

on the delicious pasticceria icing of the paving stones
is not

the seventeen year old staring at Rossetti's
loganberry compote of a dream of Dante and the corpse of Beatrice
remembering the final cold corner bust up by the bridge
by the Post Office where he stood for hours knowing
she would never feel the need to come back
not knowing that he would never speak to her again or know
her whereabouts or children or the moment of her death

is not
the boy visiting a grandfather
he hadn't seen so long he almost had begun
to think of him as dead and dreamed about it endlessly
after the rapidly-following death
the slow hand touching the bandaged throat, the querulous witty
voice

the dark conspiratorial spectacles, always
not dead after all but still with him, talking
is not

the boy who dreamt that all his classmates sat in darkness in
a circle and the circle was so large it seemed to contain
all the people of the multis at Trottick, all the people in Dundee
perhaps all the people in Scotland and in the centre was a figure,
cowled like a monk, rotating in the darkness with an index finger
pointing and revolving like a planet in an orrery
and when the figure pointed straight at him
woke up in the dark moon-streaked fourth-floor bedroom for the
first time

clearly alone

A SCIENCE OF BELONGING: POETRY AS ECOLOGY

John Burnside

A small fishing town on the east coast of Scotland: November, 2002, the first day of the (pagan) year. The night was stormy and this morning the wind is still high; lines of townsfolk have formed at the breakwater to watch the great waves smash against the wall, coming out from rooms haunted by television and muzak, bringing their children to see, bringing cameras and binoculars, a little awed, in spite of themselves, at this great spectacle of *the real*. I am taking my son on our usual walk to the lighthouse at the end of the quay, past the boats moored in the inner harbour, past the stacks of creels and old fish-crates on the dock, out to where the crab-boats come in, on finer days than this. My son is two years old and *here* is his favourite place: he likes to watch the gulls sail overhead and, in season, he tracks our summer visitors, swallows tracing the line of the breakwater at low tide, catching the flies that are drawn to the tumbles of weed on the shore, Arctic terns hovering over the shallow water, searching for food in the clear light they follow from pole to pole with the changing seasons. Most of all he likes to see the crabs, to exchange a few words with the 'crab-man' and loiter a while for the five-fathom scent of the creels and the massed colours of the catch, the black and orange bodies packed into old boxes dripping with hairweed and a greeny deepwater-light. This is what we know of life: sea birds, caught fish, the odd twenty-foot wave flaring against a wall, the dark scent of unknown waters—and, though sometimes we are embarrassed to say it, what we need to say, what we need to remember above and beyond all our other concerns is that this is the real world, this is our enduring mystery. Nothing virtual, nothing managed can replace it. We can tell ourselves other stories—history, politics, advertising, entertainment—but this is the basic ground of

despite the Atlantic storms. Not that farming was easy. In the isles of the North Atlantic the coming of spring was always uncertain. Summers were doubtful, and when Hekla erupted harvests failed for years, all the way from Iceland to the Hebrides. The warmth of the ocean that gave them their winter pastures, also brought the rain that washed their soils for twelve months in the year, rendering them even poorer in nutrients. The forests that once clad the hillsides soon vanished and with them the thin soils eroded to deserts of stone and gravel. For these farmers their endeavours, their 'registries of blood', as John Burnside eloquently writes, were 'abandoned to the depths, time without end, | with all they might have been, could they have stayed'.

A people whose population has so often risen, then plunged to the verge of extinction and back, does not readily disappear. These folk may at times have 'trailed out through the mist | to try their luck elsewhere', but they still survive. I find Burnside's poem intensely sympathetic as it conjures their hardness and tenacity to the land with their farms, perched between the mountains and the sea—an awe-inspiring model of human resourcefulness and courage in maintaining a light in the darkness of the boreal night.

STEINAR UNDIR STEINAHLLITHUM

Nature offers no home.

James P. Carse

Each day the evening was smaller;
and what they left behind, dimmed lamps and sheets,
figments of glass and tinder, what they used
to build these narrow houses on a marsh
they thought had reached a standstill, all the goods
and movables they prized were filmed with peat
for weeks, before they trailed out through the mist
to try their luck elsewhere.

They should have guessed
how earnestly the land conducts itself
and how it longs for stories to contain:
households and fiefdoms laid down in the dirt,

the thumbprint on a harness or a knife,
a cotton doll, a candy-coloured skirt,
gas-stoves and ledgers falling through the earth
as softly as a snowflake falls through light.

The flood they knew from reading in The Book
was sweet with God's intent, and crystal clear:
the quiet man, his face turned to the dark
above his head, his mind a sieve of doubt,
and how his neighbours wondered, when they caught
the smell of fresh-hewn wood, cedar or pine,
where, two by two, the creatures probed the air,
near panic, as they sensed the storm's descent.
The whole house slept on deck, beneath the moon,
the younger children leaning from the Ark
and peering down through fifty feet of rain
to where the grass had filmed with roe and spawn,
another Eden, undeserved, yet claimed
according to a stranger's covenant.

But this was something else: a slighter thing
and less precise: surrender to new mire,
a failure in the science of belonging,
an aberration, fading on the air.
No rainbow issued from the Father's hand,
only the small abandonment of fire
and something hidden, rot-cold in the land:
their loves and fears, their registries of blood,
abandoned to the depths, time without end,
with all they might have been, could they have stayed,
prosperous cities, scribbles in the mud,
unnumbered children, tarnish on a blade.

our being. 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists', says Wittgenstein and he adds, 'We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.'¹ It would be too simple to say that the work of science is to investigate how things are in the world, and the work of poetry is to remind us of this separate mystery—the fact of a world, the sense of wonder that anything exists at all—but it would not be entirely mistaken. At the same time, it would be absurd to suggest that the scientist is always a scientist, the poet always a poet: we all have to deal with the *how* and the *that*. Knowing the *how*, and celebrating the *that*, it seems to me, is the basis of meaningful dwelling: what interests me about ecology and poetry is that, together, they make up a science of belonging, a discipline by which we may both describe and celebrate the 'everything that is the case' of the world, and so become worthy participants in a natural history.

There is another way of understanding, or rather, failing to understand, our place in the cosmos. We call this method 'history', but it is a method that frequently loses its place in the book of life, a description of being that assigns far too great importance to human affairs. In its purest form, such a history might usefully contribute to our understanding, but our experience has shown that it is too malleable, too reductive, too innately humanistic in its approach. This is a history that repeats itself, something natural history never does; it even seems capable of coming to 'an end', as Francis Fukuyama and others have suggested. In other words, official history fails us as a discipline—or rather, it fails the wider community of life, what some philosophical ecologists refer to as 'the more than human'—by allowing itself to become reductive, almost behaviourist and, worst of all, superstitious in its description of the world. 'As a simplistic, linear, literal account of events and powers as unpredictable as parental anger,' says Paul Shepard, 'history is a juvenile idea'—and, like all juvenile ideas, official history lends itself to manipulation and misuse.² At present, the version of history we are encouraged to consume is one that suits big corporations and their employees in our state governments. It is a history of conflict and consumption, of production and power that denies us elements of our very nature, as human animals.

This version of history—told selectively and endorsed by the most suspect of interests—would have us believe that, even if the good were not always as good as they might have been, the bad were visibly so from a long way off. We forget the glamour of Nazism in its most public forms, the apparent vigour of Mussolini's fascists. Of course, this is part of the overall scheme: the powers that be would not want us to learn any but the most obvious lessons from history. So it is that the new fascists are difficult for the ordinary consumer to recognize, because the new fascism is different from the old fascism, just as the new issues are different from the old. The new fascism is corporate and wears a smily face, and because its public (Entertainment) wing has been careful to ensure that as many of us as possible have zero knowledge of our (natural) history—or indeed of our own local cultures, as opposed to that we've been sold by the snake-oil dealers in Tinseltown—it contrives to go about its ugly business, while enjoying the minimum possible disruption and the maximum possible profits. On the way, it has redefined what most people mean when they use the word 'science'.

It is not necessarily the work of the writer to point any of this out. Art is neither a political pursuit, nor a historical event, in the juvenile sense of the word. However, to live one's whole life in the pursuit of such a spiritually rewarding discipline as poetry, while failing to suggest some possible alternatives would seem, at best, ungrateful. Indeed, it would be impossible—for all good poetry is political to the extent that it insists upon the actual and so opposes those who would blind us to any telling of history other than their own. As a poet, I want to suggest the importance of those elements of life that have hitherto been considered minor, commonplace, even trivial. The beauty of the real, as opposed to the virtual. The starlit darkness of the actual night, the salt and physicality and achieved grace of real bodies, the pleasure of walking as opposed to driving. A view of identity that sets terrain and habitat before tribal allegiances, the integrity of place before the idea of nation or state, the pagan calendar before the atomic clock. A philosophy of dwelling that includes all things, living and non-living, and informed by the principle of *ahimsa*, of doing, if not no harm, then the absolute minimum of harm. At the beginning of a new century, I am interested in finding what Heidegger called a new way of thinking, and to propose that art contributes, in subtle but cumulative ways, to the examined life.

Is this too ambitious a project for a poet, given a small embattled readership and the hostility of a wider society hooked on three-minute diversions best suited to the proverbial and probably excessively maligned goldfish? Of course it is. The great thing about being an ecological poet is that one is utterly inconsequential and so entirely free to propose anything. Even the impossible.

That (official) science is on the side of the good has always been one of the tenets of our official, essentially positivist, history. That view is especially popular in the West, and in the USA in particular. It is in the interests of the corporations to propagate a fairly unquestioning view of (their version of) 'science' as good, beneficial, and life-enhancing, because it helps them sell products that might otherwise seem entirely suspect to us. Like GM foods. Or ill-tested and carelessly manufactured vaccines. Or 'beauty products' that, without the veneer of 'scientific research', would be seen as so much obvious snake oil. Governments like science too, because they can shift the blame for their mistakes to other shoulders: 'It wasn't our fault, we just did what the experts told us to do.' Or they can cover up their failure to tackle root problems like poverty, exploitation, and environmental degradation with 'scientific' fixes and programmes, like mass inoculations or GM-tainted food aid. None of this is science, of course. It's business—which is why the new thinking must address the main social and political problem relating to science: that of its definition.

How to begin? One of the confusions surrounding science is its separation from other intellectual disciplines, the more readily to deify it. Yet at root, science and technology are, or should be, part of a wider intellectual enterprise. We see this immediately, when we examine the etymology: *technē*, Greek: skill, craft, art. It's an interesting idea, this view of technology as art or craft. It suggests something human and holistic, rather than the mechanical and reductionist: know-how, gumption, savvy, skill. The Latin word *scientia* suggests something similar: knowledge, yes, but the heuristic, questing, sometimes intuitive knowledge by which we come to an understanding of—and *with*—the world, and of our place in it. From the first, humans have used *scientia* and *technē* to navigate the world—not just in the fight for survival, but also in the quest for beauty and a sense of the authentic.

Of course, this is a writer's way of looking at things, a concern with language and concepts, rather than an appreciation of method or mathematics. Yet I think of my own work as a discipline as much akin to *scientia* as it is to rhapsody, because I consider it to be ecological in the broadest philosophical sense—in other words, I think of the discipline of poetry as a slow, lyrical, and fairly tentative attempt to understand and describe a meaningful way of dwelling in this extraordinary world.

This is not to say that I wish to nominate the brand of philosophical ecology I study as a science, in the usual sense of the word. I know it will never be accepted as such, because it will never make money for the corporations, or political capital for the men in Greyhall. But I would say that this discipline, this 'poetry as ecology' is, for me, a form of *scientia*, a technique for reclaiming the authentic, a method for reinstating the real, a politics of the actual. A poem (or drawing or song or dance movement) that reclaims membership of a wider, more-than-human world is as necessary an enterprise as any I can think of—and I have no doubt that we need this form of ecological *technē* as much as we need any other (which is not to dispute the value of any *technē* which adds to The Good, to the overall well-being of the wider, more-than-human world).

All of this is fairly obvious: there are times when stating the obvious seems necessary. It will also be obvious, and may also need stating that, while science at its best seeks to reduce our ignorance, it cannot—and should not seek to—eliminate mystery. The more we know, the more the mystery deepens. If poetry has a role in relation to science, it is to remind science of that universal truth. In this, it is also an essentially ecological discipline. It teaches us part of the duty of dwelling, it teaches us a necessary awe. This awe is central, is vitally necessary, to any description of the world. A description that lacks this awe is, in truth, a lie.

A digression: there is no such thing as Artificial Intelligence. We can make a machine clever, we cannot make it intelligent. Intelligence is wet, contingent, and grounded in a true awareness of others.

Towards the beginning of *Underworld*, Don DeLillo describes a group of student volunteers, working with an artist in a desert where the US tested its war planes and developed its nuclear arsenal, as

'burnt-out hackers looking for the unwired world'.³ Towards the end, in the very closing pages, DeLillo invokes 'things in the room, off-screen, unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood alive in the light, the thick lived tenor of things'—and it is here, at the close, that we understand, that everything falls into place, not just the aesthetic experience of a finely crafted novel, but a philosophy, a new way of thinking, a vision. DeLillo is, in my opinion, the finest and most troubling narrator of this new vision, but he is not alone. Many writers today—most, not surprisingly perhaps, in the United States, where the real, the unwired, the thick lived tenor of things is most threatened—feel the need to explore, and perhaps to reassert the authentic and the given in the face of a society whose main credo is that we can be or do or have whatever we want (that is, whatever the corporations tell us we want), if not in the actual, then in some virtual world. I honour these writers, and can think of no better way to demonstrate my regard than to try to learn from them. Their work is ecological, in the broadest sense, for they investigate the science of belonging, the science of dwelling. As an example, I shall cite another of these writers, the poet Mark Doty, writing in what is, for me, one of the key texts of this new century, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*:

That there can never be too much of reality; that the attempt to draw nearer to it—which will fail—will not fail entirely, as it will give us not the fact of lemons and oysters but this, which is its own fact, its own brave assay toward what is.

That description is an inexact, loving art, and a reflexive one; when we describe the world we come closer to saying what we are.⁴

Here Doty is considering a still life by Jan Davidsz de Heem, but he is also talking about all our descriptions, all our attempts to know ourselves and the world. What lies at the heart of this attempt, he says, echoing Gaston Bachelard, is *intimacy*. Poetry restores to our investigations the intimacy they lack, when we think in terms of subject, object; of self and other. We know ourselves by knowing the world: 'looking outward,' he says, 'we experience the one who does the seeing'.⁵ In our moments of intimacy we see that reality is continuous, seamless, and inclusive, and that the world is both given and imagined.

At some point in any consideration of any art, we come to the

question Tolstoy asked, the question of what is to be done. How do we oppose the degradation of our shared environment, the obscene power of the corporations, the cheapening of our shared experience? (My inner life may be rich, but how do I share it with my neighbour if all we have in common is bubblegum 'culture' and a rather desperate sense of irony?) It's a big question—too big for this essay—but I will make one small suggestion in the space that remains—a simple, banal, absurdly unambitious suggestion about walking. It is a suggestion about the role poetry can play in the way we experience the world, but it is not a matter for poets alone (as works of visual art by Hamish Fulton, say, or Richard Long, illustrate). What I want to suggest is that, on foot, we all become artists to the extent that, while walking, we have the potential to attune ourselves to 'the song of the earth'.⁶ What I would also suggest is that, on foot, we become ecologists because, walking, we have the potential to see the world as it is, not in virtual glimpses through a VCR or a car windscreen, but as the here and now, the immediate, the intimate ground of our being. (As the poet Jack Collom writes, 'The word ecology means literally "knowledge of the house". In the sense that our house is now the entire world, the study of ecology has come to be a comprehensive study of the relational'.⁷ How can we study the relations between things if we flash past them in motorized non-time, distracted by our mobile phone, our car radio, or cut off from the scent and sound and feel of them by a windscreen?)

If all of this sounds far too fanciful (or grandiose), that's fine: just stop reading here and go out for a walk. In fact, stop reading and go for a walk anyway. Why read about it, when you can do it?

South Africa: 1990. The pictures were seen all around the world: as he emerged from prison, Nelson Mandela left his car and began what would become famous as 'the long walk to freedom'. That he should choose to walk seemed not only politically astute, but also inspired—for is not a man walking, out in the open, vulnerable and free, the very model of human dignity? Actually, as Mandela himself notes, the walk was suggested by a television presenter:

There was little time for lengthy farewells. The plan was that Winnie and I would be driven in a car to the front gate of the prison . . . At a few minutes after three, I was telephoned by a well-known SABC presenter who

requested that I get out of the car a few hundred feet before the gate so that they could film me walking toward freedom. This seemed reasonable, and I agreed to do it . . . Shortly before four, we left in a small motorcade from the cottage. About a quarter of a mile in front of the gate, the car slowed to a stop and Winnie and I got out and began to walk toward the prison gate.⁸

Mandela may not have known it at the time—though one suspects he was more astute than he pretends here—but this image of a man walking from his prison would become iconic, just as, only a year before, the image of a protester in Tiananmen Square, opposing a tank with nothing but his body, would attain a mythic resonance for the politics of our time. For myself, the decisive image of my formative years was of a line of armed men advancing towards a group of students, not much older than myself, and being met with the same gentle resistance, the resistance of the human body, people standing or walking in an open space—in this case, carrying flowers, which were placed, with due tenderness and piety, in the barrels of the soldiers' guns. And today, now, even as I write, Palestinian boys resist the might of Israel's occupying forces, veritable Davids opposing the loathsome power of an arrogant, ruthless Goliath with nothing more than their tender, indispensable bodies.

Even if we set aside these extreme examples, however, I would maintain that the very fact of walking—or rather, of being a human body exposed, moving or standing in the open—is an essentially *ecological* act, part of the provisional and continuing science of belonging, an act that is both deeply significant, and desperately urgent, in an age when the destructiveness of the mounted, environmentally careless man-machine amalgam—the car, the truck, the tank, the tractor, the earth-mover—is emblematic of a whole society's disregard, not so much for 'Mother Earth' as for the future of its own children. In such a climate, walking takes us away from the machine and back to the world, and so to the real.

Two hundred years ago Coleridge wrote his 'Dejection: An Ode', an expression of the anomie that sent him out walking again, in search of that elusive true self, 'the natural man'. Here is his description of that disconnected quality:

There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,

And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But to be still and patient, all I can;
And haply by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural man—
This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.⁹

What Coleridge meant by the 'natural man' is, of course, open to discussion, and it must be seen in the context of his times. In a contemporary context, however, the idea of natural man (or woman) is well expressed by Harald Gaski:

Even though the Sami probably are one of the most modernised indigenous peoples in the world, their role as communicators between an ever more estranged 'Western' conception of Nature and the indigenous peoples' preferred holistic view expressing the statement that all creatures are fundamentally dependent on each other, is important and steadily growing. This is the time to utilise the benefits of belonging to the affluent countries of the world, and also to benefit from a modern education system that enables the Sami of today to assume the position of mediators: advocating the view of the 'natural man' to the international society of the UN and the IMF, and, at the same time, convincing the indigenous peoples about the importance of letting one's voice be heard by the international community. This is the test and the challenge of modern natural man, still hearing and obeying the heartbeats of the Earth itself, imparting its message through the most modern mediums to an increasing number of serious listeners.¹⁰

For a modern poet whose predicament is at least similar if not identical to the one Coleridge identifies in 'Dejection', poetry itself can be seen as a means—a discipline, a spiritual path, a political-ecological commitment—to wholeness and reconnection with the earth itself. For an ecologically-*mindful* poet, the task is one of reconnecting, of

rediscovering, as it were, one's own nature through connection with a wider reality, with the more-than-human. Following Gaski's logic, the works of indigenous artists become exemplary to those of us who struggle to find ways of reconnecting to the fundamental reality of the earth—and, to this end, we need to learn to appreciate the works of those 'modern natural' artists, such as Gaski's fellow Sami, Nils-Aslak Valkeapaa, who are rooted in an oral tradition and connected to a terrain and a way of life that respects 'the heartbeats of the Earth itself'. Reconnection is a continuous enterprise: just as Wordsworth and Coleridge learned from the life, work, and speech of 'the middle and lower classes of society' a language and a narrative with which to attempt 'a natural delineation of human passions, human characters and human incidents', so the modern poet, by experiencing the work of indigenous writers and thinkers, becomes the privileged apprentice to a way of thinking about the earth and other life forms that our corporatized society seems determined to eradicate.¹¹ By learning about the myths, cosmology, fairy tales, and folk wisdom of these peoples, we rediscover connections to our own (pagan, magical, myth-making) history, again, a history that the corporations want us to forget.

We are not confined, however, to studying the work of indigenous artists, if we would find models of ecologically sound poetry and prose. Given his concern with a restoration of the natural man, Coleridge's walks of 1802 and 1803 can be seen as having many parallels: Wordsworth, Clare, Dante, Mandelstam, Whitman, Thoreau to name but a few. Poets—especially lyric poets—have seen walking as a natural element in the composition process—poets who compose while walking will describe their method as working 'on the lips' (Mandelstam) or poetry of 'the way' (compare Machado's 'Yo voy sonando caminos'). These poets know that, when a person dies, his soul does not rise to heaven, but walks away in the sunshine, to become an other. One may compare Lorca's 'Despedida' ('Farewell'), from the 'Trasmundo' ('Afterlife') series in *Canciones* (1927):

Si muero,
dejad el balcón abierto.

El niño come naranjas.
(Desde mi balcón lo veo.)

El segador siega el trigo.
(Desde mi balcón lo siento.)

¡Si muero,
dejad el balcón abierto!¹²

If I die,
leave the balcony open.

The boy is eating oranges.
(From my balcony, I see him.)

The reaper is cutting the wheat.
(From my balcony, I hear him.)

If I die,
leave the balcony open!

Thus, while walking, or being out in the open, has a fundamental influence on the form and music of poetry, it is not merely a matter of compositional method that drives poets out into the open. It is both a recognition of the spiritual importance of connection with the earth and the political importance of *being* open, of being on foot. There is a difference between the way a person on foot—a *peon*, as it were—and a mounted or driven figure—the *caballero*—experiences the world. This is not only a difference in status, but also in connectedness, both to the earth and to duration. This has always been recognized in ritual and initiation: for example, maze and labyrinth symbols in places as far apart as Malta and the Arctic Circle suggest that walking a maze or labyrinth was an essential part of a young person's initiation, not so much into tribal or clan tradition, as to belonging in a world. The walked maze alters the walker's perception, not only of place, but also of time: it is a way of becoming rooted in a locus, a way of connecting with the genius of a place, but it is also a way of shrugging off the necessary human constructs relating to time—clock time, calendar time—in a recognition of the momentary and eternal nature of *durée*, of which Bergson writes in *Time and Free Will*. A walking human—or, for that matter, any human being standing in the open, exposed, aware, at risk, untrammelled—is able to attune him or herself to the rhythm of the earth, the feel of a place, the presence of other animals, the elements, sidereal time, the divine. To be

exposed in such a manner is, of course, dangerous—witness the myth of Euripides, who is supposed to have been killed by hunting dogs on a visit to Macedonia—but it is also essential to being human.

Paul Shepard makes an important distinction between the 'hunter-gatherer' mentality and that of the 'peasant', the peasant being the property-obsessed, resentful, nature-fearing human who is still the model for our society, in a consumer culture. I want to stress this: by peasant, Shepard means *us*, or at least the property-owning, hierarchical, monotheist traditions to which we belong. This peasant mind sees 'heaven' as otherworldly, a city in the sky, or in some abstract place—a city society is based on the placing of everything into an ownership context—land, spouse, children, ideas. The peasant also has a weak sense of himself, and of his place in the world:

Men may now be the possessors of the world's flimsiest identity structure, the products of a prolonged tinkering with ontogenesis—by Paleolithic standards, childish adults. Because of this arrested development, modern society continues to work, for it requires dependence. But the private cost is massive therapy, escapism, intoxicants, narcotics, fits of destruction and rage, enormous grief, subordination to hierarchies that exhibit this callow ineptitude at every level, and perhaps worst of all, a readiness to strike back at a natural world that we dimly perceive as having failed us. From this erosion of human nurturing comes the failure of the passages of the life cycle and the exhaustion of our ecological accords.¹³

The hunter-gatherer mind, on the other hand, cannot imagine land as property, and sees ownership as a provisional thing: food and other provisions are shared, not as a matter of ideology, but as a fact of life, a strategy for survival. For this reason, the demand for immediate satisfaction inherent in consumerism seems to the hunter-gatherer absurd. To the hunter-gatherer mind—and I am not necessarily referring to a traditional way of life here as a mind set—the terrain is real, it has its own identity and energy, it is a living thing. The song of the earth is not a metaphor, but an actual sound, one that can be listened to. I tried to explore this idea in the following poem, written in Finnmark, northern Norway, in May, 2002:

By Kautokeino

I walk in a shower of ice
on the *Finnmarksvidda*:
freezing rain, not snow; hard pearls of ice,
stinging my face and hands as I make my way
to the frozen lake.
No sign of life—just scats and moulted hair;
but something calls from far across the water,
some elemental, lost beneath the sky,
darker than flesh and blood when it calls again
then waits, as if it wanted me to answer
and snow begins to fall—huge, sudden flakes,
drifting between the birch trees, blurring the moss,
as if some festival had been resumed,
the ceremony of another season.
Down in the village
they're coming away from church:
mothers and fathers, grandchildren, second cousins,
the blue-eyed girl I saw on the road to Avze,
the man in the tourist cafe
with his perfect English.
New wives stand in their kitchens
preparing *bidos*,
a pair of ducks go walking on the pond,
crossing his garden, an old man stops to acknowledge
the heartbeat under his feet, and the veins of thaw
far on the *vidda*, a music he hears in his sleep
through the mumble of ageing.
Out in the snow
I am making a landmark of bones,
a ring of scat, an avenue of lichens.
They say, if you make your camp
at the Pikefossen,
the girl who drowned there centuries ago
will wake you in the small hours, as her screams
unravel from the slow roar of the waters;
but surely there are other sounds to hear,
the subtler frequencies of earth and sky,
dead generations buried in the sand,
feeding the ling, feeding the birch trees and willows,
reindeer and Arctic fox and unnumbered men

who made a living here with skill and patience,
 their works provisional, their dreams immense,
 their children raised in memory and song.

Down in the village
 they're drinking the sweet white coffee,
 talking or falling silent, reading the paper
 or fixing a broken sled
 in a cluttered yard.
 The blue-eyed girl I saw on the road to Avze
 is turning aside from her book
 to consider the future
 when something gives her pause—a cry, a rumour,
 the animal keening that hovers against the walls
 of a quiet house;

and, setting her homework aside,
 she stops to listen,
 alone in herself, and thinking in the lull
 of all her future lives: newlywed; old,
 or travelling on somewhere
 to a fresh beginning;
 abroad in the world and singing a favourite hymn,
 or here in the same bright house
 with her kinfolk around her.
 She turns to the open door, when a voice she loves
 calls from the other room, to say 'It's nothing'
 though nothing could explain the quiet song
 that bleeds through the net of the wind
 and the sound of water.
 Nothing explains the pull and lurch of the sky,
 how, sooner or later, each of us goes to answer;
 no logic stills the heartbeat in the earth:
 it never stops, it knits within the bone,
 a world around the world we understand
 waiting to be recovered and given names:
 this gravity, this lifeblood in the thaw,
 this salt of love, this mercury in absence.¹⁴

What I wanted to emphasize here was the sound of the Arctic north,
 and the deliberate, conscious work of attuning one's art to the song
 of the earth. To do this, it seems, the contemporary poet in a con-
 sumer culture needs to step outside that culture, to step away from

the narrowly human realm—as delimited by consumerist mores—
 and connect with something larger and wider, with the more-than-
 human. Part of this poem's work is to remind us that human beings
 belong to the earth in the most fundamental way. For example, gravi-
 ty is part of what makes us human, as we know from space travel
 research, which indicates that long periods in zero or low gravity
 conditions lead to disease, e.g. osteoporosis—and walking upon the
 earth is what we evolved to do. In his poem, 'Hamlet', Pasternak
 quotes the old Russian proverb 'to live is not as easy as crossing a
 field', but to live is, nevertheless, a journey, a journey ideally con-
 ducted for the most part on foot, a life long walk.¹⁵ On this walk, we
 encounter the others—the animals, the birds, plant life, the elements.
 As walkers, out in the open, we are capable of restoring our
 ecological accords.

But what does this have to do with changing the (human, social)
 world (and it is my purpose, as a descendant of Shelley, to contribute
 in some tiny way to changing that world)? Well, at the most basic
 level, to sing the praises of anything, even an act so mundane as
 walking, is to remind others of its value—and this, in itself, is a
 political act. *Walking* is a political act. If I walk to the beach, I do not
 drive there. At ground level, at walking pace, out in the open, I
 participate in the world as it is, in the real. I get warm, or wet. I smell
 the wind. I taste the starlight.

In this sense, walking proposes a new politics; more importantly, it
 reminds us, as we experience the ground level reality of being
 human, that the *caballeros* who run the corporations have become
 disconnected from the earth. We—and they—are indoors too often;
 our shared animal life is confined to pets and domestic creatures; we
 kill what we do not know and so cannot trust; we fear the earth and
 its creatures (or we despise them). At one level, ecological art is
 intended to address this problem, to restore that mystery, to put us
 back into the open, to make us both vulnerable and wondrous
 again—to reconnect us. Such a reconnection seems to me the basis of
 a new way of thinking, a way of thinking that, with a little luck, may
 give birth to a new science of belonging that, in turn, may change the
 way we dwell in and with the rest of the living world.

In this sense, walking is the basic discipline of science of belong-
 ing, for this is a science based almost entirely upon field work. On
 foot, we are able to imagine an accord between poetry and ecology, a

full-scale and rounded knowledge of what Gary Snyder calls the 'Earth House Hold'.¹⁶ To achieve such a rounded science, we must set aside some of the errors we have grown up with and embark upon a new way of thinking. Imagine the science (and the poetry) that might have grown up in a society that was not rooted in a hostility to, or a romanticization of, the natural world. Imagine a science that had no preconceived ideas about 'objectivity', a pagan science in which no crude 'order' was projected upon the world. Imagine the description of the world that might have been accomplished by a society where reverence for life *really did* lie at the core of its value system. Imagine where we might be now if, as scientists and artists, we refused to put our understanding and imagination to work for corporations, or empires, or salesmen. Imagine poetry as ecology, ecology as poetry. Imagine a science of belonging.

STEINAR UNDIR STEINAHLLITHUM

John Burnside

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

by R. M. M. Crawford

INTRODUCTION

Finding a human settlement, dead but not yet buried, is comparable to discovering an uninterred corpse. The photograph of one such rural Icelandic settlement which I gave to and discussed with John Burnside raises questions which his poem implicitly answers. How did it come to be here and how did it die? What drove people to settle this place and why did they trail 'out through the mist' to try their luck elsewhere? The abandoned farms of Iceland are but the tip of an historical iceberg. A mere thousand years separate these denuded soils and mire-filled basins from a land that once had forests to the water's edge. The bogs of the North Atlantic isles have within them endless 'households and fiefdoms laid down in the dirt', buried landscapes that testify to the hopes of Norse settlers that set out from their sheltered fjords over a thousand years ago, west over the ocean to wrest a living on oceanic islands from the Hebrides to Iceland. What did they seek? Was it green pastures, where spring came early and where in favoured places sheep and cattle could winter outdoors? Or was it the freedom of new lands, where pioneers could stake out holdings according to their needs? They all must have shared hopes of a better land as they migrated to the seemingly benign bays and dales of the Atlantic seaboard.

All were successful for a time, especially when herds of milking cattle could be over-wintered. Making cheese and butter doubled the energy and protein that meat alone provided from a single beast. Populations grew, and demanded meal which also could be grown, thanks to the hardy bere-barley that flourished on the hillsides