to describe her sentient experience of having no mind. She uses words to narrate this hybrid experience of watching her owl self fly along the river. When Alette finally kills the tyrant, she does so both as a woman and as an owl. She chases the tyrant to a grotto, where she discovers that the grotto walls are not “vital” to the tyrant’s survival, but that a bush he reclines next to is:

‘I understood’ ‘what to do now’ ‘& searched myself’ // ‘for a cruelty’ ‘& temporary’  
 ‘heartlessness’ ‘I didn’t know of’ / ‘in myself:’ ‘my owl self’ ‘had to do this’ ‘But I  
 thought’ ‘my / woman’s body’ ‘had factually’ ‘to do this’ ‘I closed my eyes,’ / ‘saw the  
 winged’ ‘shadow shape of’ ‘my owl’ ‘I seemed to empty’ ‘I // extended’ ‘my arms in  
 front of me’ ‘Grasped the bush’ ‘in my hands’ // ‘& yanked it out of’ ‘the ground’ ‘Pulled  
 it up by’ ‘the roots’... ‘I dropped’ ‘the bush / suddenly’ ‘Rose, rushed up’ ‘in weightless  
 smallness’ ‘Hovered wide- / winged,’ ‘an owl again’ “Then settled on the floor’ ‘& with  
 my talon’ / ‘dug into it,’ ‘the fleshy floor’ ‘I gouged out the’ ‘stubborn / last root’ ‘Blood  
 spurted up’ ‘in a small jet’ ‘Then I changed back’ / ‘into a woman,’ ‘sat breathless’ ‘&  
 blood spattered’... (143)

Destroying the bush that represents the tyrant's vitality requires Alette to take the form of both a woman and an owl, and when she distinguishes between her owl "self" and her woman's "body," she seems to further define the kind of hybrid creature she must embody to kill the tyrant. The self, traditionally associated with human consciousness, is here attributed to the owl, while the body is associated with the female. Alette thus reclaims the female body here, using her arms and hands to extract the bush from the ground, while using her owl's talon to dig up the "last root." Of note here, too, is the "fleshy floor" out of which Alette must extract the root. She describes the wall of the grotto, too, as "the flesh wall" (142). These fleshy structures recall the early subway car that appeared only momentarily. The last root, enclosed by flesh, seems to hold all of the old structures in place and serves as a corollary to the heart in the body. The tyrant is within these walls and beside the bush, but the flesh forms walls and floors intended to separate and protect him from the rest of the world. The bush, while unconnected to his body, nevertheless represents both his body and all of the structures, societal and social, associated with his existence.

When Alette kills the bush, then, she also kills the tyrant and the patriarchy he signifies. The physical split between the tyrant and the bush stands in contrast to Alette's dual human-owl figure. While Alette can embody both the human and the animal, the tyrant defines and is defined by structures that reinforce hierarchical binary relationships: the flesh walls represent separation rather than integration. Indeed, in the early subway scene, the subway car, benches, and humans riding the train are all made of the same fleshy substance. All forms are equal, in other words. For the tyrant, however, the flesh walls are what maintain his separation from and control over the hegemonic structures he represents. Because Alette kills the tyrant while in a



hybrid form, her own body serves as an initiation into a world characterized by mutuality and reciprocity, rather than hierarchy.

### Ecopoetics and Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal*

While Notley's epic follows Alette through a process of integrating what is separated—human and animal, man and woman—Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal* follows the story of a missionary, Reverend Joseph Singh, who in 1920 captured and began a process of trying to humanize two girls raised by wolves in the Bengal region of India (IX). Based on Singh's diary documenting his attempts to domesticate the girls, both of whom eventually died while in his orphanage, Kapil's book reveals the violence inflicted upon the girls as Singh attempted to make their bodies conform to human norms. Kapil's writing imagines the complex experience the girls must have gone through in transitioning from living as animals in the forest to being treated as if they should behave like socialized humans. As she writes while documenting the girls' attempts to escape from the orphanage, "The humanimal mode is one of pure anxiety attached to the presence of the body" (12). While the word "humanimal" surely describes the literal fact of two human girls living as wolves, the anxiety Kapil highlights in this example seems more to describe their experience once they arrive in the orphanage. In other words, if they experienced themselves as animals in their life with the wolves, the sudden expectation that they behave as if socialized and raised bodily as human—not to mention the violence done to their bodies in service of achieving "normalcy"—would certainly cause immense anxiety with regard to the body. The "humanimal mode," then, seems to indicate both the girls' dual status as humans raised by wolves and also the difficult situation they find themselves in once in the orphanage.

In this way, the writing is deeply empathic. Kapil imagines the girls being subjected to the expectations humans placed upon them and how deeply distressing that must have been for them. It is Kapil's empathy, in fact, that rescues the book from the dangers of speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. "To write this," Kapil states, "the memoir of your body, I slip my arms into the sleeves of your shirt. I slip my arms into yours, to become four-limbed" (15). These lines not only ground the "memoir" itself in the body, but the metaphors here begin by imagining the speaker's arms slipping into sleeves, and then into the actual arms of the wolf girls she addresses. These metaphors point to the construction of the book, and in turn, the construction of the body as these lines move progressively closer to the body, finally landing solidly in it. They imply that context constructs the body. While these girls are human like the author, their experience differentiates them from her; Kapil thus has to use her imaginative capacities to embody the wolf girls' experience.

In addition to the imaginative act of inhabiting the girls' bodies, the speaker explicitly addresses her role in appropriating the girls' voices in *Humanimal*, saying "I am speaking for you in January" (12). Lines like these reveal an author aware of the difficulty of her project, but unapologetic about her appropriation of the girl's experience for what she calls, in the subtitle of her book, "A project for future children." On the title page of the book's first section, Kapil later revises this phrase to "Blue Sky Fiction for a Future Child." These phrases imply both the author's awareness of her necessarily fictionalized version of the wolf girls' experience, and a sense that because this work is "for future children," it might serve a moral purpose. By bringing the wolf girls' hybrid experience into language, Kapil reveals the human need—a need seemingly not shared by the wolves that adopted two humans into their pack—to draw a strict

line between humans and animals. She shows, further, how the insistence on this boundary can result in violence as the reverend tries to make the girls more human.

Kapil's book contains two types of alternating sections. Lettered sections range from "A" to "O"; the alphabet stops progressing and stutters several times at "O." These sections contain embodiment and descriptions of the wolf girls' experiences. Numbered sections, on the other hand, narrate Kapil's time in India researching the girls' lives. Both lettered and numbered sections feature first person lyric speakers, but the numbered sections are always spoken by the "I" associated with the author, while the lettered sections are sometimes spoken in the voice of a wolf girl. In the lettered sections, this speaker often alludes to her mother: "Sticky then my mother licks me clean," "I want my mother. With one crack in the stuff of her she was gone," "When I wept, she licked me clean, wetting down my hair with her tongue" (22, 27, 34). As these excerpts show, the lettered sections often deal with sensory perception above all, and thus form the central part of the text Kapil characterizes as the "memoir of your body." These examples do emphasize sensory experiences, particularly the tactile relationship between the wolf girl and her wolf mother, and also the mother's death when Singh shot and killed her with "one crack in the stuff of her."

The contrast between the wolf mother's tenderness towards the speaker and the quick violence with which Singh kills the wolf reveals the consequences when humans assume a hierarchical position over animals, rather than imagining our relationship to animals as reciprocal. As Christine Hume writes of *Humanimal* in the *American Book Review*, "The book is not as much concerned with transmission of ideas as it is with the creation of an atmosphere where our automatic naturalization of sentience into sapience slows *down* or shuts off. [Kapil] does so by refusing to betray—that is, control—the senses" (5). Singh's violence towards the

wolves certainly does reveal the tendency Hume notes to discount our sensing, perceiving bodies in favor of our sapient, or human capabilities, which include the ability to dominate parts of the physical world through violence. The contrast between Singh's violence and the wolf mother's tenderness emphasizes the distinction between a striated vision of the human and the animal and one characterized by reciprocity. In these examples, even more than refusing to control the senses, Kapil represents the sensory experience of a human who considers a wolf her mother. She represents the physical interaction between the two species, giving voice and sentience to the world Singh shattered when he took the girls from the only mother they knew.

Further, the physical interaction Kapil emphasizes, as the six sections lettered "O" make clear, relates to the mouth. The stuttering repetition of the "O" shape mimics an open mouth, a shape the wolf girl speaker notes at one point when she says that someone caught her trying to escape and pulled her back by her hair "opening my mouth to an O" (13). This early reference to the girl's mouth ties her even more to her wolf mother, whose mouth, after all, is central in the above excerpts. An open mouth seems to represent vulnerability that the wolf mother, in the wolf girl's memories, assuages with soothing gestures using her own mouth. Additionally, in the second-to-last lettered section, the fifth "O" section, the speaker in the numbered sections refers to the wolf girl in third person as "she" and "her," while also using an "I" that can be read as both the wolf girl's voice and the authorial speaker identifying with the wolf girl's experience: "Fused forever with the trees of the perimeter, she can't. The branches fill her mouth with leaves. I can't breathe" (58). The authorial speaker here seems to empathize with the wolf girl in a slightly different way because we can read the "I" doubly. The authorial speaker's visual metaphor for the girl's suspension between human and animal states imagines the girl fused with the foliage that makes a perimeter between the forest and the human world. When branches fill

the girl's mouth, the wolf girl and the authorial speaker both experience the girl's lost breath—the authorial speaker also feels like a hybrid creature. She is “fused” with the wolf girl much like the wolf girl is fused with “the trees of the perimeter.” The authorial speaker experiences her visual metaphor with her own body—her own mouth, in fact. She experiences empathy through the body, an experience that correlates with the wolf mother's empathic gestures with her tongue.

In a sense, Kapil's “project for future children” is defined by the ability to experience bodily empathy, to imagine herself into the bodies and minds of the girls. Coupled with using the pronoun “I” to speak for the girls' experiences as she imagines them, Kapil makes an ecopoetic gesture by making herself humanimal. Against Reverend Singh's desire to make the girls conform to his vision of human behavior, Kapil accepts the girls for their hybridity by embodying their hybridity. In this way, her work achieves a mutuality between the human and physical worlds. In the moments when she takes on a humanimal “I,” Kapil's attention to the sensory experience of the wolf girls grounds her ecopoetry in the body as a means of representing empathy for those creatures—animal or human or hybrid—that humans experience as other. Remembering Abram's belief that we must tolerate the “strangeness of things...allowing weather and moose and precipitous cliffs their own otherness,” Kapil's book allows us an interesting corollary to his idea that we must both see ourselves as part of the physical world and recognize its otherness (9).

By merging her body and “I” with the wolf girls, Kapil seems to reveal the purpose of her “project for future children.” Her gestures towards inhabiting the wolf girls' experience provide a model to the reader of a writer who envisions herself as part of the larger physical and animal world. Kapil thus makes the wolf girls' otherness legible to those who might not be able to conceive of the girls outside of the “automatic naturalization of sentience into sapience” that

Christine Hume notes. In other words, the book shows its reader how to imagine and inhabit the body and mind of those outside of our own domesticated and culture-centric visions of the body and mind. Kapil undergoes a process as an author that allows her to avoid the automatic move towards domestication that Reverend Singh undertook. And the book emphasizes sensory perception as that physical, bodily experience that we share with animals. In recognizing this shared bodily experience, we might achieve a greater sense of reciprocity with the physical world on a larger, ecological scale. If we can find empathy through shared experience, perhaps through empathy we can also validate the sentience of the physical world's otherness.

What Kapil and Notley's books have in common is that both present lyric bodies and lyric voices as means of embodying the change the books seek. While *The Descent of Alette* is explicit about its epic hero's desire to change the world by dismantling patriarchy, Kapil presents her work as a more ambiguous "project for future children." Her reader must decide what exactly this project is and what change it seeks for future children. *This* reader believes that by presenting an autobiographical lyric speaker who embodies and speaks for the wolf girls, the author sets an example of how we might break down reified definitions of the human and the animal, and in so doing find empathy for those who look or act differently from ourselves. Both books present bodily transformations as a means of finding hybridity or becoming humanimal. In Kapil's work, the transformation of the wolf girls' bodies is literal because the girls lived as wolves in the forest and Reverend Singh attempts to change the more animalistic parts of their bodies, while Kapil's own transformation is imagined. Notley's epic, on the other hand, shows the lyric speaker's lyric body physically transforming into a hybrid creature in order to destroy those structures that stratify groups of people and separate people from the physical and animal worlds.

Both books suggest that to find the reciprocity with the physical world that Abram suggests, or to achieve the psychological revolution Gilcrest desires, we must make an imaginative leap that allows us to see *ourselves* as capable of transformation. Once we can imagine the experience of someone or something else—once we can feel empathy with the things and creatures of the world around us—then we can respect the otherness of the physical world. If we can both see ourselves as part of that world and see that world as part of ourselves, we might be able to create an ecological, reciprocal vision of nature and culture, of human and animal.

#### Ecopoetics in *Blue Machine*

In many ways, the theory of ecopoetics I have outlined above emerged out of the most recent poems in “Blue Machine,” which include the first poem in the dissertation, “I Tie Down my Fill, Close the Sky,” and the section entitled “The Haptic Cold.” I have always been interested in reciprocity between the human and the natural world, and in how language might be used to simultaneously show the natural world’s sentience and the human tendency to appropriate nature through processes including projection and personification. When I began writing the newest poems in this collection, I was in residence at the Vermont Studio Center, and I began to consciously shift my writing practice, which in turn changed my poems.

The most significant shift in my writing process involved writing on a giant scroll of paper intended for visual artists, rather than writing in a bound journal. I often had physical contact with my compositional materials—I knelt on the paper as I wrote—and thus my poems began to evince an increased attention to the body. In these poems, the body is everywhere and is

whole and fragmented, violated by the material world and in sync with the material world, and simultaneously connected to and estranged from nature. The speakers in these poems create explicit connections between the body and the natural world, as in the poem “The Simple Hill”: “You throw a rock out with your voice, / a pebble, a jagged fragment of slate.” So, too, in “Certain Allied Experiments” the speaker states, “I’m on a mountain, rocking in its side.” This dual state of being “on” and “in” enacts the sense of recognizing the natural world as fellow subject and sentient other that I referred to above. The “I” is both *on* and thus separate from the mountain and *in* the mountain—a part of nature—at the same time.

The poem “The Difference we Make in what we See” looks at what is felt and sensed (“crusted time felt with the body”) and what is thought (“if the mind doesn’t discern it, no need to believe”), privileging that place between emotion and reason that is what the body knows. The poem ends, “A pasture’s deep color proves immune to point of view”; here, the field’s color overwhelms the speaker’s cognitive apparatus, revealing both the confluence between the human capacity for sensory perception and the natural world and the natural world’s otherness. As I noted above in my analysis of Notley and Kapil, through a process of imagining ourselves as part of the physical world, we can begin to see the physical world as sentient and thus separate from ourselves. Sensory perception and the experience of living in a body teach us what we share with the physical world, and poetry makes primary that common ground.



## CHAPTER TWO

### BLUE MACHINE

## I TIE DOWN MY FILL, CLOSE THE SKY

When I went outside and spoke, metal  
was coming out of my skin.  
I spoke backwards and others  
rotated the phrases back for me.  
I called for comfort, asking  
for something pliable and holy.  
I'd sleep here in your crescent  
eye, the laughter phasing from your face.  
However strange we need to be to get there.  
The skin's scales speak of failure  
to do something. Easy to fail all day,  
then use the word to show  
a state of non-achievement  
and Mom gets worried about my self-esteem.  
I'm only drawing a shape, the way  
the dandelion seeds get blown up  
or out, crushed down but still taprooted,  
a center, an estimation of the present,  
what's swelling in the body this fine  
hot day, irises blooming, dogs cruising  
planets as they mash their bodies  
against each other, chin-quaking out  
of the understory. What's trying?  
Trying's what we cut through  
to get experience, the dogs horsing  
in the bush, the duck's sudden clang,  
or even thick leaves leaning up.  
I kneel like some other birth outside  
buildings. Purpose falls, too, via gravity's tool.  
I push wood from wood, study the spider  
davening in its casual sleep,  
its body a light switch turning off off off.

## BEING ONE

(A Practical Collaboration)

Pleasure is a page you  
feed through the phone;

is your hum,  
oval orange;

is a stutter; is the dots  
in the plastic that grab

onto your voice;  
is the S's ugly hiss.

(A Quasi-Historical Character)

The object of the object  
is to separate. Sight and  
sentiment as simultaneous,  
the thing beginning to split  
in three. Or the object of  
the object is to fix oneself  
to it, to paint shadow on it.

The smell of the house  
like the smell of a house.

The room and my clothes  
go on together without me.

The ceiling abuts,  
becoming remembered.

(A Pleasant Multitudinous Image)

You have a bone  
for an arm and

a bone for a mouth.  
I don't have

answers, just more water  
full of Strether.

(The Mercy of Chance)

The wall of her leaving,  
the wallowing sieving,

the surrealists wake up to  
a scene where she's lacking.

Her male surface, a slab  
without warming,

indelible, synthetic, disarming.

(The Moon Creeps Up)

The image is a train stop.  
Or the image is production.  
Your arm is a shelf

quartering the image,  
or the ocean's  
dump-branded water.

The ocean's name or  
the ocean's anonymous.

Your name an image you  
can't see, except through  
another's perception.



(I Savor the Sway of Formulas, the Reversal of Origins)

We become secretaries  
of the sun,  
washing its stains with bluing.

The sun is  
ephemera, the sun is  
redacting

items on  
a shelf where the moon sees fit  
to nest and

its white shine separates, in-  
tensifies,  
leaving a cool glow like chalk.

(The Dummy in the Bridge Game)

To work the hard edge  
of ash, we toe it.

This doesn't work, so  
we jump on that edge,

try to break it.  
This doesn't work

so we thread  
an inked needle

inside it. Little figures grow  
tall, and graft a rain of

lines onto the ash,  
a sooty text that sews

the figures' feet, grey  
shapes into their soles.

(The Theory of Description Matters Most)

The moon on the shelf  
is a square on bare brown

under the white skate  
blade hanging there.

The sun dirties  
white beach foam,

the mantis' green  
clinch, the cliffs'

grey cast. Sunken  
baubles live in sand,

in clam holes  
lined with spit.

(A Channel of Transmission, and a Medium of Reception)

Hair rips the forehead.  
Sun lines the head.

Being in the sun,  
he's worked by the sun,

eye singed, neck  
expunged. She

pushes the machine  
to make him. Memory

takes him around  
with it. Civilization's

between the knife-  
wielding sides,

beach plum blood  
on the lens' eye.

(The Grammatographer)

Down the page my  
gait looms.

Images of wheatheads,  
images of place that stop

up panic; in the car  
in the dark—light under

the cloud's creamy bulge.  
Liquid shows down.

But the sky's clean  
in and around it,

trees pencil  
marks against it.

(Everybody is a Real One for Me)

The dog is real to me  
in the cold Southern  
street. There's air in her

mouth and in mine.  
Standing, we see  
a stumble of leaves

dissolve to basic  
parts, and sky  
bow down to street

like a future pillared  
with salt, or whatever  
she's tuned to.

(Without-Which-Nothing)

You rise. I call. Your hands are  
a basket, mine a question  
tightly woven.

What I ask rises to  
pace me, painted with haze.

There's a photo of you with  
closed eyes, your hands in a tent;

what I feel when I look, is that  
the height of sense?

You're a place where  
I wasn't, you  
image in me.

(Who Endures Contradiction Without Shame)

This house isn't safe. The color green  
emotes in it. Spiders deck its sills. I find  
them dead and alive on the ivory side.

This house is safe. Placeholder in clay,  
bookend for silt. In the cracks of  
the palace, other accounts.

This house isn't safe. The window  
(box for removal to the museum)  
does a petrified bit between glass and mesh.

This house is safe. What I deny,  
I confirm. *This history is dual*;  
your here is hum in the receiver.



## NATURAL BRIDGE

## MIGHT BE ROUND BUT APPEARS SMOOTH

We have new neighbors. Bikes tilt under  
lean-to of darkness. Sounds  
bump out. I copy someone's disjointed beat.

I think he took his units, scrambled them  
on the mud-footed field, and one  
hook-shaped leaf after leaf, turning,  
failed to fix an other.

This is my dream of falling through black,  
the train now baying its entrance.  
This is what I mean. I mean what I mean.  
For she who takes up likeness

and throws it down, the screen whines  
open like a dog.

## ROOT

He, formed as if  
without anxiety,  
writes on a painting,  
clear-eyed, silty  
on the inside,  
with tangles of root  
stuck loosely in.

This form is his,  
stolen from a screen,  
painted on silk.

The pins I stick in  
come out the other side.  
I'm with you  
and the measurements  
arranging us. Worry,  
lemonade, and tree matter  
bullet the air all day.

## THE NATURAL WORLD

He drew dirty  
flowers, then clayey  
flowers. Then mint

against gray. Trees  
look like legs  
beneath low clouds.

Blooms implode  
up close, mucked  
with color.

Handles for the landscape:  
sea scraped  
of water, sketch with

hidden humans.  
All skeletons  
look alike—their walking

stick bones, their  
achromatized  
privacy.

## AT THE HOSPITAL

no knives, no  
mirrors. Prominent

men framing  
windows

aren't aluminum,  
are made of glass.

Inside prism windows,  
trees point

up, their roots  
sized to cut glass.

## WE DUG DIAMONDS

in the dirt behind the house.  
The myth was a map

a female pedestrian walked.  
We glued her voice

to our legs, took the dirt in.  
The everyday is the bottom

of my shoes, what I screw  
to the floorboards.

It's our bodies  
doing time for time

we couldn't become.

## SOCKET

Out of a ripped situation, we learned  
to boat. Tacked once the harbor  
in a wood-ribbed float  
then curved to port.

I remember twirling through air,  
a baton in pain, then an arm  
backed into its socket  
by a doctor.

Luxuriating in a structural schedule,  
I open my bones. I could  
go about it  
differently, but what good

is rattling in a basket?  
And is it waiting if you  
don't know after  
is what you'd want?

## LENS

Curvy branches set high.  
Leaves coin dirt dirt.

The dog's paws scatter  
the floor, stone trails

the river to my home.  
You're in that other state.

The river trains your feet  
to fish in flexible water

that falls on your material legs.  
When this happens, tell me

it happened—  
the sun made glass

a camera lens of this place.



## BRICK BIRDS

The sky cracks. We wake twice.  
Chicago, small in my dream,  
bricks birds around my neck.  
Our room whitens. The cracked sky  
drags its dark wake away.

You love the moon in sizes,  
on paper, in space.  
You amass a canon of moons.

I paint the mind to the landscape of the mind,  
but it won't stay, lodged to its palm.

## I'M IN THE OCEAN, OR WE'RE ALONE

Repetition smudges in.

The lake sets  
beneath a bird-  
turned sky. I balance

water, rock,  
flat-topped dirt,  
the bone I've become.

Back home, wind throws  
a tree on the van  
out front, air goes

glassy and sharp.  
I point to a building,  
hit brick. Consistent

animal, it's elemental,  
how we feel. Do you know  
you're a photograph,

mapped to a flash?

## DISPLACEMENT

In a car, in the salt  
flats of Utah, in us

I'm on my shoulder.  
Hope is a thing  
with force between us.

When you come home,  
wonder on your face,  
I, underwater, will.

I drift where  
your voice begins,  
miss the dream

between this and the last.  
What virulence imagines  
there in the thicket

that guards your face,  
that vacancy at the center  
of the face, the mouth, spills.

Enough to wake me up?

## GREEN VIEW

Here's your space: a floor, fixture,  
and broken window.

Snow may enter you  
slow beneath a sleeping dog.

Here's a shelf for approved  
films and music, and here,

a closet for undesirables.  
Here's a slab to slam for private lines,

a wall compressed by fist, and pasty  
love on art. There's a woman

crying over what a man writes  
of a woman, and here,

nettle wears that woman's body.

## RENEWED MUSIC

The brown owl pointed  
with his eye (my whole life  
I suspected talk) from  
that inscrutable spot.

## BEE BELIEF

A tree knifes  
the fire a regional  
cloud's black tatters

point to. The sky  
owns any homestead.

Each square shack's  
its storage cube.  
A red truck carries air

from cube sky to sky  
and I smear clay on

all the billboards  
standing around,  
working.

Do you see the foal  
in the clay pit pond,

the rust on my face?

RECEIVED

I read a leaky letter.

I saw both components  
of the twosome  
look out their picture—

window and mirror.  
The changed gaze  
when they found

themselves. Conversation  
got blowsy, the body  
in space backed

up on water, then  
installed itself there,  
reading sky

for self, a fiction  
best left undeclared.  
You know, the letter said,

how I get, licked shut.

## DREAM BANK

Fabric downs the light,  
blacks the weather,  
a flutter in sheets.

The dream says *work*.  
In the mouth of a man,

the dream says  
*set aside*.  
So I marry,

train the moon, wet the house  
with ground water.

Weather, time's setting.



## SEABOARD

Between thought and touch  
I watch.

I see you out of your house,  
the moon

thick as twice, quick as spring.  
At seaboard,

I marked love, but the vision  
went fungal.

A family watched, shocked—  
I didn't know *slip*,

let boats moor untongued.  
*If you*, then

*anyone*, you said.

## ONCE UPON ME

love's amnesia, sleep.

Thought's reliquary, repetition,

the ignorance I feel when  
I think I think for the first time.

## NATURAL BRIDGE

Dark boats the cove.

I away to it, eyes where we are.  
Trees aren't one, they depend.

We're the map's  
lines when we lack technologic.

\*

Then a tree flaps,  
a tree haloes the moon,

the moon blinks off.

Around here

there's the present,

and then  
there's anything else.

## SENSE-BLANK

I hold my father's mother's arm.  
We enter the ocean  
hand over wrist.

I worry she's alone.

\*

In the other dream, the one I would  
undream to make real,

I go to clouds  
in the classroom  
and gesture there for days.

\*

In a done time, sit sky along sky.

Air breeds ice.  
Sense blanks brain.

Walk away.

\*

If the notebook molds,  
will poems grow?

What if I rolled on my back like that?

## SOMNAMBULENT CRESCENDO

A crow's publicity reinstates the real.

I believe it, but where's electricity's

literal fizz? Is it, the world?

Your markings compose a cape,

divide your back;

into its hallway I move.

This painting goes all the way back.

## ACADEMIA

Driving the round road, I instruct myself.

Wooded fog, wild sheep, many moons  
exist, and there might not even be one.

\*

We talk as if floating over the sharp edges  
of a lovely, man-made canal,

as if we're pliable, or liable  
to stamp the exterior as skin:

we are fingers,  
we are bridged by bodies.

The buildings here are red  
and clap all over the horizon.

## POSTMODERNISM

The lawn's shade's a hot break  
when sun's incendiary.  
Or the dog's body in water—

I could say  
she's a lion cresting.  
But why, animal to animal?

The voice strings me through, cheats.  
Its eye just makes birds birds.  
Not meaningless,

the walk I take  
from library to car,  
crossing the city in lights to its line.

## TRANSPARENCY

Branches press flat on glass.  
Down the street, semaphores.

Heavy jugs of light  
judder at crossroads

close to elegant until a picture  
points them out.

All day I splinter leaves  
with my feet, conduct them

in, singed flags.  
I think I see you in the back window,

waving there, your show moving  
west then east.

The photos so dramaturgical.  
Torso turns to see

how great a distance I earned  
to make.



## TAXONOMIC

I saw the bird throat  
like a toad  
billow out; thought

to take a picture  
and send it.  
I swallowed the door

jamb's shine. The threshold  
breaks off as I use it.  
*The water has a breeze*

says the dog-eared lady  
who owns both.  
The ripples

sit down flat on the pond.

## WHICH MOUNTAIN

I don't recall but I climbed it, trailless,  
through unsyncopated pine

I saw the bird-centered photos and knew

one centered on photos  
would love the image of one  
gone off the natural world,

toppling rocks,  
spent from a world I loved.

\*

The industrial bird center brims  
with a wish for tipped imagefull

beaks in the darkest image where  
I won't go—distended bird parts

collecting air in talons and theres.

## SPLIT LIMIT

Didn't feel like  
going, so

I holed  
up here

alone, said *no*,  
listened

to the house  
divide the sound.

## THE HAPTIC COLD

## HOUSE HOME

If something outside the mind  
makes the mind—

I'd rather a ceiling wet with river,  
the elemental basement,  
cement's slick grit.

Up on the gusty terrace,  
experimental glass takes yellow

light down into  
its purple middle and  
fits it in cellar grey.

At the bottom stair,  
I play the alchemical fan

and its pedals  
wing the composite up.

## FORM

The wrinkling in my peripheral  
vision repeats. What's moving?

Not the building, its bodies.  
The river beside.

So close we're  
almost in it?

That'd be another state,  
limbs in liquid, rock-dented.

Crushed a dead moth with my sleeve.  
Anywhere I lean, wing.

## FIGURATIVE LOVE

The tent's a sheet with a man under it.  
An open-faced lover, vision's trick.  
The haptic cold.  
Go sick into it.  
What's the story?  
Solids pushing me hard,  
or my imagined hands  
pushing hard on solids?

Whichever sea we can set,  
an iced up crate of spray  
saved for later, skins  
shading away.  
I run these thoughts down  
like a list each night  
and in the morning  
they're still here.

## CERTAIN ALLIED EXPERIMENTS

To be very young and beached on a couch.  
Describe this feeling as rubber,  
warm to the touch,  
lodged in the chest.  
In a cabin in the mountains, see bluish fog  
or the rogue sky coming  
through cloud  
to dislodge stone habit. *To stand by*  
stood up against *surprise*—  
a valve that lets another consciousness arrive.  
For a figurine slung from the ceiling  
see a fat-bellied hen, see a flat fish,  
a glassed leaf, a blinking desert built,  
like tonight, out of lightning.  
I'm on a mountain, rocking in its side.



## DOCUMENTARIAN

A storm rolls color around  
the mountaintop, sky given over  
to the deeply hues.  
The river, stirred to sultry,  
carves the village up.

Night figures a doorjamb's red  
square. Light above cuts  
its stage into a scene.

So what?

I know looking and not  
pinning the view.

I've been hum-stuck, parallel  
to the woodwork,  
saying *um*.

How close to the body  
should you hold your hands  
when the view pulses, when with each  
beat you change  
what's in or in front of you?

## TRASHED OR TIED

Six white windows slit night  
open to its emptiness.

What do you read on its canvas?

What pulled you here  
(burnt air) cools  
itself in the river's basin,  
smudges sunup.

Someone's finger says  
of the local skyline  
*smoke there.*

Then fog dispenses with street.

Which would you prefer,  
the manhandled garden  
or the monstrous  
dandelion out of its head?

## THE COMPLETE POEMS

Give some back to the mapland.  
Material qualities, stammering  
repetition. More interested  
in atmosphere, leaf and cloud,  
than clock-like architecture's alarms.  
The speaking weed points to her heart splitting.  
Sure of himself, he's a stand of columns.  
Elements make them age.  
Attention may transform  
time = days = circles.  
The objects are lively, contrived—  
Stevens' bucks, Moore's catalogues.  
Pretty clattering of birds and wives.  
Fish finally uncomparing to flowers,  
the book's gold fertilizes corpses.  
By exporting the personal "we,"  
the moon could be removed.  
Why try seeing the sun "the other way around"?  
Thunder is a child,  
a manner of sealing out emotion, the fence is thinking.  
The bird, as if in control of the disembodied  
foot that dangles to its song,  
's a bird made from a human all the same.

after Elizabeth Bishop

## THE DIFFICULT RIGHTNESS

Out of riverbank, a blue pipe grows  
long, glares white, an artificial song.  
The wind runs by, taken up by river water light.

Like glue in air it glows.  
Some branches stretch over soil-stopped  
stems, their bright sundials spun up.

Before we stop, long thorax clapped to  
metal mesh, a painter's tight triangles  
diffuse under mask of blue.

One pulls the other. Cloudy color tugs  
and covers. So the ferns, bowed bridges,  
tip down to flesh our fossils' necks.

## THE DIFFERENCE WE MAKE IN WHAT WE SEE

1

So begins the night, combed back  
into the body, then braided over  
the body, it seals the drumbeats in.

2

I unfold fingers, bend knee, turn hip away from tree.  
Outside, dark bodies join their voices.  
We throb to be relieved.

3

A woman asks me, *is \_\_\_\_\_ a real word?*  
It is, but if the mind doesn't discern it,  
no need to believe.

4

Figures remembered at the table:  
one glazed eye, one neck tipped down,  
one tugging at salad with a tuning fork.

5

In this version of time, I hold a horse-hair  
bow, feel it hard with my hands.  
I would dream up the *where* but it's gone,  
only crusted time felt with the body just now.

6

We enter the museum of masks.  
The front advances, crossing plank.  
Our photos: gates we open backwards  
to draw the way the mind erases.

7

Do we have to go into the pantry face-first,  
traced with choc-thick milk, all night long  
in the house limned with click song?

8

Sometimes, August, we'd lie in the one  
air-conditioned room, stretched flat,  
the dead dropping heat.

Space-time parceled out, flower by gloved  
hand, house by sea.

9

Even the car's curve through corridor of pine.  
Even heedless hum can't break green brawn.

10

A pasture's deep color proves immune to point of view.

## VENUS TRANSIT

I heard the voice of reason  
swerve bone-ward as it mouthed  
the high hills of Art.  
I know both sides:  
the violence of artifact  
and the living tree,  
airy branches full of weeds.  
Once a sitting thing in a thing  
that stuck me back, I walk  
straight out in heavy rain,  
trying not to aim,  
his lungs gum-thick,  
each word towed out with a chain  
pulled simultaneously back.  
I make another motion,  
send a jagged gift.

Days are dams.  
Each week posts  
a sign above the water.  
This week: Goodbye.  
Last week: The Possible.  
I close the dam of The Possible,  
open the dam of Goodbye.  
Its aperture is a mouth  
pasted mostly shut.  
Through welding glass,  
see astral green.  
I look for freckle Venus.  
It's gone, or on the blurred brink of sun.

These days, dream is a terror  
unromantic to disclose.  
Take up its visions like fruit in arms.  
Forget them in the cold barrel of the sun.

## THE SIMPLE HILL

Black path, skinny statues. Each step up,  
you throw a rock out with your voice,  
a pebble, a jagged fragment of slate.

With each, you use your body  
to admit what's wrong.  
You describe the problem

as milestones, and your milestones breathe.

So you go north. You make your air different.  
And in that split you glimpse  
the simple hill, its retinal gleam.

You think to bounce your voice  
off the simple hill to see if the simple  
hill is a mirror or a box of breath.



## BLUE MACHINE

Shelves of cloud stacked down.  
Then the brighter break.  
The mountain's dirty load.

The building's touch gives the wind  
its pitch.

And experience?  
The critic sharp upon abstraction?  
Anything's that.

How C bends the hand  
or hisses out  
from teeth and tongue.

The soft craft of these heavy clouds  
is wet in the fist.

And the boat I'm watching rock across  
the range—a blue machine that breaks  
and opens, breaks and opens

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