

The Observances

and

Observations of Walks by the Sea



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All that I present here for examination, new poems and a series of essays, is my own original work, undertaken for this degree. An earlier version of the seed-poem of the sequence Nereid with Seabird appeared under the title 'Girl Running Still' in my M.A. submission of 2006.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis presents in Part One forty-three new poems that exercise and foreground the visual, and in Part Two, a study of the determining work of the eye by three modern American poets recounting walks by the sea. Common to both parts are insights into the writer's absorption with her/his experience of place and the passing of time.

Because it daily changes state, the beach is to writers a location that heightens detachment and renders perceptions of the familiar doubtful. The extent to which vision dominates or yields to an underlying response to place, is considered in the Introduction and developed in Chapters One and Two, close readings of texts by A. R. Ammons and Elizabeth Bishop. The case studies trace poems' inception and process within the context of the poets' aesthetic and practical concerns. Chapter Three contrasts their modes of representing what is immediate or invisible by comparison with Jorie Graham, whose work is influenced by her predecessors' emphasis on attention and swerve to the metaphysical. These essays also reflect on criticism by scholars evaluating attempts to locate the lived experience, in work outside the 'confessional' mode. The Conclusion returns to questions of how a poem forms *alongside* day-to-day preoccupations.

Integral to the enquiry – and implicit in the work conducted in Part One – is the testing of when writing is 'real enough', neither too literal nor exalted. Comparisons are drawn between poets' linguistic range and pace in transcribing physical immediacy or imaginatively reconstructing environment, aiming to maintain a poem in flux in order to convey a sense of place through which the mind moves. Part Two observes instances of change in receptivity at the boundary of the visible world and, as must happen in practice-based research, the creative work goes hand in hand with the commentary.

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PART ONE

The Observances

NEW POEMS

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PART TWO

OBSERVATIONS OF WALKS
BY THE SEA

COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

Beyond the meditation place demands

In the essays that follow, I investigate the attention poets give to place and the importance they attach to describing what they see. Examining accounts of walks on the seashore by writers who are scrupulous observers, I consider the further challenge of visualising what is not apparent, and the distinction between a defining vision and freedom to envisage. How is the poet's perception coloured by memory or imagination? If looking is altered by a coming-into-play of other concerns, how is the reader led to discern that change?

In Part One, *The Observances*, I repeatedly encountered the problem of moving from vision to expression, as if translating out of one language into another. There is a path to take between literally rendering a location – by supplying facts – and representing place, such that the experience of travelling through is not confined to the poet's own, but open, permeable and fluid. Retracing events, mostly inconsequential and everyday, the mind's eye habitually reappraises places. It uses place to site the 'movie-in-the-brain' as Antonio Damasio, neuroscientist, calls the flicker of recall.¹ Environment, and the distance

¹ Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 124.

from, and physical proximity to, a setting where the mind was once absorbed, the eye trained, he explains, gives substance to a 'sense of the self in the act of knowing'. This act of knowing is enhanced by apperception, triggered by the spatial and acoustic character of place, quality of light, scents and atmosphere. Fresh sense-impressions are assimilated into existing experience, associations recovered from the memory. 'The time has come', wrote Charles Altieri in 1979, for poets to reverse the warning of Heraclitus that humans advance to become 'estranged from what is familiar' and 'to restore the familiar in its many modes of emerging [...] by reorienting modern consciousnesses to what men have rather than what men desire.'² *The Observances*, like familiar walks, return to sites along lines the eye recognises, where sight is loosely guiding, sometimes altered by resurfacing perceptions, new and old thoughts. Edward Casey proposes, in his history of the idea of place, that it is 'not entitative – as a foundation has to be – but eventmental, something in process, something unconfined to a thing'.³ Place exists, then, in relation to our perception of living and must be permanently in flux, as a physical but not finite container of events, the elastic location of their taking-place. 'It is the event of envelopment itself' (p. 339). I see a poem as the act of isolating and honouring small events and spots of time. To each its place, a place to happen and be shaped.

The poems are organised into four groups. In these I attempt to control and subvert a highly pictorial response to the world. My interest in the pictorial arises, I believe, out of my early education as both artist and art historian. The first group demonstrates stages in handing over from painted to worded images, time needed to recognise an aesthetic not ruled by the visual arts, although an awareness of the accretive and revisionary act of painting and making art never

² Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p. 49.

³ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 337.

goes away. The second group tackles the melodrama of the sea and heavy weather witnessed from a domestic point of view. Too charged and changeable to be called 'tableaux,' the views described provide thresholds between marine environments and interiors, where figures (actors) are minimally sketched and easily lost in the grander scale of the maritime scene. Following 'After Image', the 'Nereid' sequence deals in imaginative reconstruction or restoration, to countermand the stasis and disconnectedness of ruined art works and sites of antiquity. The final group loosens the grip of the eye, its insistent looking, and engages in less verifiable sensations. There are intuitions at work, sympathy rather than scrutiny applied to figures in a landscape, sensing underlying conditions on daily life. Rural or provincial, places here are foils to offset signs of life or reflect the passing of time. They are neither landscape nor nature poems. In contrast to the marine poems where the sea's behaviour is treated as if never before experienced, some ordinary encounters are framed as if they made more sense in the past than they do to twenty first century eyes.

Occasionally riddles arise when there is doubt about where in time the writing takes place: a time-gap appears between witnessing and interpreting: an enigmatic relationship to material which I can identify better in others' work than in my own, particularly in relation to talk-you-through-it poems. So I set out to create a shift in my work (from locating the intensely seen sculptural object to allowing a more exploratory response to surroundings) by reading and responding to poems that achieve that detachment and sense of emerging possibilities.

In the poems selected for study in Part Two, the first person 'I' appears as a powerful eye first, scout of the body and mind. I sought writers who, while recognising that they are ruled by the seeing eye, bring other kinds of knowledge to bear on its findings, things from beyond the original sighting, extending the time-frame and circumstances of paying attention. My enquiry centres on the busy

eye that doesn't keep still, as it artificially does in classical composition and perspective, and on the shifting role of an 'I' in poems that abound in observation. Together they stretch the limits of looking, beyond the stillness of meditation, in three fine poems set on the beach.

Topoi, settings out

Facing perpetual alteration to boundaries, formed and reformed by the tide, the beach offers not landscape – in the sense of man-made composition – but a prospect of the random, ephemeral and half-hidden as emblematic of the mind's preoccupations. In Antiquity *topoi* (literally places or landscapes) referred by extension to imagined places, where ideas and abstractions can be put and viewed, only later coming to denote positions and lines of argument. The high tide-line with its straggle of material is analogous to the borders I combed between philosophy of place, topo-analysis, environmental literature and the history of the walk-poem, poetry, prose and letters. The *topoi* (focus, verification and doubt in relation to place, person and preoccupation) are not treated in a linear way but as they recur in the course of close-readings.

A most useful guide was Roger Gilbert's *Walks in the World*, in which he reviews historical development of walk-poems after Emerson and links a poet's sense of his/her place in the world with ways of moving through and documenting it – a mobile and shifting relationship with place.⁴ He defines a walk poem as '*transcriptive* rather than descriptive' (his italics):

where *description* or writing *of* suggests the linguistic representation of something fixed and spatial, *transcription*, writing across or "taking down," implies the carrying into

⁴ Roger Gilbert, *Walks In The World, Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 8.

language of something fluid and temporal, as when one transcribes speech or music.

One suggested starting point was to research Gilbert's contention that the contemporary beach-walk poem, with its 'distinguished pedigree in American poetry' which 'reaches back to Whitman's "Sea-Drift" poems', has proliferated into a sub-genre (p. 283). British, Scottish, Welsh and Irish writers of island heritage also walk and reflect upon their coasts, but the origin and spread of the sub-genre is not my subject. Another route was flagged (away from landscape) towards a consideration of environmental writing, but ultimately what developed in this study is an investigation into writing in 'high-definition', probing poets' transcription of both minutiae and the world at its grandest, celestial, maritime. Faced with the immensity, alienation or simply distance inherent in such open locations, how does a writer modulate voice, pace and tone for recording place in broad gestures and fine detail while at the same time intimately involving the reader in making any discovery? Inevitably human scale and range is called into question.

Setting aside twenty contemporary or recent poems featuring Pacific, Caribbean, Atlantic, North Sea and Channel beaches, I opted to concentrate on aspects of focus, verification and doubt in two close readings and a comparison with a third poem. Open-form in the American tradition, written in the first person and fluctuating between narrative and lyric, they are, in chronological order, 'The Constant' by A. R. Ammons, written in the early 1960s, 'The End of March' by Elizabeth Bishop in 1974, and 'EUROPE (*Omaha Beach*, 2003)' by Jorie Graham, with its date- and site-specific title (her capitals, parentheses and italics).

These poets are conscientious – to the point of self-consciousness – about matching vocabulary to ocularity, the search activity of the eye. To what extent the matching, like handwriting, reveals identity, is a matter I also explore, detecting

both a readiness to become engrossed and a wary objectivity that keeps them at one remove, often sidelong, to their subjects. How the autobiographical 'I' is realised in the writing of sight – indeed how sight forges vision, amplifies voice – is the underlying concern. By aiming for material truth they register connections between mind, body and world: thus affirming 'being-in-place', Heidegger's term (Casey, p. 339). Graham speaks of 'the meditation | place demands', in earlier poems, many actually drafted on beaches, attuned to rhythms, ripple, swell, current, drag, rush – kinaesthetic means – to embody the sea's action and its impact on the senses. In her contemplation, Alice Oswald responds to the sea as theatre: 'I watch the weather make the sea my soul | which is a space performed on by a space': fusing internal and external regions.⁵ I recognize, when I describe its effect on 'sea-struck rooms' as aggressively external ('waves stomp and smack', 'sea shoots up') that there is a great distance to go, neither suited to a purely objective approach nor to letting the imagination run free, in pushing past the envelope of perception to receptivity.

In **When A Walk Is A Poem (reading 'The Constant')** I examine a writer's reluctance to do other than describe the world he observes, and what strategies he evolves for writing as if thinking aloud. In the central study, ***Many things about this place are dubious (reading 'The End of March')*** I chart a swing in Bishop's mind in action from inspection to introspection. In the course of the comparative chapter, ***Entanglement. Immediacy. Three Seers Faced with the Invisible***, I appraise the language of the three poets whose aesthetic discipline is attentiveness but whose mood, humour and imaginative responses to the world are differently channelled or suppressed. I introduce Graham's provoking new

⁵ Jorie Graham, 'Ebbtide', *Never* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), pp. 36-38, p. 38; Alice Oswald, 'Sea Sonnet', *The Thing in the Gap-stone Stile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 17.

possibilities for writing about perception in a form that addresses problems of simultaneity, world-view, belief, keeping science and history within its sights.

Throughout the study I puzzle over a key question: can you fix in words how you see the world? And why would you? Answer, perhaps, to affirm your ties to it, structuring your experience of the particular, which is essentially a phenomenological method. Even in the conclusion, *Let us go then, You and I*, the question remains open, despite my intention to celebrate the suitability of the walk as a format for a poem and the freedom and spatial qualities of open form. I am drawn to poetry that investigates the visual with one eye on the imagined or unrepresented. Not everything is self-evident, to be witnessed and interpreted. Something may emerge in one light but not another. An option to retrace rather than nail or fix the poem requires of writer and reader an openness of association with images and words, encouraged by informal, conversational telling, which is where the walk-poem scores. I recognise that the poem on the page is a confection, the facts of its genesis coloured and altered by the double act of looking again, looking at and for the words, before the writer puts everything into place.

to see with a reading eye and to read with a seeing eye

Bishop's interest in vision was enhanced by knowing about lenses, the projection of images, properties of light and colour through her study of optics (reading Newton) and extended by her use of optical instruments. Always to hand in her waterside apartments at Rio and Boston were binoculars for scanning the detail of shanty towns, passing ships and birds. Her long searches for the *mot juste* depend on both the long (distance) look and the long hard (magnifying) look. Sarah Riggs, in her stringent testing of Bishop's visual-verbal acuity ascribes her 'binocularity' to 'the effort to have poetry do two things at once, to see with a reading eye, and to

read with a seeing eye'.⁶ The good eye for detail cannot watch itself, except in a reflection, but its exercise can be keenly felt as part of the process of making material visible, mobile, live: the process called *poiesis*. What it sees must be reported, brought to the reader in a form of representation that can replay, back and forth, like the moving image. Does the eye serve the mind's eye, or vice versa, and what does the poet rely on in writing (and re-reading) the eye's work – the ocular and binocular account of a passage through place and time?

The three poems depict shoreline as no man's land, a region of re-configuring, the beach only temporarily available as land for human occupation, unreal territory which the tide reclaims. Although panoramic, even a practised eye cannot find much definition in it. Unable to rest on the sea as subject, it is likely to settle on a discovery on the shore, the *locus*, but the *focus* of attention tends to be an object surfacing within the walker's reach. I investigate the relationship between designation – making a find – and the doubt raised by description/decryption when the poet, who usually deals precisely in what s/he sees, does not necessarily know what it is s/he is looking at. Over pathless terrain, a walker has to watch her/his step. The head dips, the horizon alters. Mobile, it appears the world is various, 'more of it than we think'.⁷ By shifting, material that belongs in the present mingles with material from the past. The beach suits a re-thinking of our present condition and re-visiting past selves, perhaps partly because it brings back childhood and leisure pursuits. Memory meets eye and an exchange begins.

Factors common to the poems are firstly, ocular compulsion, secondly, adjustments and revisions to the speaker's sense of an audience, lastly, what happens between first impressions (which might have remained jottings, journal

⁶ Sarah Riggs, *Word Sightings: poetry and visual media in Stevens, Bishop and O'Hara* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 44.

⁷ Louis Mac Neice, 'Snow', *Selected Poems*, ed. by Michael Longley (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 23.

entry, letters) and publication, their progressive translation in other words, requiring deftness to keep rendering the everyday with immediacy. While I prize visual immediacy in poems I also prize the persistence of doubt, which may appear incompatible. This is the combination tested implicitly in the writing of *The Observances*, explicitly and specifically here, through reading. I explore poets' grip on events unfolding on the beach, itself a place of peculiar preoccupation with distance and distancing. Gilbert maintains that the achievement of a walk-poem is 'to put phenomena into words so directly and accurately that the words disappear, and the reader is *there*, on the street or in the field' (p. 265). I notice something else in the writers under discussion. Departing from the matter-of-fact manner in which they intended to record their walk, they alter their preoccupations in the space of the poem. Yet each recreates a sense of their original apprehension-in-motion so that the final draft still re-presents happening on a finding, discovery or recovery. I argue that the speakers (or thinkers-aloud) read themselves in the context of something much bigger than quotidian concerns, an external context on the grandest scale, commensurate with the coastal setting where sea, sky and land touch.

In this Introduction significant aspects of walk and beach are signposted. At the conclusion, I suggest how a record of a walk achieves lyricism. En route I consider place, person, preoccupation and the unfixed: I watch for these in play. How particular should the beach-walk poem be and how specific the poet, if s/he is also to engage the reader in the exercise and complete a poem, not a lap?

exercise (preamble to the close readings)

Let us look first at the bare bones of a walk, a digression from Ashbery's portrait of an anonymous friend in 'The Thief of Poetry' (61-68).⁸ He singles out 'the day you walked... | along the beach' and 'back | ... | in your tracks'. Yet since 'Now | no one remembers' he effectively gives 'you' blank spaces to colour in, supply your own beach, state of mind. Occasion and location exist skeletally but feel familiar, 'it seems', perhaps a glimpse of family history.

Now
 no one remembers
 the day you walked a certain distance

along the beach
 and then
 walked back

it seems
 in your tracks
 [...]

Ashbery's 'you' is whoever recognises the lone figure, possibly a child. You watch from 'a certain distance' and the beach is shorthand for the time-gap, an instance of place standing for the past. Although not described, it is 'walked' twice, so a reader must supply the detail, the kind of place a beach is, to offset the figure receding and doubling back. With great economy, Ashbery isolates an event in which we mentally invest, presumably from memory. Weather and atmosphere may come to mind, unevenness underfoot. What is it about i) walking or ii) the beach that gives us, readers and writers, such peculiar freedom of association?

For twenty years the seashore was my escape from a small family house. Because it was a dockyard city with navy and merchant marine, the sea repeatedly took men away, brought them home. I spent hours poking about at its edge, but memory does not serve up happy holidays, as it does for Philip Larkin: 'The

⁸ John Ashbery, *Houseboat Days* (1975, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 54-59, p. 56.

miniature gaiety of seashores. [...] all of it, still going on!' nor 'a vague romantic ecstasy' as for Christopher Reid's day tripper.⁹ My usual haunt, in all weathers, was the damp beach where I could mark time passing as the water dropped or rose, knowing it to be unstoppable. It is immensely suited to marking the passage of time in yearning, as in Robin Robertson's 'Donegal', a man letting his daughter go, and grieving, as in Jane Duran's return to the 'childhood memories I still enjoy visiting' of her mother, a dementia patient:

I go back so I can walk
past my own past into hers
though the tide will come in soon –
[‘Cape Porpoise, Maine,’ 13-15]

And here I detect the ambivalence of the castaway in the beach-walker, a need for separateness and for re-connection, varying in gestural effect from the solitary determination of Ashbery's figure, to the exuberance of Ellie Robertson running into the sea, the addictive collecting of W. S. Merwin's fisherman ['Surf-casting'], and Judith Wright's homesick search for a gift on 'The Beach at Hokitika':

I am a one-day stranger here,

not knowing even the gull's language.
I hawk their beach too, looking for momentos
(as the souvenir shops wisely spell it).

Evidently, we have an expectation that the beach will offer up something of great value for free which impels us to keep looking. On hearing that my research was into beach walk poems, Kathleen Jamie promptly directed me to George Mackay Brown's song of the seen-it-all 'Beachcomber' in contrast to the opportunistic scavengers in her poem 'The Beach': 'What a species – still working the long curved bay, | [...] still hankering for a changed life.'¹⁰

⁹ Philip Larkin, 'To The Sea' (1969), *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 121-122; Christopher Reid, 'The Sea', *Katerina Brac* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 34.

¹⁰ Robin Robertson, *Swithering* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 77; Jane Duran, *Coastal* (London: Enitharmon, 2005), p. 13; W. S. Merwin, *Migration* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005) p. 194; Judith Wright, 'Four Poems from New Zealand', part IV, 1985, *Collected Poems*, (Manchester:

Why the walk?

What is a walk? Ammons calls it the shortest journey in his lecture ‘A Poem Is A Walk.’¹¹ It is transit and transition: probably the simplest way and most familiar means by which we pass through space, taking our time. Being self-generated, if we can repeat it, it may become a ritual. ‘To allow oneself to be swallowed again, repossessed’ writes John Montague seeking solace in the view, smell and mess of washed-up seaweed in ‘The Hag’s Cove’, ‘I made my way there, daily, | a sort of dark pilgrimage.’¹² For most of our lives, walking comes naturally (although cars alter our inherent capacity to cover distance). We accept that, unlike many creatures, the head does not lead but arrives level with the forward stride, as first one, then the other hip and leg swings through space, to the two-step of the iambic footfall. The body is busy staying upright, resisting gravity, taking notice, testing the terrain as it re-adjusts and coordinates all parts in space. Eye, ear, skin, nose and foot assist the brain to judge and react to risks that lie ahead or are coming alongside.

Under the poet’s trained observance of conditions, truthful reporting on walking could entail a re-telling of momentary difficulties and uncertainties, halts and accelerations, producing an effect usually described as kinetic. For the reader the kinetic elicits a subconscious familiarity, a body-response whereby our sense of the ways a human body acts in space is activated. John Vernon insists we should:

look at language in poetry not as a static series of designations, but as a presence, a mystery, and as an act, the act of speech. Modern poetry has the objectification of language to struggle against, which makes it both more desperately kinetic on one hand, and more subject to fragmentation on the other. This is why most modern poems are lyrics: because a lyric is a brief

Carcenet, 1994), p. 218; George Mackay Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs* (London: Hogarth, 1971), p. 63; Kathleen Jamie, unpublished poem, 2008.

¹¹ A. R. Ammons, *Set in Motion: essays, interviews and dialogues*, ed. by Zofia Burr (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 12-20, (p. 16).

¹² John Montague, *Drunken Sailor* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2004) pp. 14-16, (p. 14).

epiphany, a fragment of consciousness, and yet at the same time, an act, a dance of words.¹³

Describing a walk, then, is one way to illustrate a change in consciousness about one's circumstances. It confirms a progression from one place – now in the past – to another, here, and forward to the future. At the same time it poses as a straightforward documentary, and indeed the poems I examine start from the ordinary. Gilbert suggests that while a walk can be transcribed it will retain only the interest of informal data collection or a journal entry, 'a disposable aesthetic experience' unless the writer is able, in Baudelaire's phrase, to "distill the eternal from the transitory" (p. 32). In the walk-poems under discussion, I examine the 'brief epiphany, a fragment of consciousness' that marks a distillation, a lyric moment that distinguishes this from an ordinary act. The walk in a walk poem is not purposeful, reaching B from A. It is diagrammatic of time and a realm for something to happen in. I hesitate to say that the sequence is straightforward. Although on the page a poem appears to have a logical sequence, line-shaped and sentence-based, it actually operates more haphazardly, words connecting by their roots and verbal patterns, both musical and graphic, and this can be happening even while it is being read as a piece of syntax. So while it reflects the behaviour of the travelling eye and mind, what happens is just beyond the control of the walker. The sudden now-ness that Baudelaire describes a painter realising at the edge of his vision and capturing: 'le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent' (the ephemeral, fugitive, contingent): is the stuff of the lyric poem.¹⁴

¹³ *Poetry and the Body* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 28-40, (p. 38).

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques et autres écrits sur l'art*, ed. by Julien Cain, (Paris: Hermann, 1968), p. 131.

On The Beach

Few places in the natural world have the qualities of flux and impermanence that Baudelaire sought for his rambler in the city, but the beach is one. In the absence of crowds or traffic, there is the constant sound of the sea meeting the shore, often at odds with the wind. There is a body of water, an enormous bulk, invisible as elephant or 'that colossal bosom', as Jamie has it, that in the course of six hours grows or diminishes in inverse proportion to the amount of land that is exposed. It is not land in the usual sense of fertile earth and yet it daily collects evidence of other lives, deaths and derelictions. As such it offers choices to the imagination as well as to the haptic collector of mementoes. The poet is less concerned with representing the sea than with what the sea brings to the land, which ranges along a spectrum of surreal connections, damage, drama, pathos, risk and threat, at a place between memory and desire. We accept its breakdown of order, and its fluctuation from wet to dry where wet is new, as at birth. Washed up, altered forms are to be expected. Amy Clampitt's 'Beach Glass' (1983), the fishing beaches Derek Walcott frequents in 'Midsummer' (1984), Derek Mahon's 'Apotheosis of Tins' (1995), Jen Hadfield's 'Daed-traa' (2008), the rockpool at 'the slack of the tide', all these have an element of degradation and danger in them which feeds the imagination.¹⁵

Given the haphazard and generous nature of the tide, the beach with its displaced and fragmented harvest seems to be archetypally the place for images to show up and be reclaimed. The shore is like a page with a few marks on it. My interest as a writer is in the manipulation of those ciphers: how slight a poet's initial outlay might be (like the example above, from Ashbery) to stimulate a

¹⁵ Amy Clampitt, *The Kingfisher* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 22-23; Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), pp. 469-510; Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1999), p. 69; Jen Hadfield, *Nigh-No-Place* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 35.

reader's re-investment. It is in reverie, Gaston Bachelard affirms that '[t]he image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own', naming the excitement of recognition as a 'resonance-reverberation doublet'.¹⁶ Gaining ownership is entirely creative, corroborating the power of one's own imagination, as if the image originated and coalesced from some depth, as indeed a wave does at sea. He attributes this recognition to the individual's *topophilia*, fascination from childhood with a certain configuration of place. We may also draw on collective or folk memories of the shore, for example, glimpses of the sea's violence and damage, of the beach as a site of war, as a starting point for a great journey, the edge of the measurable world, a naturally wiped *tabula rasa*, site of human solitude and alienation (think Crusoe, 'L'Etranger') and increasingly of the aftermath of environmental disasters. On an empty beach one could be looking at the edge or even the end of the world.

In the readings that follow, I observe how the beach works on the mind, what visual, imaginative and aural effects strike poets there, and how consciousness changes within the trajectory of the poem. The lack of achievable goal, the absence of an end-in-view, is mitigated by achieving a sense of immersion in the fluid process of the walk itself. Gilbert is right, I think, to suggest the walk poem has 'flux as its true subject' (p. 8) and I propose that of all possible settings, the beach offers the greatest range of analogies and emblems for flux, for uncertainty and rethinking.

I reflect on the raggedness of the open form to suit the shoreline itself and the divagations of a walker along the endlessly mutable sea edge or erratic high tide-line. I follow commentators who treat *process* as an active, reactive, and therefore contradiction-laden, experience that can be re-presented in writing. I will argue that what prevails is a reckoning with change in a place of perpetual shift.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, 1964, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), p. xxiii.

Since I have never found the beach easy to represent, precisely because of the challenge to harness the ephemeral in a balance with the age-old and infinite, I will be looking beyond the meditative and focussed frame of mind to identify distractions, other presences.

CHAPTER 1

When a Walk is a Poem (reading ‘The Constant’)

... do walks mean that we need structure – or, at an obsessive level, ritual in our lives?

‘A Poem Is A Walk’

Ammons the Observant

Tidal bays, shifting barrier islands and dunes keep back the Atlantic on the southern coast of New Jersey at Cape May County. This is the low-lying landscape that Archie Ammons walked in from 1952 to 1964, and records, almost obsessively, in three closely related collections, *Expressions of Sea Level* (1964), *Corsons Inlet* (1965) and *Northfield Poems* (1966).

Ammons spent a decade developing an idiom for writing the natural world, and in this chapter I consider ‘The Constant’, a walk-poem probably written weeks before his celebrated breakthrough poem, ‘Corsons Inlet’ in 1962, though published later, in *Northfield Poems*.¹ It revolves, quite literally, around a find made on the beach. At the visual centre of the poem is a form of devotion: an exercise in seeing, measuring, and leaving in its rightful place a shell filled with seawater.

I examine this poem because, while doing the essential job of a walk poem,

¹ *Northfield Poems* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 8-9, and in *Collected Poems 1951-1971* (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 144-145. Hereafter referred to as *Collected*. Line references are given after quotations. See poem in full, Appendix A.

relaying first observations, it becomes an observance by retracing the event in such detail that things seen or sensed in the natural world assume the greatest significance when fixed in words. How loyal is his text to observation and literal rendering, and how much is dramatised? The poet records his detachment from the phenomenon observed, but some element of ritual re-connection is enacted where, briefly at least, everything falls into place. Ammons's shift between active/passive engagement with the universe is the reader's too, by the end of line 30. The sense of reading an experience perceived in real time is convincing, as is the dilemma: what is material and what 'miracle'?

An Eye for the Particular examines Ammons's project to describe 'the principle that seemed to explain nature' (Emerson) in relation to what he knew of his environment as a walker with a keen eye while fighting a contrary urge to absent the 'I' of his first person narration, an odd strategy if he intends to connect with his reader.² Everything is built on visual data, testing what is permanent and what contingent in the natural scheme of things. I identify his need to illustrate ecology to the reader, while keeping us aware of the difficulties both of fixing the ephemeral truthfully and speaking thoughtfully of the universal. The emergence of a modern sensibility to the natural environment, which dispenses with landscape conventions, is not uniquely American nor late twentieth century but in U.S. post war poetry there are many innovators (not least Snyder, Merwin, Momaday) including Ammons. In the departure from celebrating human dominion, Jonathan Bate describes post-industrial environmental writing as eco-poetics, a term developed for Rousseau that can be applied to Ammons:

Reverie, solitude, walking: to turn these experiences into language is to be an eco-poet. Eco-poetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Circles', 1841, in *Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 225-238, (p. 228).

it, but an experiencing of it. By 'poetry' here I mean *poiesis*,
*making ...*³

Lawrence Buell (*The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 2005) avoids the historical backward look and argues for change in the way writers respond to place and natural detail, while Angus Fletcher (*A New Theory for American Poetry*, 2004), considers the extent to which poets feel a responsibility for transcribing environmental experience, drawing on the rhythms and events of the natural world. He asks whether poets who are attuned in this way can help make sense of our increasingly fractured diurnal experience. For years now, Ammons has been seen as a poet who does.

Among writers on eco-poetics, Guy Rotella (*Reading & Writing Nature*, 1991) defines various skills of responding to the environment in literature, foregrounding a commitment to amassing sensory experience through immersion. Reading philosophers of place, particularly Edward Casey (*Getting Back into Place*, 1993) and geographers and environmentalists who appraise the experience of place, I find an emphasis on the need to ground oneself in place, and a responsibility to record it actively, allowing for interaction and change, but not artificially causing it. In this, many contemporary travel writers concur, among them Robert Macfarlane (*The Wild Places*, 2007) and Kathleen Jamie, herself a poet, drawn to the far edge of landscape (*Findings*, 2004). They often cover remote areas on foot, as do naturalists, avoiding modern transport systems and schedules. The essayist, Annie Dillard, asked 'why I take walks' replies 'to keep an eye on things' for she maintains, like Thoreau: 'We are here to witness'. Central to our existence is an ongoing awareness of the natural world, which we must encounter

³ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 42.

day-by-day.⁴ Again, Ammons appeals to the eco-critics for the manner in which he bears witness.

I discovered the universe this morning looks at his balancing of the facts of existence on an ocean beach. With its tidal rhythms, non-human presences and traces of lost lives, it appeals to Ammons, opposed to neat summaries. As Bonnie Costello says: 'In giving the seashore a central role, he follows an American tradition of leveled, horizontal relations, of many as one, and of a permeable boundary between stability and chaos'.⁵ There follows a discussion of the poem's title in relation to the unstable setting, since '*the shore*, (Whitman's emblem for) *the state in which poets are made and unmade*, becomes the theater for [...] Ammons' poetic maturity' notes Harold Bloom.⁶ Possibly his most significant commentator, Bloom hailed him as heir to Emerson and Whitman, a connection Ammons fought shy of. He is chary of comment about his work generally but in 1967, soon after publishing the body of work in which 'The Constant' figures, gave an extraordinarily evasive lecture, *A Poem Is A Walk*, in which he gives his method as 'seeing one thing better by looking at something else' and reflects on tracing his 'verbal means to a non-verbal source'.⁷ In the closing section, *I was in no mood for wonder* where his declared 'mood' affects meaning or resolution, I conclude that his take-it-or-leave-it attitude, recreating in form and language his alternating briskness and ruminance, challenges the reader to pay more attention to things that go unsaid, and justifies the speaker's use of 'I'.

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Teaching A Stone to Talk; Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 72-73.

⁵ Bonnie Costello, 'A. R. Ammons: Pilgrim, Sage, Ordinary Man' in *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 143-172 (p. 162).

⁶ Harold Bloom, *A. R. Ammons*, (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 6. Hereafter referred to as ARA.

⁷ First published in *Epoch*, 18, Fall 1968, (114-119) and in *Set in Motion: essays, interviews and dialogues*, ed. by Burr, pp. 12-20, (p. 16 and p. 20).

An Eye for the Particular

A. R. Ammons (1926–2001) had a naturalist's eye, adept at identifying botanical species, birds, weather patterns, insect and marine life. He was, according to Phyllis Ammons, 'blessed with an extraordinary set of senses, probably nurtured by growing up in a natural environment,' adding, 'He did not use binoculars ... As John, our son, has said "he saw what nobody else saw".'⁸ Raised on a remote North Carolina farm, he was drafted to the Royal Naval Reserve for two years at sea (1944-46), before taking a degree in general science. 'After re-adjusting my vision to look for small things,' he told Nancy Kober, reflecting on the different topographies of New Jersey and North Carolina, 'I [...] became very much attached to the shore and land there.'⁹ In 1961, he gave up his job (ten years vice-president of a medical glassware company) when the award of a Bread Loaf Writers' Conference scholarship heralded a shift into full-time writing. For the next three years he worked at home, close to the creeks and tidal lakes near Ocean City, sometimes formulating shorter poems entirely *en plein air* and in his head, he recalls in his 1996 Paris Review interview.¹⁰ In these he records climate, terrain and native planting in piercingly fine detail. Although he writes in the first person, and has an open, honest manner, there is always a touch of guardedness, as if reluctant to voice certain responses, the reason for which I try to ascertain in my close-reading. Of the twenty beach walk poems by others I originally considered using for this commentary, his is the least personal, least apparently concerned with human relations. As such it stands at the other pole from Jorie Graham's work.

⁸ Mrs Ammons, in private correspondence, February 2011.

⁹ Nancy Kober, 'Poetry Is A Matter of Survival', *Cornell Daily Sun*, 27 April 1973, p. 12.

¹⁰ David Lehman, "A. R. Ammons: The Art of Poetry LXXIII" (interview), *The Paris Review*, 139, Summer, 1996 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1394/the-art-of-poetry-no-73-a-r-ammons>>[last accessed 28 January 2011]. Hereafter referred to as Lehman interview.

I see 'The Constant' as part of Ammons's sustained project of mapping and re-expressing his response to everyday surroundings, represented here by an unidentified location close by the sea. This project continues at least until Fall 1964 when he moves to Ithaca, New York, to take up teaching at Cornell. A productive six-month stint in 1963 as editor of the poetry journal, *Nation*, covering for Denise Levertov, had precipitated him into sending out clusters of poems for publication in journals and organizing a backlog, over a hundred poems, into three collections. The first, *Expressions of Sea Level*, combining work from 1956 to 1963, is now seen to best represent his coming-to-maturity. 'A Nature Walk' (written at one sitting, Lehman discovered) became the title poem of *Corsons Inlet*, while the last selection, *Northfield Poems* ranges across the decade, incorporating early pieces from 1951 and 1955, and quietly reinforces the discoveries of his maturing voice and *ars poetica*.

'The Constant' belongs, in its enquiry, with the discursive, restless poems, 'Saliences' and 'Corsons Inlet'. Longer and more panoramic though these are, they turn similarly on 'events of sense' ('Saliences', line 66) experienced on his walks to the shore.¹¹ Friend and early champion, Bloom dates their composition to late summer of 1962, while cautioning that because the collections are 'chronologically scrambled', he recommends the 'three volumes [...] be read as a unit, since the inclusion of a poem in one or another volume seems to be a matter of whim.'¹² For *Collected Poems 1951-1971*, Ammons re-ordered everything chronologically, using the composition dates from his notebooks, such that 'The Constant' appears two poems ahead of 'Corsons Inlet' and six after 'Expressions of Sea Level'. Until his

¹¹ *Northfield Poems*, pp. 16-20, (p. 17).

¹² Bloom, p. 12.

notebooks (and biography) are published, we will not know what, if anything, he revised for publication.¹³

Another factor in the process of defining his output at that time was the spatially and typographically experimental journal he kept for five weeks starting mid December 1963, while waiting for the proofs of *Expressions* to arrive. Typed directly onto a hundred foot long, two-inch wide scroll of adding machine paper, it forced him to progress in staccato, gappy lines and was published unaltered in 1965 as *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, his ‘essential poem of America’ as Frederick Buell calls it, something akin to a modern blog.¹⁴ He may have been unconsciously reeling from the assassination of John F. Kennedy, two weeks earlier, although he doesn’t mention anything that occurs much beyond his domestic sphere, Winter outdoors, Christmas in, except a bus trip to New York for a memorial event for William Carlos Williams. As with the older poet’s prose-poem ‘Kora in Hell’, a year’s unmediated jottings made in 1917, Ammons keeps writing even when he has little to say, dashing down thoughts, questions, exclamations. He eschews full stops (the only one after Phyllis calls him to the table) and goes freer of the page than Williams in staggering lines, allowing plenty of space for phrases and single words to stand alone. Throughout my essay, longer quotes from the poems are correctly transcribed with contractions, punctuation, indents and left-hand margins, tabs, syncopations and blanks, in the configurations Ammons designed. William Harmon suggests that towards the end he draws attention to his spatial juggling as an invitation to the reader to read between/beyond the lines for things

¹³ A. R. Ammons Papers, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University
< <http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/1096> > [accessed 11 Jan 2011]

¹⁴ “To Be Quiet in the Hands of the Marvelous” in *ARA* ed. by Bloom, pp. 195-212, (p. 207).

that Ammons perceived were there, functioning obscurely, but could not write about.¹⁵

I've given
 you my
 emptiness: it may
 not be unlike
 your emptiness:
 [...]

I've given you the
 interstices: the
 space between
 electrons:
 I've given you
 the dull days
 when turning and turning
 revealed nothing:
 [...]

I've given
 you long
 uninteresting walks
 so you could experience
 vacancy:
 [*Tape for the Turn of the Year*]¹⁶

The significance of *Tape*, a largely interior poem, to his outdoor poems of the early Sixties is that he rehearses how he should write to achieve release from modern suburban life into a teeming universe where flux and motion are constantly creating change and loss:

ecology is my word: tag
 me with that: come
 in there:
 you will find yourself
 in a firmless country:
 centers and peripheries
 in motion,
 organic,
 interrelations!

In 1963 ecology was not yet the keyword of the environmental movement, just growing in the USA, prompted by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (serialized in *The*

¹⁵ William Harmon, "How Does One Come Home": A. R. Ammons's "Tape for the Turn of the Year" *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Spring, 1975), 3-32.
 < <http://o-www.jstor.org/catalogue.ulrsls.lon.ac.uk/stable/20077511> > [accessed 31 December 2010]

¹⁶ *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1964, New York: Norton, 1994), pp. 204-5 and p. 112.

New Yorker from June 1962).¹⁷ The term (from Greek *oikos*, home and *logos*, science) denotes the study of the relationship of physical environment to the organisms it houses, the proliferation, adaptation and interconnectedness of all life forms within it. Notice that Ammons invites the reader to ‘come in’ to a kind of bustling orbit. If we look for *ecology* in ‘The Constant’ we find evidence not of the actual world but in a vision that plays with our sense of dimension, within a small, obsolescent object, picked out from many. What this found object contains immediately becomes Ammons’s subject and momentarily ‘the universe’. Gone is the haunted voice of his strangely intense first collection, *Ommateum* (1955), which remained critically ignored.¹⁸ His new ‘I’ persona seeks to share, is informative – using terminology made easy by a conversational tone – and active in that the first person carries the reader into his immediate world, a world in which to exercise a curious mind.

Pertinent details of his local walks and drives, given in *Tape* and all three collections, reveal the habitats of saltmarsh lakes of Northfield, and a coastline subject to marine disaster, high winds and erosion. William Klink, retracing his steps to the bird reserve at Corsons Inlet, ascribes Ammons’s sensitivity to wind-speed and direction, tidal conditions – his multi-sensory grasp of what’s going on – to a habit of attentiveness learned in his early working years in farm- and woodland.¹⁹ Real measurements and scientific facts are among the particulars of his walks because – although Ammons shrugs off the notion of being a scientist – he is always serious about making methodical and informed observations. His alertness to change means he describes how things happen as they happen. Far from reading

¹⁷ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

¹⁸ *Ommateum: With Doxology: Poems* (Philadelphia: Dorrance Press, 1955). Self-published, like Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* exactly a century earlier, it sold sixteen copies and was unobtainable until facsimile edition, 2006.

¹⁹ William Klink, ‘Site and Sense in “Corson’s Inlet” by A. R. Ammons’, *Journal of American Studies*, (1990), 24.2 (Aug 1990), 221-228 < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555316> > [accessed 21 Dec 2010]

his 'long, uninteresting walks' as conveying vacancy, Bonnie Costello remarks on how firm the shape of the walk and his feel for landscape is, where physical sensation is strong, calling him 'a poet of matter who unifies the world not at the level of ideas but at the level of substance and energy'.²⁰ He conveys much of the experience of the natural world as if he were speaking live from it.

I discovered the universe this morning

If indeed it was 'this morning', it would appear that little time passes for Ammons, between finding the seed of a poem and growing it. At forty-one lines 'The Constant' is almost short enough for him to have started *in situ*, memorising the details or taking notes, estimating measurements.²¹ He would come home to his typewriter, an Underwood that lasted, he tells Lehman, from 1952 through the 1990s, to hammer out a draft. He claims he rarely re-drafted. Having committed a picture of place and event to memory he can retrieve it through an act of recall. This active re-creation he extends to the reader, by dint of honest reporting, supplying many quantitative facts, on which he nevertheless puts a certain spin.

In the opening line, Ammons passes rapidly from an inland landscape he intimates is safe, 'leaving the primrose, bayberry dunes', only to find on 'a rise of beach, a hundred feet from the surf,' (9) a long site of devastation. The shift signalled conflict for the senses, (optical confounded by intellectual?) or at least a confusion, 'already beyond the vision| of my grasp' (7-8). After the first stanza, his gaze is averted from the broad external scene to an almost floor-level sightline that peters out along the backdrop of 'a row of clamshells' (10). Heaps of empty opened shells, no longer housing life, straggle across the second stanza as along the high-

²⁰ Costello, p. 162.

²¹ Lehman interview.

water mark, [...] sinuous as far as sight:’ (12). Attention is drawn to ‘one shell’ (13) among very many ‘others like it –upturned,’ (14) which holds in microcosm ‘a lake’ (16). We apprehend it for its real size and concavity, the measurements given in inches, and later gauge the ‘film of sand’ (20) in comparison, reckoned as ‘an inch in diameter’ (22). The third stanza grips the shortest line, ‘a lake’, between two tercet-like callipers or halves of visual information and transfers our attention fast from the miniaturised dimensions of ‘wing’ and lake to an even smaller scale phenomenon, the sand in a swirl dependent on the water’s surface tension. This is the core of the day’s ‘miracle’, an event occurring in slow motion, mirroring or manifesting cosmic grandeur,

indescribable in curve:
 and on the lake a turning galaxy, [...]
 [...], turning:
 turning:
 counterclockwise, [...]
 the galaxy rotating, (19-26)

Ammons mesmerises by repetition not just in words, the actively cyclical participles: turning, rotating, revolving: but visually, using the points, tails and twinned shapes of commas, round brackets, colons and the ‘nearly circular’ (21) curved and ring-like letters c, o, o-o (in ‘co-ordinated’, 21), o’clock and oo in ‘noon’ (25). He plays musically too with lip-shaping o sounds and clustered consonants rich with the cupped *l* sound, ‘shell lip, | revolving | round and round the shell:’ (28-30). There is a concentration of repeating vowels within the consonantal vessels, almost replicating the shells. Richard Howard shows how, in key poems contemporary with ‘The Constant’, this sound patterning develops a ‘consciousness of effects that become the living twist’.²² Rests and accelerations

²² Richard Howard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States since 1950* (1969, New York: Atheneum, 1980), p. 9.

equate to lulls in conversation, or finding words: ‘the device of the colon helps keep a dense reserve of silence to poise against the “conversation”(his speechmarks): alongside ‘a rhythmical certainty’ (p. 12), where spacing and punctuation mark and inflect ‘the speed and retard of words as they move together in the mind’ (p. 11). Thus Ammons externalises the thinking process, the forming of words, in close relation to the dynamic act of seeing.

His field of vision contracts to the foreground focal interest, a tiny ballet with the sand performing its dance like a clockwork part, a sense of the logic of the clock-face altered or reflected in ‘counterclockwise’. It then expands, noting ‘the wind hardly perceptible from 11 o’clock | with noon at sea:’(24-25) not about time but in sailors’ speak for describing direction as the angle between two hands. Using this shorthand to describe an onshore wind coming off the sea has the effect of re-orienting the reader to the bigger scene, showing how exposed the shell’s microcosm is to risk: gull, sun, wind and tide are all imminent and ‘could spill the universe’: ‘sun could dry it up: | [...] wind could rock it out:’ (31-33). He predicts the inevitable: ‘the tide will rise,’ where ‘utterly’ (34-35) contains the idea of annihilation, of the last cry that one drowning or ‘wash[ed]... loose’ might utter. Here he fixes, preoccupied with what ‘could’ (the modal auxiliary nervously reiterated three times (31-33) or ‘will’ (his future tense *is* tense, fearful of the inevitable), change and destroy the universe he just ‘discovered ... this morning’. The recent continuous past tense has been loosely maintained from ‘this morning’ to the end of the stanza describing the terns’ ‘new round and dive’ (39).²³ The assault seems to bring him to a standstill. Reportage breaks off and the last two lines are written in hindsight, where Ammons speaks of himself, not as the ‘I’ of the opening, the self-absenting first person who ‘was in no | mood | for wonder’,

²³ ‘The Constant’ first appeared in *Quarterly Review of Literature* (1964), v. 13, no 1/2, (p. 9). Later ‘a new round’ becomes ‘another round’ in *Collected*, p. 145.

but a more emphatic, challenged and possibly changed 'I'. It is a statement treated as an aside, what Robert Pinsky calls one of his characteristic 'disclaimers'.²⁴ In the face of so many calls on his perceptions, he admits he must quit:

I have had too much of this inexhaustible miracle:
miracle, this massive, drab constant of experience. (40-41)

Does the second 'constant' carry the same weight in the title as in the last line? Constant motion, interruption: monotonous or reassuring? The clue lies in 'Saliences', a landscape of associations in which he recognises, 'when I went back to the dunes today, | saliences, | congruent to memory, | spread firmly across my sight: '(93-96).²⁵ While the 'saliences' of Ammons describe the rising and falling of wave and dune, for Gaston Bachelard, philosopher of science, 'The poetic image is a sudden *salience* on the surface of the psyche.'²⁶ Ammons manipulates the word to liken sand to sea and the topography of 'memory':

much seemed
constant, to be looked
forward to, expected:
from the top of a dune rise,
look of ocean salience: in
the hollow, where a runlet
makes in
at full tide and fills a bowl,
[...]
deep into the mind the dark blue
constant: (107-117)

Again, there are two constants, the first anticipating the familiar, unchanged. In the *Paris Review* interview he tells how, on naval patrol in a South Pacific bay, aged nineteen, his sense of the world 'changed as a result of an interior illumination':

As I looked at the land, heard the roosters crowing, saw the
thatched huts, ... I thought down to the ... changed and
strange world below the waterline. [...] — the water level
was not what it was because of a single command by a

²⁴ Robert Pinsky, 'Ammons' in *ARA* ed. by Bloom, pp. 185-194, (p. 189).

²⁵ *Collected*, pp. 151-155. Bloom dates it to late Summer 1962.

²⁶ *Bachelard*, p. xv.

higher power but because of an average result of a host of actions—runoff, wind currents, melting glaciers.

That the sea, ‘the dark blue constant’, governed, and was in turn governed by, the planet’s motion, overturned the belief system he was raised in. Waves formed far out at sea continually redefine sand at sea-level, sometimes over-reaching the limits of the ‘bowl’: thus we can see the motion in the clamshell as a paradigm for the ‘nearly circular’ ecology of the planet. Later his science education further ‘de-denominated’ him from the teachings and images of an omnipotent Creator taught at the Fire Baptized Holiness Pentecostal Church of his childhood, where he was, according to his biographer Roger Gilbert, ‘mesmerized by the sermons he heard, especially the fire-and-brimstone parts and [...] deeply impressed by the spectacle of people speaking in tongues, though he never did it himself.’²⁷ Tellingly, his only memory of books as a child is of ‘the first eleven pages of *Robinson Crusoe*. I read that so many times I practically had it by memory. I don’t know where the eleven pages came from, but there they were. Otherwise we read the Bible and we sang hymns. That was my exposure to words.’²⁸ If anything, studying science would heighten his first-formed ritual of attention, the observance of ‘pentecostal’ elements, sun, wind, water, which in his poems, replace hymns and speaking-in-tongues.

I began to apprehend things in the dynamics of themselves—motions and bodies—the full account of how we came to be a mystery with still plenty of room for religion, though, in my case, a religion of what we don’t yet know rather than what we are certain of.

When Ammons tags himself in *Tape* with the term ‘ecology’ he may mean that he operates on principles that are self-generating and interconnected, using the vocabulary of a keen observer/scientist, where there need be no mention of a

²⁷ Gilbert, interview <<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/newsletter2008/nhcnewsspr2008gilbert.htm>> [accessed 8 January 2011]

²⁸ Lehman interview.

Creator or the divine. Robert Kirschten, reading a religious impulse that persists in his sensibility, speaks of the environment he depicts as ‘a mythopoeic land’.²⁹ His grasp of the inter-related and contiguous forces at work in the elements later leads him to make some dramatic and imaginative assertions in his poetry. For example in ‘Expressions of Sealevel’, his term ‘expression’ does not designate height or depth – as in cartography – but actually ‘speech without words’ (8).³⁰ Continually generated by the planet moving in tension with the Moon, ‘it is a dream the sea makes’ registered peripherally, fragmentarily as ‘broken, surf things’ (17) and ‘breakers against the land:’ (55). The erosion the ocean causes, the debris it leaves, are visual indicators of this tension. Ammons urges the reader, ‘stay to watch’ the rise and spill of the sea into a clamshell lying ‘upbeach’, filled with ‘dry sand, remembrance of tide:’(37-38). Almost as in ‘The Constant’ but darker somehow, the shell, ‘half-buried’ (53) is both subject to the abuse of the tide and a distraction from ‘the ocean’s speech,’ (13) which comes as waves from ‘mid-sea’ (21). This ‘markless’ language is essentially climactic, a ‘long-held roar’, the ‘spray/swells, whitecaps, moans’ (23-24) yielding up

an inner problem, a self-deep
dark and private anguish
[...]
by hints, to
keen watchers on the shore: (26-30)

The poem has an orderly pattern of five line stanzas until Ammons lets the rush of ‘rising tide’ (56) flood across the page to bring him to the crux of the poem, eight lines where questions form, indented to suggest an aside or perhaps another speaker asking:

is there a point of rest where
the tide turns: is there one
infinitely tiny higher touch

²⁹ Robert Kirschten, ‘Approaching Prayer: Ritual and the Shape of Myth’ in *A. R. Ammons and James Dickey*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), preface, pp. xxii-xxiii.

³⁰ *Collected*, pp. 134-136.

[.....]
 is there an instant when fullness is,
 without loss, complete: (65-71)

returning to the original un-indented stanza form with the last, child-like demand:

how do you know the moon
 is moving: (73-74)

Indefinably, a doubt is being exercised though not overtly articulated, (no question marks), about the ‘infinitely ... higher touch’, not one that is divine, but sexual and procreative. I suggest there is an underlying turn in the irregular thirteenth stanza, an aspiration to reach a goal, ‘without loss’, a grief that ‘fullness’ hasn’t been achieved, a lapse of confidence in the lunar (and by association, menstrual?) cycle. After the turn, Ammons is rewarded in his search for signs, finding the sea’s ‘expression’ at his feet, in newly wetted sand, confirming that the cycle continues:

the talk of giants
 of ocean, moon, sun, of everything
 spoken in a dampened grain of sand. (80-82)

the shore ... the state in which poets are made and unmade

Harold Bloom was quick to champion Ammons as a nature writer with an oracular Whitmanian streak. He reads ‘Saliences’, for instance, as a landscape where mind meets terrifying nature.³¹ Only a few early reviewers (poets like Kalstone, 1973, and Lieberman, 1965) mention the nature-inspired Blakean mysticism or look closely enough at his language to reconcile the sometimes prosaic matter-of-factness with delicate suggestions of enchantment.³² ‘If Ammons is, as I think, the central poet of my generation,’ Bloom wrote in 1971, it is ‘because he alone has made a

³¹ Bloom, p. 12.

³² David Kalstone, ‘Ammons’s “Radiant Toys”’, *Diacritics*, vol. 3, 4, Winter 1973, pp. 13-20; Laurence Lieberman, ‘Poetry Chronicle’, *Hudson Review*, vol. 18, 3, Autumn, 1965, pp. 455-467.

heterocosm, a second nature in his poetry.’ To some extent Bloom fashions critical response to Ammons’s ‘poetic maturity’ by linking his work to the grand vision, transcendental ideals and vatic pronouncements of his American forefathers, Emerson and Whitman, and occasionally to the English tradition of Nature writing in Wordsworth and the Greater Romantics. Despite his admiration for them, particularly Coleridge, Ammons does not draw on an older poetic language to re-create nature, rather the opposite. One wonders, nevertheless, how conscious or ironic he is, placing the word ‘naked’ prominently in ‘The Constant’, ‘the naked mass of so much miracle’ (5), of the echo back to Wordsworth’s ‘naked pool’. In the *Prelude [1805 Book Eleventh]* it occurs three times framing the passage, ‘It was in truth | An ordinary sight; but I should need | Colours and words that are unknown to man, | To paint the visionary dreariness’ (253-256).³³ The beach is challenging as ‘naked mass’, barren and unpeopled, ultimately ‘drab’.

To Bloom, perhaps, Ammons’s beach walks echo Whitman’s, for example in ‘As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,’ playing out a crisis of identity on the beach, but I would say Ammons drains off much of the colour, voices and other kinds of contact that create the energy in Whitman. Compare the terseness of ‘The Constant’ with this operatic monologue:

As I walk’d where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok,
 Where they rustle up hoarse and sibilant,
 Where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways,
 I utter poems,
 [...] seiz’d by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot,
 The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the
land of the globe.
 (‘As I Ebb’d’, I, 3-6, 7-9)³⁴

³³ Hugh Luke, ‘Gestures of Shape, Motions of Form’, in *ARA* ed. by Bloom, pp. 221-242, (p. 223). See *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 432.

³⁴ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, 1867, First and Death Bed editions*, intro. by Karen Karbiener (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), pp. 406-409.

arises, he replies:

I think it comes from anxiety. That is to say, either the mind or the body is already rather highly charged and in need of some kind of expression, some way to crystallize and relieve the pressure. And it seems to me that if you're in that condition and an idea, an insight, an association occurs to you, then that energy is released through the expression of that insight or idea, and after the poem is written, you feel a certain resolution and calmness. Well, I won't say a "momentary stay against confusion" but that's what I mean.

Jorie Graham gave virtually the same answer, also citing Frost, in a recent conversation, adding that doubt rather than curiosity *is* the driver.³⁷ Ammons also added a rider: 'You know, Bloom says somewhere that poetry *is* anxiety.'

Bloom's influential comments at an early stage in his work may have obliged Ammons to keep expanding his vision and generating text to describe the new world, perhaps in Transcendentalist terms.³⁸ He had in fact read Thoreau and Emerson at Wake Forest where he minored in English and later, for a Masters degree at Berkeley but only later realized, thanks to Bloom, he says, how beautifully Emerson expressed things that he himself instinctively felt but could not write. With Emerson he shares certain basic tenets: the more or less Lucretian belief in a central principle of 'a subtle magnetism in nature' (which informs 'Circles') and a conviction that while everyone should learn about the living world through observation and science, they must be open to its contradictions and possibilities.

The intent looking that characterises his writing and owes much to the 'transparent eyeball' in its enraptured and minute depiction of circular motion, is undercut in 'The Constant' by a doubt as to whether anything he encounters today will make sense tomorrow. It has a ring of Emerson who admits to failure of 'will'

³⁷ Graham speaking at John Hewitt summer school, Armagh, 26 July 2011.

³⁸ Donald H. Reiman, 'A. R. Ammons: Ecological Naturalism and the Romantic Tradition', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 22-54 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412>> [accessed 21 Dec 2010]

in maintaining focus once he has ‘abridged into a word’ his latest revelation:

The result of to-day which haunts the mind [...] and the principle that seemed to explain nature will itself be included as one example of a bolder generalization. [...] Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts: but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which I now see so much; [...] Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow!³⁹

Admiring him for managing to retain both ‘Emerson’s theoretic ambiguity and the intensity of Emerson’s search for vision’, Hyatt Waggoner distinguishes between visionary types and denotes Ammons as a seer in the sense of seeing best, not a dreamer, nor a mystic.⁴⁰ His is not the nineteenth century conflict between belief and science but a commitment to immersion in experience. A person’s experience begins with the eye, as Emerson had said: ‘The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second.’ Key notions are centre and periphery where the eye (not Whitman’s ‘I’) occupies the centre and activates the mind, and though it cannot literally *see* past the horizon, is aware of the many widening circles beyond it. But while Emerson recommends, because ‘[t]he field cannot be well seen from the field’, the writer (later also ‘the sayer, the namer’⁴¹) must stand proud of the earth, seeing it from a higher vantage point, Ammons in his beach walk poems departs from the high ground, risking dropping to sealevel, where he reaches the edge of the everyday as he has thus far experienced it. And, as in the first and last lines of *The Constant*, nearing and recalling the shore, he expresses an existentialist’s reluctance to encompass it all.

³⁹ *Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, p. 228-229.

⁴⁰ ‘Notes and Reflections’ in *ARA* ed. by Bloom, pp. 63-72, (p. 65).

⁴¹ ‘The Poet’, 1844, in *Selected Essays*, pp. 259-284, (p. 262).

A Poem is a Walk

Insisting that he was not ‘interested in walks as such but in clarification or intensification by distraction’ Ammons lectured under this title to the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh in April 1967.⁴² In many ways it epitomizes his behaviour in ‘The Constant’, exercising his sidelong habit for ‘seeing one thing better by looking at something else’. Characteristically elusive, he lectured without discussing poems, mentioning only lines on walking by Wordsworth, Whitman and Frost, to develop his analogy between a walk and a poem. Both involve ‘the whole ... mind and body’ in a rhythmic, progressive activity which is the ‘externalization of an interior seeking’ (p. 16). Negotiating ‘terrain, inner and outer,’ the walk (or poem) progresses ‘by outward and inward motions,’ to a level of openness where it may ‘rehearse the expansion and contraction of the universe’ (p. 19). Walking and poetry are un-programmed ways of encountering the world in ‘the mode ... that can reconcile opposites into a “real” world both concrete and universal’ (p. 13) undertaken without a goal: poetry as a process, allowing for divagation, changes of shape, scale and scope, lack of predicted outcomes, fugitive sensations, that leads

... to the unstructured sources of our beings, to the unknown, and returns us to our rational, structured selves refreshed ... a verbal means to a nonverbal source ... a motion to no-motion, to the still point of contemplation and deep realization. (pp. 19-20)

For a conflation of walk with poem, or simultaneous translation, follow ‘Corsons Inlet’.⁴³ Bloom describes Ammons ‘losing his battle against himself’ until writing

⁴² *Set in Motion*, ed. by Burr, p. 16.

⁴³ *Collected*, pp. 147-151.

this, he discovered that language gave him ‘release[d] from forms’ (13).⁴⁴ Here Ammons finds a mode of conveying his thinking through the evocation of movement, responding freely to the natural world at the walker’s own pace, matching the play of his senses to his capacity to relay information. Synonyms cluster and syntax recedes as the landscape changes, becoming indeterminate, disordered, freed of organizational principles:

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
 straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises [...] and blends
 of sight:
 I allow myself eddies of meaning
yield to a direction of significance
[...]
I have reached no conclusions, ...
[...]
so I am willing to go along, to accept
the becoming
thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
 no walls:
 (13-20, 41, 49-52)

Significantly, in later life Ammons was an enthusiastic painter, responding to landscape in a new medium, watercolour, more similar than words to the ‘hues, shadings, risings and blends of sight’. His paintings are not topographical but subtly coloured abstract designs. Derived from the fast changing colouring of coastal sky and landscape they substantiate the painterly description of his liberation ‘from forms,’(13). The abstract cover of the paperback *Northfield Poems*, with its conspicuous white path between brown fields, may have been his design, although no artist is credited.

Frederick Buell sees ‘the mid-world’ of ‘Corsons Inlet’ as both geographical and philosophical, existing midway between the explorations of two regions,

⁴⁴ ‘A. R. Ammons: The Breaking of the Vessels’, *Salmagundi*, 31/32 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976), pp. 185-203, p. 193.

‘caught always in the event of change.’(63-64). It connects a natural habitat to an intellectual and spiritual ‘world whose visibility and clarity of form is rooted in the active knowledge of Greek philosophy and receptive wisdom of Taoism’.⁴⁵ For Ammons a poem negotiates a balance between the ways we apprehend the world and the ways it arrests and slows us: he combines dynamic Western reasoning with lessons in what is sometimes referred to as *not-acting*, or not-seeking, in simply going with the flow, from Lao-tse. There is a relationship of the successive shedding of just-passed experience to the progressive opening of eyes and self to new events – the gaining of a sense of place and then displacement as before. In ordinary life we accept that as we walk.

Offering the reader the scope and limits of his understanding of the ‘terrain, inner and outer’ (*A Poem Is A Walk*, 18), Ammons fashions his world out of Nature in an idiom so convincing that we don’t notice the shifts between aesthetic, scientific and colloquial forms of expression for what he finds there. As he says in the lecture, the contrary step of ‘seeing one thing better by looking at something else’ can result in reconciliation between disparate things, balancing external reality with ‘an interior seeking’ (16). But, he cautions, ‘a world of both one and many, a world of definition and indefinition [...] comes into being about which any statement, however revelatory, is a lessening’(13).

‘*A Poem Is A Walk*’ is Ammons’s first manifesto, shedding light on his first critical successes. He urges his audience to teach that a poem is ‘necessarily an act of discovery, a chance taken’ (p. 16), and ‘not simply a mental activity’:

... it has body, rhythm, feeling, sound, and mind, conscious and subconscious. The pace at which a poet walks (and thinks), his natural breath-length, the line he pursues, whether forthright and straight or weaving and meditative, his whole “air,” whether of aimlessness or purpose – all these things and many more figure into the “physiology” of the poem he writes. (p. 17)

⁴⁵ Buell, *ARA* ed. by Bloom, p. 204.

He describes a series of four resemblances in entirely physical terms: it ‘involves the whole person: it is not reproducible: its shape occurs, unfolds, it has a motion characteristic of the walker’ (p. 18), and then he warns against trying to unpack it, as I have tried.

It can't be extracted and contemplated ... There is only one way to know it and that is to enter into it.

How should we read this, as equivocation or resistance? Charles Altieri sees a commitment in Ammons and his peers to ‘disclose a world’ but indicates the pitfalls of unpicking such disclosure in poetry.⁴⁶ ‘[P]oets of the sixties tried to present their work as direct psychological or meditative experiences ... direct experience is notoriously difficult for criticism to come to terms with’ (p. 22). Quoting Levertov, who in turn quotes from Rilke, he recommends:

The central imperative of the aesthetics of presence is to “be here intensely” and concentrate one’s attention on the emergence of energies in the now, where “every step is an arrival”. (p. 20)

Altieri concludes that poems should be approached (where Ammons might say walked) for ‘the mind engaging the world rather than structuring it into created orders, and the critic’s goal is to recover an attitude or stance and its implications’ (pp. 24-25). Analytically or imaginatively, can we detect the state of mind Ammons hints at in ‘The Constant’ and from which he uses his powers of description to divert us?

I was in no mood for wonder

At start and finish of this poem, there is distrust, perhaps of the task ahead. Although he is no stranger to the beach, Ammons renders it unfamiliar by

⁴⁶ Altieri, p. 9.

remarking on two things: the intangible ‘mood’, and the tangible but unassimilable ‘naked mass’ (6) possibly exposed by the tide.

When [...]
I discovered the universe this morning,
 I was in no
mood
for wonder,
 the naked mass of so much miracle (1-6)

Already the lineation is jumpy and the walk already feels abbreviated. In fact, ‘leaving the ... dunes’, is his last recorded step until turned back by birds defending their nests. At the moment of writing (presumably that evening) Ammons professes himself reluctant to bear witness to the ‘miracle’ (6) he happened on, a galaxy in microcosm but a ‘universe’ (31) endangered and impermanent because threatened by the next tide. Doubting his capacity for ‘wonder’ he elicits in the reader a similar doubt as to how to communicate a sense of the unified world and a belief in its workings. We hear a difficult tone, scepticism perhaps, reflecting a mind set against being impressed. And yet it becomes deeply impressionable to ‘the abundance’ (13) and we are taken in. The poem moves (walks?) the reader towards delighting in the discovery then breaks off, diverted from contemplation, leaving us, like the poet, in two minds about ‘miracle’ (41). We would be left with a rather self-conscious inadequacy to absorb ‘this massive, drab constant of experience’ if it were not for his sense of the significance of the fugitive and contingent.

This is endorsed for Ammons in Taoism. Lao-tse persuades him, he says, ‘to approach the phenomenal world with lyrical acceptance’ but that when investigation is taken to rigorous extremes, ‘to “grasp” things is to lose them’.⁴⁷

Robert Pogue Harrison and Laura Wittman discuss the sense of incipient loss and

⁴⁷ Steven P. Schneider, *A. R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope* ((Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994) pp. 92-94. Quotes ‘Interview/A. R. Ammons’, by David Grossvogel, *Diacritics*, 3, Winter 1973, pp. 47-53.

precariousness of life that prevails in his work of this period likening it to Thoreau's view that by speaking of the lost and absent one may recover what is foregone but not forgotten.⁴⁸ Gilbert suggests that the spur to writing a walk is 'the desire to keep what we have lived' (p. 252). I would suggest, in Ammons's case an equal and opposite desire to keep it secret. Perhaps that is why something in 'The Constant' slides attention away from wonder at the little galaxy turning within a shell. The poet keeps his distance, an outsider-ness, from the rest of life on the shore. It is a very honest thing to admit 'I have had too much' (40), which he says wryly, with irony. Although the miracle is 'inexhaustible', he does at least close the poem with a full stop.

On the beach, with its life-forms and its fallen mass of the bleached and dead, used homes of molluscs, the walker is assailed, not transported, by 'miracle'. 'The Constant' has its moments of siege mentality, particularly near the close. Richard Howard admires 'the interrelations of *making* and of ... destruction, the actions of sea and land serving as the just emblem of the mind's resources, so that the poet can discuss his undertaking precisely in the terms of his locus', calling Ammons 'a littoralist of the imagination' for whom:

the shore, the beach, or the coastal creek is not a *place* but an *event* (his italics), a transaction where land and water create and destroy each other, where life and death are exchanged, where shape and chaos are won and lost.⁴⁹

More heroic than a walk, this is 'Ammons's Homeric conflict, the beach his Troy' (p. 32). Nevertheless, whether it is the 'inexhaustible' presence of the sea or some greater source of energy and power, Ammons admits that an insistent world makes greater demands on his poetry than he can withstand. Turning from the sea towards land, where 'terns, their | young somewhere hidden', with the unusual line

⁴⁸ Laura Wittmann, 'A conversation on the Poetry of A. R. Ammons', *Entitled Opinions*, KZSU 26 February 2008 <<http://french-italian.stanford.edu/opinions>>[accessed 2 Jan 2011]

⁴⁹ Howard, pp. 45-46.

break, he abruptly signs off, using a word he likes to turn on itself, 'drab' to describe himself (bard). Although it does not make him invisible, it makes him peripheral. What emerges is an anti-heroic stance, a quiet desperation and a great need, communicated to the reader, for time to reflect on any given experience. By the poem/walk he has 'discovered', more or less as haphazardly as the tide uncovers and recovers its many shells, that he can only and briefly devote attention to one, and the small place it occupies in the universe.

CHAPTER 2

Many things about this place are dubious (reading ‘The End of March’)

On a beach walk, unlike walks with firm destinations, the poet-walker must eventually (critically for Ammons, under fire in ‘The Constant’), turn for home. Detritus, perhaps the ownerlessness of things, on beaches encourages salvaging – in the sense of rendering – something the poet did not intend to own. And the poem permits fetching, for, should something surface on the walk but go uncollected, it is re-collected by the act of writing. Thus Mahon’s tins, Clampitt’s broken bottles, and Jamie’s ‘blue polyprop’ rope exert a draw as *un-found* objects. When Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘famous eye’ is cast along a beach in unpromising circumstances it returns with a catch of intangible things: royal footprints, a drowning, a house that is not a house. ‘The End of March’ is a walk-poem that combines the veracity of that eye so admired by Robert Lowell, with imaginary elements that become more far-fetched and thought-provoking the longer one dwells on them.¹ It is also a poem about home.

In this chapter I consider the role of Elizabeth Bishop’s imagination in relation to her close attention, how she interprets signs at the strange world’s end,

¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Geography III*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 42-45, and *Complete Poems*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), pp. 179-180. Hereafter referred to as *CP*. See poem in full, appendix B.

the beach. All through life, beaches presented her with material, from ‘The Sea and Its Shore’ (1937), ‘The Monument’ (published 1946), ‘At the Fishhouses’ (written 1946, published 1955) to ‘Crusoe in England’, which she recorded on April 15, 1974 at the Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, Washington. Its first airing coincides exactly with the period of composition of her last great beach poem, ‘The End of March’. It can be no coincidence that the adjective ‘far’ occurs five times in this poem of outbound and homebound, forward- and inward- looking, of coming to terms with the losses and consolations of late middle age.

Written in 1974, when Bishop was sixty-three, ‘The End of March’ was published in *The New Yorker* on 24 March 1975, and in *Geography III* in December 1976, a rapid turn-round for Bishop who usually worked on drafts on-and-off for years. Close readings by J. D. McClatchy and Roger Gilbert, enjoying ‘its complete ease of manner’, offer insights into the achievement.² Its evolution through drafts and revisions and publication history is recently documented.³

A four-year acquaintance with it underpins my writing, forming the core of my investigation into poems’ emergence from place and recurring preoccupations. Bishop almost makes that process patent through her letters and admissions in her more relaxed interviews. In *looking for something, something, something*, I consider her walk as a search and the suggestion that Bishop is an ‘epistemologist of loss’. Faced with her habit of relinquishing attachments, I found I must necessarily review her ‘life as material’, even though she was always diffident about portraying herself and shunned the licence with which contemporaries indulged in confessional and painfully autobiographical writing. In *Ties* I suggest that images retained from solitary girlhood holidays, her years in Brazil, and correspondence, both incoming and outgoing, hold leads to the poem, and vice versa. Being able to

² J. D. McClatchy, *White Paper: On Contemporary American Poetry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 55-75 and Gilbert, *Walks*, p. 163.

³ Joelle Biele, ‘Swinging Through the Years: Elizabeth Bishop and “The End of March”’, *American Poetry Review*, vol. 38, 6, Nov/Dec, 2009, pp. 55-62.

wind on in time is an important aspect of the recovery of memory, as in ‘Poem’ where she recognizes ‘the yet-to-be-dismantled elms’.⁴

I investigate the throw-away claim that ‘The End of March’ is merely *a bit of description* and how lightness of touch leavens her insistence on ocular truth. Her honesty is more disarming than Ammons’s matter-of-factness – see preceding chapter – because as Rotella says, her poems ‘acknowledge that what they “find” may be invented’ (his speechmarks).⁵ Robert Dale Parker recognises the inherent tension of thinking through visual experience, declaring ‘First she sees...then wonders if she is wrong.’⁶ In *the secret of the held balance* I differentiate between the immediacy of her observations and her fall-back on humour and memory, to divert from herself in the present or recent past, her apparent disingenuity in gathering evidence, seeking correspondences and emblems. Chief amongst these is the visualization of her *proto-dream-house* that demands a large part of the poem to itself. A section on *echoes* from other writers precedes the final discussion, *a light to read by* on quality of light, a matter of constant interest to Bishop, ever pragmatic about the illumination daily life requires, especially for reading.

looking for something, something, something

In her 1937 notebooks, Bishop started to develop two portraits of beachcombers, ‘Sandpiper’ from observation and ‘Edwin Boomer’ from her imagination, both

⁴ CP, p. 177.

⁵ Guy Rotella, *Reading & Writing Nature: The Poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), p. 209.

⁶ Robert Dale Parker, *The Unbeliever: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988) p. 29.

‘preoccupied’ to the point of obsession with *reading* their beach finds.⁷ She sketches them in a continuum of moving through space, sustaining a search for signs and returning to the task of construing them: distracted/fascinated, minutely absorbed, curiously detached. It is this attempt to chronicle looking and to keep on looking that tugs me back to Bishop’s work and places her example central to my commentary on the inclusiveness of visual experience.

Gilbert, who relishes everyday details embedded in a walk-poem (things like weather conditions that ring true) raises the question of elaboration. He compares ‘The End of March’ to ‘The Moose’, which retells a bus journey taken in 1946, but because revisions took Bishop from 1946 to 1972, the poems first appear together in 1976.⁸ Both narratives build little by little, one episode replacing another in importance, till the whole journey is ‘felt’ suggests Vendler, ‘to say something global, something almost allegorical’.⁹ Gilbert responds: ‘The very elusiveness of the “something” [...] is a tribute to Bishop’s skill in cleaving so closely to experience that we are unable to say precisely how a major truth has been revealed in the process’ (p. 280). He describes the blend of close-up and distant perceptions that a beach-walk offers shaping the open form and content of ‘The End of March’. ‘[I]ts leisurely, incremental movement, its hesitant and scrupulously self-correcting attention to the landscape and above all, the lack of an obvious thematic center’ (p. 163) seem to magnify both the sequential process of walking and the sustained act of searching. As a paradigm of the ‘walk as revelation’, Gilbert sees it ‘move naturally [...] from the particular phenomena of the walk to a moment of pure cognition that synthesizes the data of experience, producing an effect of revealed

⁷ ‘Sandpiper’, *CP*, p. 131; ‘The Sea and its Shore’ published in *Life and Letters Today* 17 (Winter 1937), pp. 103-8, repr. in *Elizabeth Bishop, The Collected Prose*, ed. by Robert Giroux, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), pp. 171-180.

⁸ Helen Vendler, ‘Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly’ in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. by Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil Estess, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), pp. 32-48, (p. 47). Hereafter referred to as Schwartz and Estess.

⁹ *CP*, pp. 169-173. Published in *The New Yorker*, July 1972, and *Geography III*, pp. 22-31.

truth' (p. 150). My commentary attempts to discern the leap between writing that cleaves to experience and image-making that departs the everyday and imparts 'something' beyond it.

Travisano implies that Bishop's interest is not so much in the precision task of total recall as in a fresh, apparently artless picking-up of clues to her own story and artistic development. His 'epistemologists of loss' trace *how*, not *what*, they know they have experienced:

... a process of exploring the self, of reaching back through a consideration of surviving artifacts, documentary records, lingering memory traces, dreamlike recurrences, symptomatic behaviours, and verbal slippages – [...] through the intangible and unreliable but powerful messages of the unconscious – toward the elusive junctures of the traumatic past. Their poetry places the present self among these elusive, ambiguous [...] knowledge-sources as it probes for insight into the causation of present dismays and disorders. In short [...] exploring lost worlds.¹⁰

Does Bishop's walk explore a lost world? The nine poems of *Geography III* all create sites to stand for her personal history (even the desk in '12 O'Clock News').¹¹ In these landscapes, she is on a kind of treasure hunt. In the Renaissance art of memory, a mnemonic is created by visualizing a passage taken through a site, noting objects. Their location, sequence and relatedness stand for the elements that must be remembered, and the order. Revisited, these signpost the complex map and mesh of recall. Gilbert believes that 'Only *in* the world ... can the mind find the material it needs to shape into poems' so that her walk, recounted as a series of mysteries, represents 'the very process of reimagining the world that lies at the heart of Bishop's poetics' (p. 171). Some readings find her beach world unrelievedly dark, others light to the point of whimsy. Hollander sees it as

¹⁰ Thomas Travisano, 'Elizabeth Bishop and The Origins of Narrative Postmodernism' in *Poetry and the Sense of Panic, Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery*, ed. by Lionel Kelly, (Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000) pp. 87-104 (p. 93).

¹¹ A tenth poem, her translation of 'Objects & Apparitions' by Octavio Paz, placed after 'The End of March' in *Geography III*, pp. 46-48, was moved to Translations in *CP*, pp. 275-6.

unsettling, even apocalyptic:

“vision” is not too serious a word, a strange, late domestication of the poet’s earlier Nova Scotia sea-scapes. But this time it is not a meditation on a scene so much as a movement against a scene, a classic journey out and back, toward a treasured image ... along a stretch of beach that yields up none of the comforts of place, ... past objects from which meaning itself has withdrawn. The goal is never reached, and the walk back presents glimpses of an almost infernal particularity.¹²

Read as signs of absence, even the stones, momentarily alight, ‘threw out long shadows...then pulled them in again’ (57-58), and in receding, extinguish themselves. From the first impression her view of life diminishes:

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos. (1-5)

For over three quarters of the poem, metamorphosing images surface little by little and are lost again. Chief amongst these are the ‘ghost’ (21, 22) in the shallows, the ‘house’ she cannot reach, under these particular conditions, and finally a kite, where there had previously been ‘no kite’ (23). Along the way, ordinary details assume new life, resurrected, like the stones acquiring colour, but only – she repeats – ‘for just a minute’ (53, 54).¹³ Dismal weather, ‘shrunken’ scenery is forgotten as everything becomes conjectural. Images are conjured, enhanced by her own enthusiastic invention: ‘A light to read by – perfect! But – impossible.’ (48): dropped again. Always thinking ahead, she encourages our anticipation of transformative sunlight and ‘shadows’ (57, 58), and of the heraldic company (stones that played “Statues” with a ‘lion-sun’) gathered on the beach. Just as the ‘sun came out’ (53) she imagines how the morning sun from the East had played at

¹² John Hollander, reviewing *Geography III*, ‘Elizabeth Bishop’s Mappings of Life’ in *Parnassus*, Fall 1977, 359-366, repr. in Schwartz and Estess, pp. 244-251 (p. 250).

¹³ Biele, p. 59. There was a third ‘minute’ (line 58) in the version she sent Howard Moss at *The New Yorker*, 22 October 1974.

‘the last low tide’ but ‘now he was behind them’ (60), the game soon over. Almost unremarked, not a vision as such, it is delicately suggested, in a switch to fantasy, less an epiphany, more a lightening of spirits, hard to tie down. Implicitly we read a change of heart, as it steals over the walker on the beach.

Ties

Neither Bishop nor a reader can pinpoint how images form out of stirrings drawn from her notebooks, records of dreams, old correspondences, yet stirrings there are, as she discovers, in ‘The End of March’, witnessing a little life left in ‘lengths and lengths, endless’ (17) of string. The word ‘endless’, always signifying uneasy, stands for elusive, inconclusive – ‘looping’ on the edge of the tide. Using many ‘ties’, ‘string’ (17 and 23), ‘wires’ (43), ‘another wire ... leashes’ (45-46), the poem strings together disconnected, ephemeral findings. The loosest of links connect the animal tracks to the puzzle of the ‘kite-string’ (23) as the outward journey is retraced and becomes the homeward-bound loop, going North, coming South. This is the loop Lloyd Schwartz calls the poem’s ‘reverse nostalgia’.¹⁴ Within the natural time lapse of a walk between tides, each item has ‘pulled ... in’ and appropriated strands of imagery arising from elsewhere, as we shall see.

‘A group of words, a phrase, may find its way into my head like something floating in the sea, and presently it attracts other things to it’ she told Ashley Brown, describing the connections like flotsam.¹⁵ One factor in this flotsam is the ‘endless’ (17) presence of the sea. At their first meeting in 1964, Bishop, resident in Brazil, lived weekdays in Rio at a penthouse apartment above Copacabana beach,

¹⁴ ‘One Art, The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, 1971-1976’ in Schwartz and Estess, pp. 133-153 (p. 151).

¹⁵ Ashley Brown, ‘An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop’, *Shenandoah*, 17, 2, Winter 1966, 3-19, repr. in *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. by George Monteiro, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996), p. 25.

facing the Atlantic. Reminiscing in 1977, Brown wrote of her spectacular views:

I hope she doesn't mind my stating in print that she is far-sighted. [...] When I, quite myopic, could barely see a freighter steaming across the bay, Elizabeth was already describing the activity on deck.¹⁶

The same ocean had long been a setting for coming to terms with aspects of her life: on the coast of Nova Scotia, at Key West, Florida, and as the favoured location of holidays since summer school days (Wellfleet and Provincetown, both on Cape Cod, across the gulf from Duxbury) where she excelled in swimming, fishing and sailing and kite-flying. Ocean-going was her preferred means of Transatlantic travel South to Brazil and to and from Europe and she loved to watch shipping.

Bishop also used binoculars, the effect of which is to merge from two-parts to one and magnify the image, to follow a flicker of movement, a little ritual, from her crow's nest: 'Top floor, 11th, a terrace round two sides, overlooking all that famous bay and beach. Ships go by all the time ... people walk their dogs, same dogs, same time, same old man in blue trunks every morning with two Pekinese at 7am – and at night the lovers on the mosaic sidewalk cast enormous long shadows over the soiled sand', she told Lowell.¹⁷ Notice the 'enormous long shadows' cast on the sand. Bishop was always attracted by the panorama of sea and sky at nightfall. At Key West, a famous sunset observation ritual draws daily crowds, which is, in part, the subject of 'Anaphora' (*CP*, p. 52) and Bishop describes the sand at Copacabana covered with candles on New Year's Eve while waders dressed in white, singing, float sheaves of white flowers on the water for Iemanjá, goddess of the sea.¹⁸

¹⁶ Brown, 'Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil', in Schwartz and Estess, pp. 223-240 (p. 223).

¹⁷ To Lowell, 30 October 1958, *One Art*, pp. 365-366. They were photographed together on this terrace, see jacket of *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, eds. Saskia Hamilton and Thomas Travisano (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

¹⁸ Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 176 and pp. 317-318.

Her view is that source-images mesh irredeemably, that '[i]t takes probably hundreds of things coming together at the right moment to make a poem and no one can ever really separate them out and say this did this, that did that'.¹⁹ Two poems that exist only in draft add to this particular mesh. 'Apartment in Leme', written for Robert Lowell, describes Copacabana at sunrise, the morning after Iemanjá, seeing the tracks left by two bathers and a dog on the beach. The second, an unfinished poem of the 1960s, similarly depicts Copacabana in the last stanza:

This is a day that's beautiful as well,
and warm and clear. At seven o'clock I saw
the dogs being walked along the famous beach
as usual, in a ~~shiny~~ gray-green dawn,
leaving their ~~dog~~ paw-prints draining in the wet.
The line of breakers was steady and the pinkish,
~~rainbow in segments~~ segmented rainbow (hung)
steadily hung above it.
By At eight two little boys were flying kites.
(*'Suicide of a Moderate Dictator'*)²⁰

Although she affirms 'This is a day that's beautiful', her decision to rerun the morning's events suggests something out of the ordinary occurred between 'flying kites' and the present. It may have been this ambiguity in the narrative order that prompted her later to cast 'The End of March' in the past and not to treat it in present tense as continuously unfolding. In writing the events in the imperfect (and conjecturing in pluperfect, conditional and present tenses) she slips herself free of real time and Duxbury slips into the role of all her dreamed and remembered beaches.

¹⁹ George Starbuck, "'The Work!' A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop', in *Ploughshares* 3, nos. 3 & 4 (1977), 11-29, repr. in Schwartz and Estess, pp. 312-330 (pp. 318-319).

²⁰ Biele, p. 57.

a bit of description ...

for what it's worth – it started out as a sort of joke thank-you-note – John B was so appalled when I said I wanted that ugly little green shack for my summer home! (He doesn't share my taste for the awful, I'm afraid.) This is the only copy I can find – & I may have made more changes already – & shd. probably make a lot more. Suggestions welcome – even to tearing it up. (No, I can't – I've already spent the New Yorker check).²¹

Thus deprecatingly, Bishop sent her poem to Lowell for comment. Probably begun within days of a Lenten walk on Duxbury Beach it was revised in early summer 1974, and 'enclosed with a thank-you note to John and Bill,' old friends for whom she house-sat, at King Caesar Road.²² Duxbury has a sheltered bay, a famous bird reserve, and a long spit of sandy ocean beach perfect for kite-flying. It was close enough to Boston for Bishop, teaching at Harvard since 1971, to escape at weekends to stay with the dedicatees of this poem, John Malcolm Brinnin, a fellow Nova Scotian, and his partner Bill Read. In 1963 they co-edited *The Modern Poets: An American British Anthology* and entertained many poets and academics, among them Richard Wilbur, Helen Vendler, Frank Bidart and Bishop (to whom Brinnin had introduced Dylan Thomas in 1953).²³

The months after the poem's inception were fraught with change for Bishop. For personal reasons it did not have the long lead-in time of several other poems she would publish in *Geography III*. In April 1974, possibly just after their 'end of March' walk, she tells Brinnin she is at Rio, en route to Ouro Prêto, where she hoped to complete the sale of Casa Mariana and pack her library and papers.²⁴ In

²¹ To Lowell, 3 September 1974, *Words In Air*, p. 767.

²² Millier, p. 491. 'An almost finished version' reported at end of June 1974.

²³ John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read, eds. *The Modern Poets: An American British Anthology*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963).

²⁴ Postcard, 4 April 1974, *One Art*, p. 583.

June she wrote to Brown, who knew what it cost her to close the doors on life in Brazil, giving her ‘new address after July’ as Lewis Wharf, Boston. Meanwhile:

I’m going down to Duxbury tonight with a friend. John Brinnin has kindly lent us the use of his house there for about a month – it’s nice; right on the bay. I’m going to take nothing but the Marianne Moore piece and 3 poems ... and hope to get my mind on higher things than marks and bills for a few days.²⁵

In July the poem reached Howard Moss at *The New Yorker* carrying the dedication to her hosts, and when Moss suggested the place-name be included, Bishop approved.²⁶ In asking for Lowell’s reaction she would remember that he knew Duxbury, indeed had once fallen for a house there: ‘1740, red cedar shingled...three acres, stream, flagpole...’ and tried to coax her from Brazil, promising ‘we’ll build a replica of your Brazilian house, and you can swing through the years back and forth from one to the other’.²⁷ By naming Duxbury, Bishop addresses her poem to other friends, like Lowell, attached to ‘that long beach’. Rarely for their exchange of poems, he suggested alterations that she accepted. Letters of Autumn 1974 assess her attempts to recast the last stanza although it had already been accepted by, and (in its penultimate form) appeared in *The New Yorker* at the end of March 1975.²⁸ Key to my interest in Bishop is the deceptively light confiding tone of her ‘bit of description’, the way she communicates as if writing a letter. We appreciate the effort it costs to state things correctly, a lesson in phrasing observations to ensure they are unambiguous. One of her Harvard students, the poet Mary Jo Salter, ascribes her detachment as a writer to her ‘lightness’:

She has a way of talking about sad, heavy, difficult things with a kind of shrug—with a feeling of offhandedness. In other hands, that technique could seem shallow, but you

²⁵ To Brown 11 June 1974, *One Art*, p. 586.

²⁶ Biele, pp. 58-59.

²⁷ Lowell to Bishop, 29 November 1953, *Words in Air*, p. 145.

²⁸ To Lowell, 18 October 1974, *Words in Air*, pp. 770-771.

never feel it's shallow with her ... [W]riters I admire ... tell a few jokes or make a few shrugs along the way, though they don't skirt the difficult aspects of life.²⁹

'The End of March' opens with take-it-or-leave-it remarks. Nothing suggests a revelation will occur to the walkers who are barely sketched. Yet when she confides growing mistrust of her desired goal, '(Many things about this place are dubious.)' we begin to hear – and observe within parentheses – 'the secret of the held balance' which 'is the place to hear the real truth', says Seamus Heaney. Her discriminating between what she will and won't say about herself, he terms the 'redistribution' of weights on 'the mind's scales'.³⁰ The balance between sureness and doubt, desire and effacement, wavers mid-poem when she departs from what 'we came on' (16), shared perceptions of the beach, and introduces her first person preoccupation, what 'I wanted' and where 'I wanted to get' (24). Despite the sharpness of her observations, there is a strong sense that what she is really 'looking' for and 'looking at' is not the same and will never be entirely resolved by seeing.

the secret of the held balance

Her priority is ocular truth, not coloured by a need to speak of longings and loss. Anne Stevenson, writing on Bishop's exactitude, considers how she achieves truthfulness. (Bishop preferred 'truth', claiming that she always wrote 'exactly how it happened').³¹ Declaring her 'an observer who wrote for observers,' Stevenson

²⁹ Sarah Cohen, 'The Poets' Poet', interviewing Salter for *The Atlantic*, July 2008, < <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/the-poet-apos-s-poet/6919/>>[accessed 19 July 2010]

³⁰ 'Counting to a Hundred, Elizabeth Bishop', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 332-346 (p. 346).

³¹ Wesley Wehr, 'Conversations and Class Notes (1966)', *The Antioch Review*, 39, 3, Summer 1981, 319-28, repr. in *Conversations*, ed. by Monteiro, pp. 38-46, (p. 42).

outlines a two-tier approach: 'first to *notice* all the aspects of something as it really happened,' and then to corroborate, 'in a form that would delight, stimulate and amplify the understanding of other people who 'noticed'.'³² Riggs goes further in describing the two-part method as 'binocular', combining the 'reading eye ... with a seeing eye' such that word and image are brought into focus and simultaneously appraised.³³ Calling it 'optic denotation', she describes the outcome as more than equivalent to visual: 'to materialize poetry – to bypass artificiality – produces its own verbal reality. Bishop's efforts work against poetic logic to render things visible to the point of tangibility' (p. xxiii). Her double appraisal tests the appropriateness and emphasis of words, but I suggest it also accommodates and absorbs previous formulations of words for images.

In 'The End of March' atmospheric conditions are 'rackety' (6), physically and acoustically uncomfortable, noisy and anti-social. About the ocean, although it has somehow absented itself, gone back to the past, 'indrawn' and 'inaudible', she insists '*it was the colour of mutton-fat jade*' (13), more exotic than anything else described. The 'offshore' wind, that 'disrupted' (8) the Canada geese, drives the Atlantic backwards into the mist, 'upright, steely' (11) evoking roller shutters. 'I lived in Paris one whole winter long ago ... and that "endless wall of fog" haunts me still', she told Lowell, referring him to her own translations from Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Beneath the date, 1 March 1961, she added 'in like a lamb, if that means anything here', reversing the old adage: March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb.³⁴ That month she was south of the Equator where the seasonal pattern is reversed, Brazilian summer waning, but did the phrase slip back into place at Duxbury? The water she sees is not the boiled-green of ordinary jade but valuable

³² Anne Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* (London: Bellew, 1998), p. 16.

³³ Riggs, *Word Sightings*, p. 41.

³⁴ To Lowell, *One Art*, pp. 394 -396. McClatchy notices this in *White Paper*, p. 58.

and special ‘mutton-fat’, whitish or tallow-coloured jade often employed for Chinese animal carvings. The name must have tickled Bishop who loved to mention culinary details, as it confuses synaesthetically, mixing mineral with animal associations: the pallor and opacity of fat on joints of lamb, anticipating cooking and eating, but also, Millier suggests, the colourlessness of a corpse.³⁵

Bishop can alter her poem’s ‘truth’ by hesitating over words (sometimes visibly in punctuation, more often invisibly) whether she is providing *evidence*, letting *correspondences* surface or giving substance to *emblems*. *Evidence* is of-the-moment. *Correspondences* arise from way back – earlier drafts of inconclusive poems, wordings of part-forgotten accounts in her notebooks, drawings and letters, memorable even after years for their evocation and wit. *Emblems* emerge to form a personal iconography, as the ‘lion sun’ does, its origin and meaning not as obvious to her as the emblem she can ascribe to dreams, her ‘dream-house’. The beach itself becomes emblematic of the world that supports conflicting aspects of Bishop’s self-sufficiency as a creative writer.

What is ultimately complex in its layers of perception starts, and seems to mean to go on, in a language that affects to be plainly literal, slightly and humorously, I think, plodding:

Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
 a track of big dog-prints (so big
 they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
 lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
 looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
 over and over. (14-19)

The mystery begins to accrue a sense of the disembodied, when the companions (who disappear in their turn) discover ‘the wet white string’ (17), a detail also found in ‘The Moose’ where sweet peas ‘cling | to their wet white string’, the next-to-last things visible in a foggy dusk until, by lantern light, ‘Two rubber boots

³⁵ Millier, p. 492.

show, | illuminated, solemn. | A dog gives one bark.³⁶ By leaving gaps between signs of life in ‘The Moose’ Bishop can shift from ephemeral perceptions to solid facts, a trick she plays here too. Discoveries are made step by step, a little randomly. She doesn’t impose (compose) a progression. Interviewed in 1970, Bishop said that her sense of narrative came naturally from being ‘on the move’:

Writing poetry is a way of *life*, not a matter of testifying but of experience ... not the way in which one goes about interpreting the world, but the very process of sensing it. When one is “on the move” one obviously *discovers* things, but that is merely part of the process.³⁷

As an apprentice writer she had wanted ‘poetry [...] in action, within itself ... “a progress of imaginative apprehension”’.³⁸ She intended to alter pace and insert pauses rather than rely on meter, to a rhythm ‘built up by a series of irregularities. Instead of beginning with an “uninterrupted mood” what I want to do is to get the moods themselves into the rhythm.’ Her feel for the acoustic patterning of life, how things move, with halts and accelerations, unconscious recurrences and stresses, is proof of her sensory acuity, and goes beyond looking. She can render what she hears by the patterning of phrases, cleverly used to intensify listening, or the reader’s awareness of sound, and so charge mood and atmosphere by changing the energy of her communication.

Refrains are used in ‘The End of March’ (‘big ... so big, prints ... prints, lengths ... lengths, over and over’) to set a rhythm which I propose replicates waves, not ‘inaudible rollers’ but shore-break. Repeated like this, we see and hear the ‘ghost’ in the wash at the water’s edge: ‘rising on every wave, [...] | falling back, sodden,’ (21/22) while antitheses muddle us, ‘up to | down to’, ‘endless | end’, ‘A kite | no kite’. ‘[O]ver and over’ models wave-motion itself and we know from ‘At

³⁶ *CP*, pp. 169-173, (p. 170-171).

³⁷ Regina Colônia, ‘Poetry as a Way of Life’, *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 6 June 1970, repr. in Monteiro, pp. 50-53 (p. 51).

³⁸ To Donald Stanford, quoting M. W. Croll, *The Baroque Style in Prose*, 20 November 1933, *One Art*, pp. 11-12.

the Fishhouses' that it induces a strange optical/aural reverie in Bishop:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones, and then the world.
(‘At the Fishhouses’, 67-70)³⁹

‘The End of March’ is intriguing precisely because Bishop’s reverie does not build like a mantra from her ‘very process of sensing’ the natural world, but from desire attaching to the *un-found* object of her walk.

my proto-dream-house, my crypto-dream-house

Common to journey poems is the grail, the aspiration of a quest. The ‘snarl’ of string, its ‘sodden ghost’, lures the aspirants off-course, like an evil spirit. But when the speaker becomes a single ‘I’, determination enters her voice. She anticipates what lies ahead – its ‘palisade’ (29) against the action of the sea – imagines a safe interior within ‘that crooked box/set up on pilings’ (25-26), with herself reading and writing. The brave attempt to reach and ‘retire there’ (32) metaphorically marks a winter of personal struggle over the idea of home for Elizabeth Bishop. Significantly she comments on disruption to ‘a lone flight of Canada geese’ (9), migrating North, like her, in transit between continents. Within weeks, her papers and library (3000 books) would be *en route* to Boston from Brazil.

I am going through papers and burning large baskets full. I
thought I’d done most of this last year, but keep finding
more bundles of letters and old checks – only somehow or
other *I* did all this, in past years, all by myself...⁴⁰

Ever since her brief employment as a creative writing tutor in 1937, reading assignments represents the loneliest and ‘most literary’ nightshift. Then, she had

³⁹ Published in *The New Yorker*, 1947, *A Cold Spring*, 1955, and *CP*, pp. 64-66.

⁴⁰ To Frani Blough Muser, 26 June 1972, *One Art*, p. 569.

written for her character, Edwin Boomer, a nocturnal ‘priest-like task’:

Once, on one of our large public beaches, a man was appointed to keep the sand free from papers. [...] Since he worked only at night he was also given a lantern ... a big wire basket to burn the papers in, a box of matches for setting fire to them, and a house.

As a house, it was more like an idea of a house than a real one. [...] It could have been a child’s perfect playhouse or an adult’s ideal house – since everything that makes most houses nuisances had been done away with.

It was a shelter, but not for living in, for thinking in.⁴¹

Like Boomer’s, she has in ‘The End of March’ the ‘idea of a house’ and an actual house: ‘There must be a stove; there *is* a chimney’ (42).⁴² Details she may have seen – or missed – on previous visits are rehearsed in lines 26-48 in a series of parentheses, punctuated pauses, long dashes, question marks and italics, until we are almost persuaded that she arrived at the real thing, ‘the whole affair’. Everything she supposed could happen in the house (always in the conditional, ‘I’d like’, ‘I’d blaze’) only happens in the poem’s ‘dream-house’ time, not in the “real time” it takes to walk.

Again, like Boomer, her sleepless alter ego, she avidly collected clips from letters, from her own correspondents and literary heroes. (At Harvard in 1971 she originated a course on writers’ letters). Undisturbed in the ‘thinking’ hut at night Boomer collates the papers he hunts on the beach. She describes him reading by lantern light, and coming across advice ‘that seemed to be about himself, his occupation in life’:

“The Exercitant will benefit all the more ... by moving from the house in which he dwelt, and taking another house or room, that there he may abide [...] more freely in diligently searching for that he so much desires.”

⁴¹ *Collected Prose*, p. 172. She notes ‘a beach should be able to keep itself clean, as cats do. We have all observed: ‘The moving waters at their priest-like task | Of pure ablution round earth’s human shore’, from Keats’s ‘Bright Star’.

⁴² Millier, p. 2. In the maternal family name, Bulmer, the ‘l’ is silent: Boomer.

That certainly was plain enough.⁴³

If Bishop knew Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, (I cannot prove she did) she would have rejoiced in his phenomenology of the house: 'the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.'⁴⁴ In his list of memories of the intimate qualities of one's childhood home are the lamp at a window, the colour and warmth of a stove, the same as Bishop's images of the 'dream-house'. In both writers we have a sense of the promise of the cosy interior for the house is a shell emptied by departure, but open to house a new incomer. He cites Emily's discovery, on board ship in *A High Wind in Jamaica* that it's safe to come out from her make-believe home, since a house stays put. She has only 'an idea of a house', made of tarpaulins, but 'it suddenly flashed into her mind that she was *she...*' just as reliably as her 'house' was what she said it was, and she need no longer be confined by her play-space but could take on the universe and still come home to it.⁴⁵ My surmise is that Bishop does know this story and possibly also remembers Edna St Vincent Millay's anticipation of a return to a childhood beach:

I shall go back again to the bleak shore
And build a little shanty on the sand,
[...]
But I shall find the sullen rocks and skies
Unchanged from what they were when I was young.⁴⁶

In defence of the 'Duxbury poem' Bishop later rebuked Jerome Mazzaro for suggesting it abounded in literary references: 'I wasn't aware of any echo until you pointed it out', then re-considered:

Well, it takes an infinite number of things coming
together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, books, last night's
dream, experiences past and present – to make a poem.

⁴³ *Collected Prose*, pp. 175-176.

⁴⁴ Bachelard, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Richard Hughes, *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1929, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1971), p. 94.

⁴⁶ Edna St Vincent Millay, *Collected Sonnets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 33.

The settings or descriptions of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts – or as close to the facts as I can write them.⁴⁷

The depiction of the beach has chilly ‘plain facts’ enough to make one wonder why she left the comfort of home, ‘scarcely the day | to take a walk’ (1-2). Elements that used to be there, now ‘withdrawn’: tide, kite (perhaps), ‘the house ... boarded up’, a creature ‘who’d walked the beach’ (61): must be taken on trust. There was something or someone special, ‘except that now he was behind them’ (60). In the nostalgia for a home that is blanked out, McClatchy finds in Bishop’s walk an echo from Wallace Stevens’ ‘Vacancy in the Park’:

March . . . Someone has walked across the snow,
Someone looking for he knows not what.
[...]
It is like the feeling of a man
Come back to see a certain house.⁴⁸

Recording the attempt to make the beach home in some way brings us again to her depictions of Boomer and Crusoe. Kit Fan suggests that, “‘Crusoe in England’ offers a complex mirror of a life ... lived between different cultures, languages, and notions of identity. The idea of home, as opposed to that of travel, is a site of conflict that centers on the tension between autobiography and geography. ...[W]riting about home, either real or imaginary, involves negotiating the Crusoe dilemma’.⁴⁹ Her Crusoe, displaced, on ‘another island, that doesn’t seem like one,’ (154-155) flits between worlds, missing his original ‘archipelago’, recalling islands his ‘brain bred’ in dreams and nightmares. Recounting his implausible geography and fauna, Bishop’s castaway supplies us with more and more imagined features.⁵⁰ ‘I’d shut my eyes and think about a tree, | an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere.’

⁴⁷ To Mazzaro, 27 April 1978, *One Art*, p. 621.

⁴⁸ McClatchy, p. 71.

⁴⁹ Kit Fan, ‘Imagined Places: Robinson Crusoe and Elizabeth Bishop’, *Biography*, Vol. 28. 1, (Winter) 2005, pp. 43-53 (p. 44).

⁵⁰ ‘Crusoe in England’, *Geography III*, pp. 9-18.

(113-114). This is a perfect Bishop *emblem*, an image conjured from a figment into being, given a chance to flourish and cast ‘real shade’, exactly what Marianne Moore wanted from ‘a real toad in an imaginary garden’.⁵¹ Some memories mitigate the past’s monotony, others allay a continuing sense of loss. And after the bravado and jokes at his own expense, Crusoe finally sets down the hardest plain fact, Friday died ‘seventeen years ago come March’ (181-182).

Echoes in ‘The End of March’

The poem has a date, perhaps an anniversary, perhaps a hint of Easter, curiously enough the name with which she disguised her mother in her first stories.⁵² It also has ghosts, ends of lives. From the disturbing ‘snarl’, neither animal nor human noise, emerges a drowned or shipwrecked being, ‘man-size, awash’. She raises the suspicion of a life taken, so that later the emblematic kite can be returned to life and play. In investigating her ambiguity, Mark Ford infers Bishop ‘finds herself led by her tangled kite-string to a vivid apprehension of how her creativity emerges from and figures forth the interplay of elements.’⁵³ She had invented a hobby for Boomer, twitching (bird-watching) litter, animated by wind:

... the flight of the papers was an interesting thing to watch. He had made many comparisons between them and the birds that occasionally flew within range of the lantern.

A bird, of course, inspired ... by a desire ... to reach some place or obtain something, flew in a line.

But the papers had no discernible goal ... They soared up, fell down, could not decide, hesitated, subsided, flew straight to their doom in the sea, or turned over in mid-air to collapse on the sand without another motion.

⁵¹ ‘Poetry’, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (1970, New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), pp. 1329-1330, (p. 1330).

⁵² Millier, p. 6.

⁵³ ‘Elizabeth Bishop at the Water’s Edge’, *Essays in Criticism*, 53(3), 235-261, (p. 259).

She contrasts the line of ‘desire to reach some place’ to the skittish way kites lose wind. Kite-flying was a favourite pastime of Bishop’s and in 1938, staying ‘right on the edge of the beach’ at Provincetown, she boasted,

the kite was a great success. I actually had it up a mile one day. It looks wonderful that high up over the ocean ... One evening several barn swallows tried to light on the string, and seagulls have flown right at the kite itself several times.⁵⁴

Thirty-five years later, her poem restores an essential kite-presence to Duxbury, which stands across the water from Loren MacIver’s cottage at Cape Cod. She may have opened Brinnin and Read’s anthology, in which her own work and photograph appeared, to find ‘Kite Poem’, by her fellow kite enthusiast James Merrill, where ‘a certain person’ ‘sought to emulate | The sport of birds [...] | By climbing up on a kite. They found his coat’.⁵⁵ The riddle of ‘giving up the ghost...’ would be resolved then by ‘A kite-string? – But no kite.’(22-23).

In the watery end of her ‘sodden ghost’, I hear Wallace Stevens’s ‘sovereign ghost’ in ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’, and picture Crispin at sea, ‘washed away by magnitude’, divested of all attachments to the small world he can command:

[...] dissolved in shifting diaphanes
 nothing left of him,
 Except in faint, memorial gesturings
 That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,
 [...] until nothing of himself
 Remained, except some starker, barer self
 In a starker, barer world, in which the sun
 Was not the sun because it never shone
 (I, 39, 46-48, 54, 62-65)⁵⁶

Bishop often quoted Stevens’s powerful invocations; his work had been important

⁵⁴ To Moore, 10 Sept 1938, *One Art*, p. 77.

⁵⁵ Brinnin and Read, p. 228.

⁵⁶ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 1954 (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) pp. 27-46, (p. 28-29).

to her since Key West days.⁵⁷ Meanwhile her walk perhaps owes something to ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’ and ‘The Sun This March’ (1929): ‘Cold is our element and winter's air | Brings voices as of lions coming down.’⁵⁸ She may too have found, leafing through Brinnin and Read’s anthology, ‘Thorn Leaves in March’ by W. S. Merwin.⁵⁹ It concerns a dog-walk in moonlight so white it replicates snowfall and reverses, exactly as Bishop does, the lion and lamb symbols for the beginning and end of March:

And as a lamb, I could see now, it would go,
Breathless into its own ghostliness, [...]
And here there would be no lion at all that is
The Beast of gold, and sought as an answer.

As for the ‘lion-sun’ I am tempted to relate it to the ‘suspended lion face’ of Philip Larkin’s ‘Solar’. Possibly Bishop had read ‘Solar’ after it appeared in *Queen* in 1966, but we know she read aloud from Larkin’s new collection (published in June 1974) to her students.⁶⁰ ‘In the fall of 1974 [...] *High Windows* had just come out and I remember her reading some ... including some of the profanity, which was amazing from Miss Bishop’s mouth.’⁶¹ A poem proliferating in emblems for the sun, it resonates with hers. Could his ‘single stalkless flower’ with ‘its petalled head’ have suggested her ‘artichoke’ (which would be ‘greener | boiled’)? Bishop asks how its colour was intensified, ‘(with bicarbonate of soda?)’ (27-29), revealing herself as a practised cook. Stay with the ‘shingled green’ calyx of her image and Larkin’s fist of a sun, ‘unopening like a hand’, strip it to the choke, not unlike a beard or mane, and find its heart/Larkin’s ‘coin’. Layered though I have made this

⁵⁷ Carole Doeski, ‘Proustian Closure in Wallace Stevens’s *The Rock* and Elizabeth Bishop’s *Geography III*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 44, 1, (Spring 1998), 34-52 (p. 43).

⁵⁸ Stevens, p. 114.

⁵⁹ Brinnin and Read, p. 233.

⁶⁰ Philip Larkin, *High Windows*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 27. Dated 4 Nov 1964, ‘Solar’ appeared in *Queen*, CCCCXXVI, 5594 (25 May 1966), 47. See B.C Bloomfield, *Philip Larkin A Bibliography, 1933-1976*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 55.

⁶¹ Salter interviewed, *The Atlantic*, July 2008.

association, dependent on visual correlatives, it is clear that Bishop unconsciously gleans image-possibilities for her repertory.

In her reading as much as watching, she never stops hunting for descriptions that fit the forces at play in her imagination. She not only qualifies and revises her descriptions but in playing associatively with further possibilities, she has the reader join her play, encouraged by the energy with which her mind searches.

A light to read by – perfect! But –

As creative reader and writer delighting in evocations of place I am aware of a tendency in poets to dramatize effects of light, largely because, even in ordinary circumstances – rainbows for example – they seem the nearest thing to ecstatic visions. Wallace Stevens never forgot witnessing a ‘glory’, the sun in aureole, over the Rockies, which made him want to write.⁶² Describing a *real-enough* outdoors and an imagined interior in the same poem demands Bishop’s focused attention on physical detail, particularly to shifts from one light level to another and on the intense moments of enchanted light, altered by fire and water: ‘droplets slipping, heavy with light’ (37) and ‘diaphanous blue flame | ... doubled in the window’ (40-41). These prepare us for a sense of invisible sources of power and light that ultimately transform the beach-walk.

In 1937 while dreaming up Boomer’s experiments, Bishop studied Newton’s *Opticks*, his experiments with light, with capturing and intensifying an image by narrowly channelling light into a dark chamber (*camera obscura*) and how light passed through a prism diffracts and reveals the colours of light, in Newton’s term, diaphany. Riggs examines her reluctance to put words to illumination since she

⁶² Gyorgyi Voros, *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 1.

might fall short of saying what she knew about light, her fascination with effects such as iridescence, sunset, the colour of shadows and flames and her interest in optical precision using many devices that magnify and enhance vision.⁶³ Bishop often has several tries at naming a colour or light effect. At moments of heightened sensibility she always records colour perceptions as prismatic, diaphanous and intense.⁶⁴ She feared that television would require less and less of viewers' curiosity and acuity of observation, telling Ashley Brown, 'I have one here, I must admit – small, brightly colored [...] and the reception is almost perfect'. She took 'occasional' delight in film, with its potential to transport her, for example, to the undersea of Jacques Cousteau, significantly more interesting as moving images than photographs by marine biologists such as Rachel Carson.⁶⁵

In an essay that takes its title 'visibility is poor' from Bishop's '12 O' Clock News', Katie Ford concentrates on her obsession with achieving higher and higher resolution, with establishing whether she sees what she sees.⁶⁶ Ford describes the search for precision in terms of movement:

The trodden paths within a poet's mind are of two sorts—those made out of routine habit and those made out of troubled obsession. [...] Bishop's [...] finds its uncertainty growing as its intensity of observation grows. Alongside that uncertainty, the need to undo or correct prior statements becomes prominent.

[...] So speech must turn itself back on its former statements, undoing them. It is a linguistic of self-suspicion, of essential doubt that language is in a one-to-one relationship with "reality".

One thinks of the 'finical' attention of Sandpiper, a 'discreet' self-portrait. Even describing the bird's activity she tweaks it: ' – Watching, rather, the spaces ... | where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains.' Accepting the *Books Abroad*/

⁶³ Riggs, pp. 48-49.

⁶⁴ Travisano, p. 103.

⁶⁵ To Brown 23 Jan 1972, *One Art*, p. 555.

⁶⁶ Katie Ford, "'Visibility is Poor": Elizabeth Bishop's Obsessive Imagery and Mystical Unsayings', *Academy of American Poets*, 2007 <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19646>> [accessed 18 July 2010]

Neustadt International Prize in 1976, she admitted: ‘all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper – just running along the edges of different countries, ‘looking for something’. I have always felt I couldn’t *possibly* live very far inland, away from the ocean; and I *have* always lived near it, frequently in sight of it.’⁶⁷ Out of the ‘endless heroic observations’ Bishop admired in Darwin’s daily practice, ‘his eyes fixed on facts and minute details’, grows ‘a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration’ the sort she will develop, retiring to Duxbury to ‘look through binoculars, read boring books, | ... and write down useless notes’ (34-35).⁶⁸ An ‘endless’ process starts up again with the first draft of ‘The End of March’ rehearsing the reality of ‘things about this place’, doubts, a dreaded sense of exclusion since, ‘of course the house was boarded up’ (51). Closed, isolated, unreal, unrealistic – Bishop is deeply equivocal in outlining the promise of the place at its most unpromising. There’s the rub of this poem, what is lacking or missed matters more. While many things seen on the beach have a provisional, precarious look about them she hints at greater un-likelihood in the apparent suppression of the sea’s sound by ‘offshore wind’ at low tide. Years earlier in ‘The Monument’, the speaker asked “Why does that strange sea make no sound? ...” (31) filling a hiatus that only increases the walkers’ apprehension of another inconstant presence: ‘once each day the light goes around it | like a prowling animal,’ (69-70).⁶⁹ With much the same foreboding, ‘a thick white snarl’ on the Duxbury shore heightens the sense of presence that is also absence.

Doubts ease as she starts to decide or invent what ‘my’ house has to offer: a built form, solid materials, ‘are they railroad ties?’ (30), Bishop at her most chatty.

⁶⁷ Heaney, p. 337.

⁶⁸ Anne Stevenson, ‘The Geographical Mirror’, in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* ed. by Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2002), pp. 31-41, (p. 39). From the unpublished “Darwin letter” to Stevenson, 8 January 1964.

⁶⁹ *CP*, pp. 23-25. Written 1937/8 alongside drafts of ‘The Sea & its Shore’.

Yet the window (41) which will allow her, 'foggy days', to 'watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light', recalls a phenomenon that has long played tricks on her memory:

The window this evening was covered with hundreds of long, shining drops of rain [...] I could look into the drops, like so many crystal balls. Each bore traces of a relative or friend: several weeping faces slid away from mine [...] and strangest of all, horrible enough to make me step quickly away, was one large drop containing a lonely, magnificent human eye, wrapped in its own tear.⁷⁰

Having the means to bring the place to life will make her mistress of the dream-house. Only after dreaming 'There must be a stove' does she check for existing 'wires, | and electricity,' (43-44), having infused the interior with warmth in anticipation of 'a *grog à l'américaine*' (her Canadian grandfather's hot rum toddy) and the doubling (to suggest company?) of the flame across it:

I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window. (38-41)

The affirmation provided by that flame, 'doubled' seems to last into the final stanza. When she read the draft of Lowell's *Life Studies*, she welcomed a surge of 'that sure feeling':

... when everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry - or not material, seemed to be poetry, and all the past was illuminated in long shafts here and there, like a long-awaited for sunrise. If only one could see everything that way all the time! It seems to me it's the whole purpose of art, to the artist (not to the audience) - that rare feeling of control, illumination - life is all right, for the time being.⁷¹

Bishop can write of everyday occurrences with an awe that puts things in a wonderful light – perhaps puts light to things? In 'Anaphora', a poem simultaneously celebrating and mourning the sun in Key West, the lovers' waking

⁷⁰ David Kalstone quotes this passage in 'Trial Balances, Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore,' *Grand Street*, 3.1, Autumn 1983, 115-135, p. 122.

⁷¹ To Lowell 14 December 1957, *One Art*, p. 350.

question is:

“Where is the music coming from, the energy?
The day was meant for what ineffable creature
we must have missed?” (7-9)

Then she warns against taking light for granted, even when the sun continues to reappear, ‘the fiery event | of every day in endless | endless ascent’.⁷²

Sunlight at ‘The End of March’ transforms the merest details of the beach. What remains are stones ‘set in their bezels of sand’, and, since the tide is still out, ‘majestic paw-prints’, isolated signs of life. In her traveller’s tale Bishop gives us a taste for the beach and house, convincing us of the actual and psychic importance of places. She has revealed her own invention at work, practicing on the ‘ghost’ and doing marvels on life in the shack. On the way home, she recovers space for dreaming. The walk, we sense, has literally provided breathing-space, welcome to an asthmatic person like herself, and given her *lift*, a crucial word – the one which ends *Geography III*, albeit in parenthesis, ‘(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)’⁷³ Duxbury is suddenly hers, and the lion’s, ‘to play with’, a site of fiction and aspiration precisely because it is a site of proto- and crypto- dreams. The last, sudden now-ness of the sun ‘for just a minute’ reduces to nothing all the distances and ambivalences to what is ‘far’, Bishop’s many references to ‘long’: ‘that long beach’ (2), ‘lengths and lengths’ (17), ‘old, long, long books’ (35), ‘long shadows’ (57): breaking the ‘endless’ cycle. While it is a poem of the moment, set in a specific month, (or at a time when a personal long march ends), it takes place beyond the present too, in the littoral world, on the edge of landscape, a *locus* of the imagination. She has the reader enter and appreciate both kinds of space: the vast ocean landscape and the small world of the ‘box’: where the writing of the

⁷² *CP*, p. 52. Assent/ascent: Mutlu Konuk Blasing considers how the gist is altered by repetition, in “Mont d’Espoir” or “Mount Despair”: The Re-Verses of Elizabeth Bishop’, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 25. 3, Autumn 1984, 341-353, (p. 350).

⁷³ ‘Five Flights Up’, *CP*, p. 181.

poem lets her come and go, discover (as in Bachelard's example, 'Emily' discovered 'she was she'), 'you are an *Elizabeth*' ('In the Waiting Room').⁷⁴ By conjuring fantasy elements of dog, kite, stove, match, lamp, shadow and lion, she allows herself to play and wish. And whereas 'But – impossible.' sounds categorical, 'perhaps' (last line) is cheerful; rather than closing, it suggests *find out tomorrow*, as one says to a child, with a wink, at the close of a bedtime story.

'The End of March' repays examination precisely because it is never really done: it has a luminous, shape-shifting life. When Frank O'Hara joked that his own work was of the 'I do this, I do that' school of poetry, he may not have anticipated the truly elusive quality of a walk poem entered into by a writer who usually shrinks from using the first person to stand for herself. Yet this is a pleasure of elucidation, finding the 'Elizabeth' whose 'joke thank-you note' lights up and ties in to a lifetime of work.

⁷⁴ *CP*, p. 160.

CHAPTER 3

Entanglement. Immediacy. Three Seers Face the Invisible

Who is the third who walks (always beside you?)

Let us compare a third beach walk poem for place, person and preoccupation. So far we have followed Ammons and Bishop relaying, in a fairly steady, informal idiom, what takes place in changeable daylight on an un-eventful beach. At first sight, at least, uneventful. Their poems are investigative and accretive, leisurely – in their open form – despite disclosing anxiety about elements that strike them as hostile or uncertain. They write in first person, past tense yet both will waver into the present, Ammons to still the time, Bishop to reassure herself, ‘there is a chimney, [...] and electricity, possibly’ (42, 44). Then comes a sense of adjustment, of an *afterwards*, worked into the poem, a space between encounter and representation. Each comes to re-consider her/his own place in the event. This sense of place is not about the sites, but a relatedness to the world ‘out there’ and to varying degrees, ‘in there’ too, with the reader, with themselves as thinkers.

They work with a frankness of expression that I wanted to understand: how, in their manipulations of language, they move from private experiences of perception and reflection to revelation.

I distinguish between three different uses of language at work in the poems. The first is common to all three: for showing, naming and situating material things: re-presenting them step-by-step. The second, discreet in Bishop, dramatic in Graham, is address, in a form that simulates speaking, and the third is particular to Graham, her deictic commentary and demonstrative style: her notation of *now*: how she insists on the here-and-now of the writer speaking, the speaker writing.

Jorie Graham acknowledges debts to both previous writers for the quality of scrutiny and articulation, especially to Bishop for persistent clarification, her 'revisionary descriptions'.¹ In the same interview, she admires their 'porting' (her pidgin term), rather than reporting, showing themselves to be active in the poem, living the change of events, not covering it as journalists. Each does it differently, and I consider the range in material and language that they 'port', (from the French and Italian verbs, *porter*, *portare*) which I interpret as wear, carry, and bring home (not, I think, to be confused with the term used for adapting software). Their transcriptions, or crossing into writing as Gilbert suggests, are not drawn out of landscape, but of experience – at a phenomenological level – of small worlds: clamshell, dream-house, bucket/pool: found within the wide world of the beach. Graham obsessively revisits sea and shore in her collection *Never* (2002) but it becomes, in *Overlord* (2005), the littoral and liminal position – at the edge of order – crucial to her historically. In twenty-five related poems (with Notes), she returns to the events of June 1944, from D-Day, when America entered the war in Europe with "Operation Overlord". She examines the Normandy coastline as a site of devastation, inter-meshing documentary evidence (from military cemeteries and

¹ 'The Art of Poetry No. 85 | Jorie Graham', interview by Thomas Gardner, *The Paris Review*, no. 165, Spring 2003 <http://www.joriegraham.com/interview_gardner>{accessed 14 June 2011}

nearby town museums) with her observations on what remains in the region.

Graham (b. 1950) is American but being raised in Rome, rarely spoke English until she enrolled at New York University film school (1969). A cosmopolitan European, she is deeply conscious of the Catholic Church and Roman Empire. Layers of classical history and philosophy underpin her sense of the world.² Schooled in the French *lycée* system and the Sorbonne, she has also lived for sustained periods in France. Thus, writing 'EUROPE (*Omaha Beach 2003*)' involves her in a different historic and cultural perspective to the two Atlantic seaboard poets, as well as a different deployment of what, she insists, is not her first but third language. Already this separates her from Bishop and Ammons whose early years were spent in remote rural Baptist communities, where the common understanding of one's place in the natural world was reached through working with its materials rather than via the philosophical, language-based enquiry in which Graham is at home.

Notwithstanding her ambivalence to her American heritage, for she is openly distrustful of U. S. military involvement abroad, a strong American tradition can be traced in her beach poems:

Like Whitman, Stevens and Bishop, Graham loves to situate herself on a shoreline and to use the available sensory data as a goad to, and a reflection of, her metaphysical aspirations.

[...]

Her philosophical themes (shared in part with the late A. R. Ammons) are cause and effect, origin and destination, and the way things work temporally. [...] Her hurly-burly synaesthetic response to the world allows her to combine the philosopher's wonder with the painter's eye. And the listener's ear.³

² Jorie Graham, for the Big Think<<http://www.5min.com/Video/The-European-Mentality-303382299>> and <<http://www.5min.com/Video/Jorie-Graham-On-Growing-Up-Trilingual-303382260>>[accessed 10 June 2011]

³ Willard Spiegelman, 'Jorie Graham Listening' in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. by Thomas Gardner (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2005), pp. 219-237, (p. 231-232). Hereafter referred to as *Essays*.

Walking I try to tell ...

There is no denying the energy of her mind in action, ‘hurly-burly’ of her poetic method, richness of transcribed sensation and an overall earnestness to bear witness to the contemporary world. But she has detractors. Spiegelman criticizes ‘*impatient* observing of both sights and sounds’ (p. 231) comparing her to Bishop for raising ‘the same questions in different dialects: How is the natural world scripted? How can we reproduce nature’s script in our own language?’ (p. 220). We shall see however, in *Overlord*, that she breaks away from specific concerns with nature and the sea, her main focus in *Never*, while laying a more general stress on the preoccupation Selby names her ‘apprehension of imminent ecological disaster’.⁴

One way she does this is to combine the immediacy of notes made *en plein air* with a broad range of reading in her research for ‘a book which tried to deal with war as I encountered it by coming to live in a house right near Omaha Beach’.⁵ She was recovering, in Normandy in 2003/4, from an undisclosed crisis or illness. Her notes, made in large sketchbooks, record traces of war, found at sea level (although tidal erosion has deleted much that was abandoned on the beaches) and in the hinterland: restored farming country, altered villages, the cliffs where military cemeteries now stand. In the subtitle of an earlier anti-war poem, ‘What the End is For’ Graham identifies in square brackets and italics ‘[*Grand Forks, North Dakota*]’ the site of a U.S. military installation where, to her horror, five hundred B-52 bombers stood ready, with their engines idling.⁶ Calvin Bedient calls her account ‘hardly lyrical; in fact, hardly poetry’ and describes the arena she

⁴ Nick Selby, ‘Mythologies of Ecstatic Immersion’ in *American Mythologies: Essays on Contemporary Literature*, ed. by William Blazek and Michael K. Glenday (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp. 202-225, p. 216.

⁵ ‘Imagining the Unimaginable, Jorie Graham in Conversation’, 2008 interview with Deirdre Wengen, <http://www.joriegraham.com/interview_wengen>[accessed 4 January 2010].

⁶ *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), pp. 66-69.

enters as 'gladiatorial.'⁷ This remains true of the newer work and the grand combative scale on which she operates.

Three poems mingling the voices of the dead are titled 'Spoken from the Hedgerows'. In one, she summons "the United States and her allies" (in speech-marks) to Vierville, a strategic seaside town, as 'the meeting place' for

(T)he experience of killing and getting killed.
Get missed. Get hit. Sun - is it with us. Holiday,
are you with us on this beach today. (5-7)⁸

When she defies 'you' to appear, 'you' might be the dead of D-Day, today's holidaymakers, or the as-yet unplaced reader. Her address lacks the friendly inclusiveness of Whitman, displaying a dangerous, sibylline edge. She treats the loss of life during the Allied invasion as overture to a lamentation of the sacrifice of further lives to global wars pursued in the name of the free world, and as spurs to her six poems chronicling 'Attempts' at 'Praying' that human endeavour to take control of Earth's resources will not ultimately leave Earth a wasteland.⁹ Bedient reads *Overlord* as 'anti-lyrical in tone and almost throwaway in its art of plain communication, but, yes, lyrical [...] if lyricism is [...] a jolt of utterance standing out from the words of the multitude' and if, 'the lyric is a species "of a social antagonism," giving "voice to what ideology hides"'.¹⁰

Thomas Otten reads Graham for her ability to trace gaps, losses, absences and breaks in the material and social world, to provide subjective links to objective facts, including the ugly and dangerous, using the poem to push through or into the spaces that lie between:

⁷ Bedient, 'Toward a Jorie Graham Lexicon,' in *Essays* ed. by Gardner, pp. 275-291, (p. 279).

⁸ 'Spoken from the Hedgerows', *Overlord*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005) pp. 40-42, (p. 40).

⁹ In *Overlord* six poems of 'Praying', dated to differentiate each 'Attempt', are not to be confused with four earlier poems called 'Prayer' in *Never* (2002).

¹⁰ Bedient, quoting Adorno, 'The Predicament of Modern Poetry (The Lyric at the Pinch-Gate)', *Chicago Review*, 51/52, 4/1, 2006, pp. 135-154, Academic Search Complete, EBSCO host [viewed 21 June 2011].

... lyric emerges as the most intimate material history...the genre in which the gap – even just the physical distance – between a speaker and a world of objects is at its narrowest, the genre most dependent for its intelligibility on material things as they fill in and bestow a sense of location on the blank antecedent of the first-person pronoun. ... [S]ubjectivity changes as isolation, connection and desire are thought through the substantial and ephemeral things that surround the self.¹¹

Knowing yourself to be alive and sentient somewhere, and knowing how to move on from the spot in time to make that affirmation, seems to be the message inherent in the walk poem. It is compromised by ‘authorial interruption’, as Sharon Cameron describes the tendency, overstating what one is conscious of.¹² Surely that is why Ammons ends up with the ‘drab constant of experience’. I return to Graham’s difficulty in reconciling literal with lyric treatment in ‘EUROPE (*Omaha Beach 2003*)’ and to the sense of futility that permeates the sequence as a whole.¹³

While Bishop had to be persuaded to add ‘*Duxbury*’ to her subtitle, Graham uses the name expressly, adding the year of her inspection. With ‘*Omaha*’ in parenthesis and ‘EUROPE’ capitalised, she implies its historical and territorial significance. The combined names focus on something greater than the geographic beach. David Abrams reminds us that in certain oral traditions, if a storyteller does not give the name of the place where something happens then ‘it may render the telling powerless or ineffective’.¹⁴ Although since World War Two, *Omaha* is commonly printed on maps of this region, the name belongs to a Native American people, riders of the Great Plains, decimated by disease in the nineteenth century, and was given first to the capital of Nebraska; its re-appearance here is noted, rather than discussed, with some apprehension. Now a summer resort, the chain of

¹¹ Thomas J. Otten, ‘Jorie Graham’s _____s’ in *Essays*, ed. by Gardner, pp. 185-205, (p. 201).

¹² Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 207.

¹³ *Overlord*, pp. 50-52. For the full text, hereafter referred to as ‘Europe’, see Appendix C.

¹⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 182.

beaches collectively code-named *Omaha* was the place where disastrous fatalities were incurred by the Allied invasion, so that when Graham describes the surfacing of WW2 equipment revealed by the dropping tide, she informally acknowledges several aspects of the past, not without foreboding for the future.

Children as usual at work in the tidepools.
 Made larger here by bits of mostly submerged landing-craft.
 Now not submerged. (9-11)

Abrams also tells us that in Omaha ceremonial address ‘words do not speak *about* the world; rather, they speak to the world’ (p. 71). Graham intimates she too can hold conversation with it. The apparent throw of her voice can change within a poem as ‘you’ is used to address bigger or smaller groups, conveying bigger or smaller notions. Thus, although it has no breaks ‘Europe’ has operatic range, where the loudness and reach of her enquiry expands to fill the beach as stage and auditorium. If we compare ‘The Constant’ in which the universe is conjured, Ammons’s tone may be melodramatic, angry, even self-belittling, but the voice doesn’t invoke a tragic chorus, or *deus ex machina* or other powers to be ‘with us on this beach today’. Pensive and self-contained, Ammons’s ‘I’ remains distinctly singular and completes a loop between the opening statement and the final one, whereas Graham’s poems of this collection build their effects progressively, volumetrically, and therefore may not be read completely independently of one another.

Who’s speaking? Who’s Asking? Forms of Address

Questions and answers echo and reverberate within the sequence. Often the tone is confrontational. ‘Europe’ alone contains fifteen questions – three un-marked. Bishop, in contrast, has three quizzical asides. ‘[A]re those railroad ties?’ she asks,

checking her hunch, trying to picture the unreachable beach-house in ‘The End of March’, while Ammons queries nothing, although he rehearses different endings for the world in a shell. But Graham’s enquiries persist, often disguised as conversational gambits. They are not pauses for correction, as Bishop’s are. The final fearful question is almost the same third time round, with the auxiliary verb modified: ‘what should I do ... | what can I do ... |, what must I do to make him not afraid?’ (63, 68, 80). Coupled with the unanswerable ‘doubt’ of preceding lines, the poem reaches a peculiar close, not strictly an end, certainly lacking the uplift of Bishop’s ‘kite out of the sky to play with’. Is it litany, rhetoric or clamouring for someone’s attention?

Am I, the reader, the ‘you’ addressed? Let’s see who you might be, and who the others are. The poem’s ‘I’ is the observer/speaker who wants to go unobserved by boys she is tailing on the beach:

I’m going closer to the
 tidepools and the kids to listen and to look.
 [...]
 They do not see me on the other side’ (22-23, 29)

Three lines end with ‘they’, suspended momentarily before they redirect their dabbling. She captures the busy-ness of small boys on the beach, the freedom (fondly observed) to play aimlessly and abandon games where it does not matter ‘where | the boundaries are’ (66-67), without ‘A set of rules [?]’ (77). Pronouns in poems are usually signposts to locate the different protagonists: ‘he’ is ‘Green bucket’ (34), ‘they’ (friends of the first) ‘drop their buckets to climb on’ (41) the landing-craft, ‘I do not speak | the tongue although I can hear rise and fall’ (53-54): all should hint at relations, social, spatial, emotional, while ‘you’, at least in the singular, posits a relationship with someone close, perhaps an alter ego, perhaps the reader. Bishop and Ammons present an ‘I’ so absorbed in the task of the searching eye that the reader can tag along on their heels, unchallenged, investigating what they investigate. By putting distance, using major concepts such

as warfare, invisible notions such as quantum, between 'I' and others, Graham stretches the net of communication at the core of her poem. The questions are prompts, pinches to rouse and engage the invisible 'friend' (44) adopted, suggests Vendler, from Whitman.¹⁵

First, she insists, heed the ambiguities of the setting, how the beach reveals, literally and metaphorically, layers of concerns. As the tide exposes uncomfortable historical and technological evidence, she lists materials that raise ecological concerns, detritus, 'plastics' (1) and evidence of machines: 'tire track' (3), 'trailer' (7), 'tractor' (12). Linking ambient sound to the technology that brought 'jet-skis ... and (without looking up) the single-engine | plane' (16-17) to the beach, she suddenly deplores the way motors 'rip' the world, presaging environmental disaster:

... What are you leaving, species of mine,
people, fuels, enemies, other – you, you there – what
for me to stand on ... (17-19)

This seems quick to accuse 'you there' where 'you' are generalized rather than particular, although there is some softening in 'look out – long and slow – into the "beautiful" oncoming day. When was it you last | woke to that? Yes you.' (21-22). She drops the hectoring until a final 'you' (78) returns us, I think, to 'species of mine', ancestors, next generations. Only later, when she writes 'The other who is me' (49), do we realise how much of her argument is with herself, also spoken to as 'you', in a manner that is probing and interrogative, less scornful. Nevertheless she uses 'I' thirteen times, with a further nine references to 'me' and 'myself' and six possessives. In comparison Bishop and Ammons use 'I' only three times each, 'me' once and a 'my' or two.

Graham always presents a self-conscious 'I', but writing on this particular beach – more than usually sensitive to the idea of aerial and marine attack – makes

¹⁵ Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman and Ashbery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 79.

her vigilant, noting where she is in relation to others, in what chain of reactions she has a part, and the obligation to chronicle her findings so fast they tangle, muddling what poetry can address or correct, ecological issues, moral and scientific principles, how the world behaves. She creates the impression of a wrap-around, of being immersed or surrounded on every side by material that varies from recognisable through difficult-to-judge to invisible. And I suggest this wrap-around is a sort of insulation Ammons and Bishop also achieve in their beach-walk poems.

Entanglement. Immediacy. Defining here and now

The first obstacle in reading Graham is that a simple word may not be what it seems. She has often before used terms from Darwin and Descartes, Pascal and Kant, so we are alert to the connotations of 'species' but not perhaps to 'rules' or 'predictions' or the inflections she can put on 'now'. She doesn't always flag up a term from philosophical discourse or modern physics, and one might be forgiven for thinking that 'entanglement' was debris on the shoreline, like Bishop's 'lengths and lengths' of string. Abstract and theoretical connotations of words work alongside concrete meanings and imaginative possibilities, in a collage of vocabulary from many sources. Vendler, long her champion, comments on the 'ambitious attempt to make language equal to our perceptive body, with its several senses always in mutual interplay with the phenomenal world'. She warns:

Graham asks patience of her readers as she invites them into the cloud-chamber of her attention, where particles collide and part. Matter and anti-matter, quanta of energy arise and vanish ... electrons are gained and lost ... she wants us to 'see' the motions of the world, if only because they bring us, by analogy, as close as we can come to the motions of consciousness ... the shimmer of body-mind as it attends to nature.¹⁶

¹⁶ 'Indigo, Cyanine, Beryl' in *Essays* ed. by Gardner, pp. 170-184, (p. 180).

The dilemma is how to write beyond sensation – beyond grasping the material, visible and audible world – and she easily slips into the interrogative to question her method. Many of her questions are about the gap between seeing and believing. Observation and transcription for Graham are fraught with distractions, breaks in continuity that Bishop and Ammons scarcely allow themselves, given their classical focused attentiveness. They have made it safely home with something to write about. Graham by contrast stays out and launches off into space.

Halfway through the poem her use of speechmarks for “the observer” (48) alerts us to Einstein’s idea that there can be no “observer” nor fixed frame of reference to measure the universe where everything is relative. Later her reference to ‘Hilbert’s space’ (70) tells, since it can’t be shown, of a mathematical concept of multi-dimensional wrapped or in-folded space. Having no visual counterpart, it can’t be mapped or assigned to a place in time, that is, ‘not what we mean by | “real,” ... Just made *entirely* of | prediction – but is real.’ (72-73). We may not follow this, but read as speech we appreciate how her correction-in-stride, like Bishop’s, aids definition. She borrows the fine detail of telling from Bishop and Emily Dickinson, using emphasis by italics, long dashes, speech-marks, frequent capital letters, but tends to use all her options in bursts, stopping and starting them as sentences but not forming sentences. The effect is both gestural and didactic, precipitating towards the prophetic.

In many respects her project appears to be a kind of prophecy, a pronouncement pieced from the scrying of picked-out signs. She is alive to warnings, interpreting ‘piercing birds suddenly made audible’ (13), ‘a mother calls’ (42) and ‘cries’ (44). She detects a multitude of discrepancies: a language she doesn’t understand but can follow as a pattern of ‘rise and fall’ (54), atomic activity she cannot see but understands along scientific guidelines, perceptions of

landscape and the passage of time neither unified nor linear but in a condition of flux and impermanence, her sense of ‘radical doubt’ (78) at the limits of her own agency in lifting fear from a child.

Reading Graham, I am struck by her determination. The fact that she keeps trying to capture these difficult layers of intuition in language that is specific and factual, that has almost eliminated the sensual, and yet still has a semblance of lyrical, is what draws me to her and links with Ammons. Both poets achieve an honesty in transcription from everyday experience that aligns new material, sensations and perceptions just this minute gathered together with insights into their existing – but somehow, they intimate, incomplete – conceptual framework. We see them virtually lose their grip (Ammons’s faltering ‘vision | of my grasp’) in these poems, having to re-orient themselves in the world. In her teaching Graham actively sought a modern counterpart to Traherne and Greville, telling Lehman:

looking for something like the metaphysicals in a contemporary idiom, I connected them to Ammons and then it was all Ammons for the rest of the semester. The immersion in his work made me want to write again. It was like oxygen. Tell him for me.¹⁷

Traherne’s ‘emphasis on the microcosmic and macrocosmic orders of creation’, which Susan Stewart identifies as the basis of his extensive commentaries and meditations, is also at the heart of Ammons’s work.¹⁸ This surely attracts Graham to Ammons, the way s/he examines detail, then opens out to encompass the universe, not just the visible world. She admires the range of his scientific interests and ecological concerns while appreciating, perhaps imitating, the mobility of Ammons’s experimental punctuation, lineation and verb-flow, sustaining observed activities as present participles, a technique she customises by using gerunds. And there is a kind of licence to be moody in his work, apparent in ‘The Constant’, with

¹⁷ David Lehman, ‘Archie: A profile of A. R. Ammons’, *American Poet*, <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15766>>[accessed 9 Sept 2009]

¹⁸ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 232.

a habit of ending the poem in a less concrete, more contingent and yearning idiom than it was begun in.

Like Ammons, she strives for immediacy. Unlike him, she relies heavily on *deixis*, the reiteration of position: I, you, here, now: coordinates to establish and constantly update her presence as speaker. Everything in the poem is located and given a time-frame, until that is, it all breaks down. The designation 'now', used nine times, culminates in the burst of simultaneity, and at the moment when the bucket pivots, she jams into words the whirl or dispersal of associations its 'cant' occasions, the battery of collective nouns, provoking a rush of five reactions starting 'No' and two additional denials, in her italics, '*No time has passed from then. No now.*' (52):

It cants
into the center of the pool where all the kelp-heads
stop. Boats, surf, cries, miles, pools, bars, war. No
container, friend. No basic building blocks "of
matter." No constituent particles from which everything
is made. No made. (42-47)

This is complicated because it is Graham's way of documenting instaneity, which we can recognize, and 'entanglement' or the multi-dimensional spin of quantum mechanics, which we can't. As Ammons does, in 'The Constant', she changes the entire scale of the event on the brink of immersion in the moment, but what a far cry it is from the slowing and centering of Ammons's attention, inwards to a single magnified detail, the infinitely 'turning galaxy' (20). Hers is an involved, rapid apprehension of vortex, a kind of springing apart (or centrifuge?) of all the variables. Both poets put the reader on alert, primed to notice noises off, things coming into range from a distance, danger signals, confusions of scale. Dynamic writing creates spatial images, movement in all dimensions, and risk. Graham writes of being in the thick of it, not just operating in the present tense, but also in a peculiar dimension of 'no now', unlike Bishop and Ammons who have both safely retreated to the past tense, even as they begin their poems.

Scripting description

Nick Selby describes how Graham investigated in *Never* a 'sense of selfhood as a precarious 'representational space' [*sic*]. In her descriptions of wave motion, tidal shift, meditations on debris on the beach and estuary she frequents, she employs 'a rhetoric of space and its poetic inhabitation':

Imagery of heights, depths and surfaces, and the power structures this implies, are ... played off ... against settings that look alongside, or across surfaces, or that take place on shorelines ... or that reach poetically towards horizons.¹⁹

He distinguishes being 'beside oneself', transported or 'ecstatic', from the position of being 'alongside' an ignorable background (recalling 'the roaring' Bishop's sandpiper 'takes for granted') explaining Graham's 'besideness' not as grounded – too earth-bound – but immersed to such an extent in the experience of place, so attentive to the objects the world offers that the effect is a totally responsive 'lyric participation' in which she attunes to the rhythm and reflux of the sea: 'an apprehension of time as never static is seen, therefore, as an effect of place upon the poet's touch' (p. 215). These characteristics are both developed and suppressed in 'Europe' and the *Overlord* poems.

Spatial awareness, a feel for distance and the sense of things taking place elementally is one of the characteristics I consistently find in American poetry, and I suggest it matches the mid twentieth century American development of open form, which in Ammons's case was rather idiosyncratic. Lines governed by few stops, arranged with expansive areas of blank page in what might be called an open plan, were to become in the sixties a hallmark of his work. He originally took his cue from the spoken comment-shapes of W. C. Williams, breath and gesture equivalents of Olson and the blasts and blowings of Pound, but because his subject was not social (unlike Ginsberg's) he did not conceive of the words as performance

¹⁹ Selby, p. 214.

punctuation is at its most choppy and distracting in Graham's work. 'Europe' is a block of eighty lines, some as short as five words long, reducing gradually like an ebb-tide. Unusually for her, only one sheds a word, not because the line reaches the margin, but the word is literally suspended: 'water is lifted | away.'(6). Eighty lines pack in seventy-five sentences or, if not sentences, full-stopped comments. Only twenty-eight of these end at the line-end (eight in question-marks), compared to Bishop's fifteen end-stopped lines (and four sentences terminating at caesuras mid-line) and Ammons's one. He is altogether light on punctuation except for seven colons that conclude stanzas (but resist closing them down), two dashes, one parenthesis and six intermediate colons that stand for pauses for thought. While Bishop uses seven long dashes to play for time to re-consider her facts, Graham's eighteen serve as couplings to amplify her notes, rather than change her mind.

John Hollander shows in 'Observations on the Experimental' with what aplomb Whitman always rounds off his sentences – any length – at the ends of versets, making a vessel of them, concluding 'there can be no enjambment in oracular poetry'.²² Graham rarely end stops a line. She balances her inclination to declaim with instances (replacing conventional sentences) of eagerness to define things better, softening the insistent full-stops many times by starting up a new sentence one or two words from the end of the line. She also scatters handfuls of patterning words to seed little narratives that are inter-cut with complex ideas. Clicks of *k* and rhymes of *all* activate the connection between herself and those she records on the beach:

... I do not speak
the tongue although I can hear rise and fall.
A ball ... is kicked my way. I
look up quickly, skip to kick it back. A small

²² *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 227-244, (p. 232).

boy running [...] surprised. It makes him
fall. (54-58)

and the activity connects the two inexplicable moments of 'No now' (52) and 'Photons attach | to my gaze now upon his face' (59-60).

Graham and Ammons find ways to handle the moment as if they are not framing it later, but existing within it. Bishop does it (for sixteen lines only) with great deftness, sneaking, via the conditional tense: 'I'd like to retire there' (32) and a long list of things to do, into the present, to confirm 'there *is* a chimney... A light to read by' (42, 48). Establishing that it happened 'this morning', in the past imperfect, Ammons describes how the clamshell 'lay' (12) 'upturned' (14), then, in sixteen lines (a coincidence with Bishop?) governed by present participles, effectively translates it into the present. Next 'it' may incur the risks outlined in the conditional (31-33), before he turns away from it into the perfect: 'I have had too much of this inexhaustible miracle.' I suggest the shift between tenses occurs when the speaker sees, as the reader hears, a different realm of 'now' opening up, perfectly illustrated by Shelley's perpetually surprising flourish: 'The world should listen then – as I am listening now.'²³

Paying Attention

Observances, or returns to sites and objects of significance, originate in these slippages out of direct observation of material. Graham draws attention to what cannot be seen even more emphatically than the two poets of the previous generation. Despite their adherence to the facts of everyday experience, conscious observance of the visual world opens the way to a presentiment of unseen energy at work. Place, moved through, its minutiae closely regarded, reveals a realm of

²³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to a Skylark', *Norton Anthology*, p. 878.

possibility beyond the visible. Their writing expands the present and the palpable to allow for much else to *take place* and to *take time*.

The moment, such as we glimpse it in each poem, is marked by an acknowledgement, a keeping-in-sight that lasts beyond the actual time and place. Writing is the first revisiting which becomes through reading a ritual of summoning and honouring some force beyond what is immediately visible: Bishop's *fiat lux*, her invoking of electricity as well as the occluded sun, Ammons's flash of certainty in the motion of a 'galaxy rotating', Graham's launch into quantum physics, past everything she has so far managed to show in language, stretched to express the kinetic and synaesthetic, towards what concepts only scientists and mathematicians can tell. All sense that, however rigorously one gives one's attention to the stuff of our world, there is always more to give.

This effort of both attendance and attention is highlighted by the Scottish poet Kathleen Jamie, a philosophy graduate like Graham, who writes 'Poetry is the place where we consider or calibrate our relationships – with ourselves, our culture, history. [...] To be ever in relationship, but requiring what artist Helen Chadwick called 'the privileged space of our own reverie' – that's the tension.'²⁴ Ammons and Bishop conscientiously maintain that 'privileged space' as they recreate their walks. The beach, and returning to it, offsets reverie, although that is masked by their caution at the start of the poems: 'When leaving the ... dunes, | I was in no | mood', 'It was cold and windy, scarcely the day for a walk'. If unready to talk about themselves, we glean a little. Poems such as these do not illustrate a fictional life; they are, however, lived and loosely documentary.

Jorie Graham, who was trained as a film-maker and editor, is skilled in on-the-spot recording, and prepared to appear in shot, letting herself be watched

²⁴ Kathleen Jamie, introducing her 2004 publication *The Tree House*, <<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/english/jamie/treehouse.html>>[accessed 18 November 2004]

watching, as if her agency in the documentary should be made clear. She implicates herself in the change to which she bears witness more politically than her predecessors did. It is not a function of her age (Ammons after all was under 40 when he wrote 'The Constant') but of her epoch, speeded, fractured and dramatised by communications and media coverage of events, post 9-11, Iran-Iraq conflict, driven too by a sense that eco-cide is underway. And yet I cannot agree with the pessimistic view of Graham's recent work, as delving into

a reality too ... horrifying for song. It despairs of history, which ... has become vortical. [...] I respect ... the increased harshness of her subject matter; possibly her latest state of the soul, in which beauty feels alien, is prophetic: Graham may be reading in herself, in her nerves, what the future will regard as the truest response to our times.²⁵

True, the overwhelming 'doubt' expressed in 'Europe' persists to the end of the sequence where she asks herself in 'Posterity', the closing poem, quoting from a poem she was drafting, (using her punctuation):

"how can I write/in a lyric poem that the world we live in/
has already been destroyed? It is true. But/it cannot be said
into the eyes of an other,/ as that other will have nowhere
to turn." Took the lines out.²⁶

Although she voices doubts that lyric can come from a ruined world, her perseverance in forging 'the meditation place demands' is admired. James Longenbach suggests she creates, through her observances of the beach, what the psychologist Winnicott describes as the 'potential space' of play, 'hovering between the literal and the figurative'.²⁷ At her toughest Graham is a teacher and an exponent of ideas; when she writes didactically it is like seeing the terse wording of topics for discussion in PowerPoint (e.g. how "representation" became "ornamentation" (8)). When she asks 'you' to join her, it can be coercive, or playful,

²⁵ Bedient, *Chicago Review*, as before.

²⁶ *Overlord*, p. 88.

²⁷ James Longenbach, 'The Place of Jorie Graham' in *Essays*, ed. by Gardner, pp. 206-217, (p. 217).

witty as Bishop. Patently responsive to all manner of stimulus: ambient sound, visual sensation, symbols, human gestures and physicality: she will sweep the reader into a fast game, trading perceptions and interpretations, an excitement of notes, comments and curiosity. Right at the edge of those multiple and multiplying calls on your attention – for which the beach stands *in loco* – she stops you reading, beyond the littoral and literal accumulations. Think, she says, about what lies ahead. And look!

CONCLUSION

Let us go then, you and I –

where observations become observances

No matter how closely one follows the progress of words across a page, a poem is as much about what does not immediately appear as what does. If, as in the selected poems, significant change takes place invisibly, the ‘event of change’ (as Ammons calls it) is preserved in the cycle of activity established by the poem itself, its rhythms, repetitions, aesthetic and acoustic qualities. Graham, mustering words to say what she finds ‘so moving about Bishop’s poems’, describes the older poet being ‘willing to suffer the limits of description’, to send her poems ‘out into it’:

they all take place at boundaries and are enactments of the ways the ineffable erodes the known, and the known makes inroad into the ineffable. Mapping of the back and forth. Poems which are entirely acts of description, because description is an attempt to go out into it and come back changed.¹

The open form with its long vistas of words, irregular lines and wide spaces beyond the words provides a setting for retracing one’s steps. Surely that is literally what the beach provides in these poems. We were invited to take the same walks by the

¹The Art of Poetry no. 85’, <http://www.joriegraham.com/interview_gardner>[accessed 13 June 2011].

sea, to a greater or lesser extent to become the small figure in a big scene, speak rather than hear muttered asides and exclamations, respond to expressions of hope, fear and disbelief. We were asked to do more than observe.

Repeated readings of 'The Constant' and 'The End of March' revealed more than the great powers of observation of their writers. But many aspects that were non-visual went relatively unnoticed in my research until differentiated in relation to Jorie Graham's more performative poem. One only detects the lacks and absences a poem contains by comparison with another poem that supplies the missing element in abundance. For this reason I work intensively with others' poems to determine what their own terms are. Via these I seek an understanding of process and how it must be fresh to produce insight, probe deeper than sight. If I stripped my own poems down to working parts, however, I might fail to reassemble the connectors linking the literal with unworded and non-visual associations. Too many doubts litter the page about word choices, tone, line endings, the quality of anecdotal evidence, inclusion of an authorial 'I', relevance or truth of certain details. Often doubt is, as Graham said, the driver. 'Just as writing seems to be the proper state of an impassive thinker', wrote Walter Benjamin, 'doubt appears to be that of the flâneur.'² For the Baudelairean roving eye, the world (of the modern city) is wonderful because 'fugitive', too fast-moving to pin down. If the observer is in 'in no mood for wonder', s/he cannot locate the essential by looking. And, as philosophers and scientists repeatedly demonstrate in the twentieth century 'matter has become a system of interrelated events [...] the prejudice that the real is permanent must be abandoned' (Bertrand Russell).³ We

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) p. 422.

³ Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). His chapter 'Ephemera' deals with the retreat from objective and pictorial ends in literature, pp. 245-285 and quotes Russell, p. 257.

should practise physical awareness, Ammons insists, in poems as in walks, but accept that sense-impressions are discontinuous, like thoughts, and only make sense fleetingly. As a result, an instability arises between seeing and believing, also upsetting Graham's work. Ammons's 'ecotone' admired by John Elder, is 'rich in the elaborated energy of awareness.' His phrasing of 'the tide's pulse is like the mind's flicker between [...] observation's specifics and imagination's completions'.⁴

Only the 'reading eye' can locate what lies outside the scope of the 'seeing eye.' The beauty of handling finished poems is that the whole is retained even at the point of sharpest forensic attention or neglect or untidy disintegration. You have the entire poem, so do I. That is where reading differs from criticism and becomes increasingly participatory, inclusive. By the same practice, observations become observances by being repeatedly carried out, paths and findings familiarised and pondered. Don Paterson says 'a poem is a little machine for remembering itself' and as such it starts (and works) every time.⁵ It requires a 'feedback loop', where reverberations extend and deepen the associations between words and not-words (punctuation, silences), irrespective of their arrangement as written.⁶ A good walk poem, then, will return writer and reader to its own achievement. The reading process progressively establishes – as a walker nears things that were distant – and honours the format, the particulars and the reach of the poem. The reader completes the circuit.

⁴ *Imagining the Earth*, pp. 194-195.

⁵ Don Paterson, 'The Dark Art of Poetry', T.S. Eliot Lecture, 9 Nov 2004, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/news/poetryscene/?id=20>>[accessed 16 August 2011].

⁶ Paterson, 'The Poetic Contract', *Poetry Review*, 101:1, Spring 2011, pp. 72-95.

Oh, do not ask, 'what is it?' Let us go and make our visit

I read poems set in landscape for examples of visualising and voicing the relations between a writer and her/his world, not assessing dialogue, gesture and character which a fiction writer might, but noticing that peculiar attentiveness poets show to things that happen free of human agency, and to the task of making poems out of the everyday. This is a strength of modern American walk-poems which Frost may have learned from the Englishman Edward Thomas. Whitman's ancestral beat (his rhythm and his shore-line haunt) pervades two of my choices. The poems I turn to are informally wordy but not relaxed, quotidian in context, self-conscious. In a study of Roman poets walking their city, Tom Spencer shows how verbs particularly link to place, by describing occupation that is at once interior, mental activity, and exterior, spatial. That might be obvious but the effect is to reveal associations between routes, rests and the poet's interior life (desire, ambition, anxiety) rather than portraying Rome.⁷

My observance of the writing process (bringing successive readings to bear on texts) hinges on the distance and difference in time between observation and evocation, as outlined in the Introduction. The partial, sketch qualities of recollected material defy instant verification, invite further speculation. To cross between the imagined and the real, which Bishop patently does, a poet needs a light step and an open hand to extend to the reader: addressing the relationship of 'we' and 'you' to 'I': so that nobody is left outside the poem as if it were a picture. I have learned not to rely on the apparent objectivity of formal composition and to investigate content with one eye on the imagined or unrepresented. Whitman was ambitious, Gillian Beer believes, to find equivalents for invisible energies and rhythms such as sound waves, the earth's transit and the passage of tides, hence

⁷ Tom Spencer, 'Walking in Rome: walking and the construction of subjectivity: a study of three Augustan poets' (unpublished PhD. thesis, Bristol University, 2008).

his electrifying technique in trying to achieve synaesthesia.⁸ Ammons and Graham strive to detect forces at work, sensitised by an environmental concern to better represent the Earth. Poems of walks by the sea convey a sense of two or more parallel existences: the small but definite human scale, the grand and indeterminate surround: with everything in motion.

Edmund Husserl was first to consider the role of walking in connecting person to place. He valued *kinaesthesia* (perceptions ordered while mobile and responsive, achieving spontaneity) over the stasis and unity created by rules of composition, fixed viewpoint and perspective that post-rationalise the eye's findings.⁹ I am intrigued by the poet-scientist Paul Valéry's account of a walk when his 'machine à vivre' is invaded by a creative energy controlling him by a complex rhythm, sonority and melody. There is no visual input but the 'song' must be vocalised. After twenty minutes when it wears off, he fears, since he's 'no musician', that the whole composition was meant for someone who could properly transcribe the 'gift'. He simply responded as if he understood it, grasped intuitively, and kinetically – in and through the body - without knowing any of the 'music' or *form*, having no prior image, word or idea to become the content of a poem.

Notice that this all takes place between what we call the *Outside World ... Our Body* and ... *Our Mind (Esprit)* – and requires a certain jumbled collaboration between these three great powers.¹⁰

⁸ Gillian Beer, "Authentic Tidings of Invisible Things": Vision and the Invisible in the Later Nineteenth Century', in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. by Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 85-98.

⁹ Casey, pp. 224-228.

¹⁰ Paul Valéry, 'Poésie et Pensée Abstraite', 'Variété, V,' *Oeuvres*, 1, (Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1957) pp. 1314-1339, (my translation, pp. 1322-23).

Valéry perceives, writes A. R. Chisholm, ‘an almost physiological element in the making of poetry and that rhythm precedes words in the genesis of a poem’.¹¹

Ammons speaks in his lecture of the “physiology” of the poem where mind and body together pass from active to meditative in ‘motion to no-motion, to the still point of contemplation and deep realization’.¹² A walk poem, then, recreates a distance travelled and thought through, revealing certain innate habits, how you progress, and how far, in what company and conditions you are prepared to go. Crucially, how the lyric ‘I’ finds things of which to sing. Phrases which assay and test material, line breaks and diction to translate changes in pace and sequence, recreate rhythms which were perhaps already *out there*. Take this example:

I
the song
I walk here
(traditional Modoc song)¹³

Like any triangulation, the proven method of surveying the world, it has three co-dependent points, the same three points I identified at the outset: person, preoccupation, place. ‘I’ is a single accent, seen as vertical, heard as a note, perhaps, moving through space, coming ‘here’. Repeated, it travels; the ‘song’ reverberates and expands. It has lyric intensity by incantation and, despite its smallness, a suggestion of epic scale, and a focus on the voice, where song and person are one, a companionship. If Valéry and the Modoc are right in their intuition of a fused ‘I | the song’, rhythms of the environment in which a body moves are internalised and embodied. In three years of writing up observations made out-of-doors I realised I rarely described ongoing ambient sounds. The sound of waves, wind, even the poet’s footfall, rhythms which must underlie beach walk poems, go unremarked. A poem rests on them nonetheless.

¹¹ A. R. Chisholm, ‘La Pythie and its Place in Valéry’s Work’, *Modern Languages Review*, 58. 1, Jan. 1963, 21-28, (p. 23).

¹² ‘A Poem Is a Walk’, p. 20.

¹³ Abram, p. 89.

*And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions*

Time spent going back, going over – again the walk offers this, as Eliot's Prufrock knew, time to rehearse how one might 'dare disturb the universe'.¹⁴ We have seen poems rehearse anxiety (Ammons), a puzzle, a wish-list (Bishop), a sense of global predicament (Graham). They do not linger over details of walks but in the telling, dip into other pockets of time, which extend beyond the actual hour, day or season, casually signalling oceanic and historical distances. We have seen the beach attended to as a site of history and of ecology but it is the attention Bishop both gives it, and diverts from it, that makes her pilgrimage across it an observance.

Associations linger to slow and absorb the reader in the mind's pre-occupation. Events take shape loosely in open form; descriptions accumulate randomly, neither conforming to stanzas nor sometimes grammatically. Still and moving images are intercut where 'I' the writer appears in the landscape, in motion, conscious of location but relatively unconcerned with composition if all it does is freeze a scene. Bishop's reluctance to figure until the twenty fourth line in 'The End of March' is matched by rendering the sea incognito. 'It' and the italicised, demonstrative 'it' (the day, the sea) together give nothing away. Eye cautiously lets 'I' materialise, to busy 'myself'/herself in an inner world, a private domain of dreams and doubts. The time is up, 'I' is struck out again, walk resumed, beach reinstated. And her vision has changed.

Philosophers of place, amongst them Bachelard, and the newer critics of environmental literature give much thought to our psychic preoccupations with place as refuge rather than theatre. Lawrence Buell reads Wordsworth's 'spots of

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *The Waste Land and other poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 3-7.

time' as places where x marks the spot – not the moment in time – and proposes that a 'place template' formed in childhood is the basis for all subsequent place perceptions, generating the recurring trope of redeeming a neglected place by re-inhabiting it.¹⁵ Thus Bishop re-visits the setting where she first housed 'Boomer'. There she can live as he lived in her imagination. Nevertheless it is a tricky source of images resurfacing, a resource beyond the edge of her conscious knowledge, like the sea, a boundary between real and imagined lives.

Open form allows for the assembly of contingent, transient experience. There is a loosely sequential structure but with an aesthetic based on heurism, 'training [people] to discover things for themselves,' (Shorter OED, 2002), inviting the viewer to reconsider events, as indeed Bishop does 'on the way back' from the house she never reaches. Bishop shares with her reader the 'struggle,' which Frank Lentricchia identifies originally as Frost's, 'between the fiction-making imagination and the anti-fictive of the given environment'.¹⁶ She epitomises the gradual but difficult fit between person and place, reconciling memory with experience, in what artists call the studio completion of a work begun *en plein air*.

I am not as revisionary as Bishop was, but need years to re-draft, cut, re-cast the tenses, re-jig narratives, alter person, because when other configurations are changed, the imagination re-enters and plays things differently again. Indeed the 'Nereid' sequence (2006-2011), which developed around a new draft of 'I imagine her becoming you', became so approximate that it entailed a site-visit to Turkey to verify certain imagined elements. Reading Bishop's correspondence, I admire her persistence with enquiry coupled with vim and informality in prose, which infuses the late work. The tone she hones in letters, her signature, as it were, transfers to the last four poems of *Geography III* where she is unmistakably herself,

¹⁵ Lawrence Buell, *Writing For An Endangered World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001), pp. 67-69.

¹⁶ Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscape of Self* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975), p. xii.

writing as 'I', not in flashback as a child in 'The Waiting Room' nor in the guise of Crusoe, nor impersonally as in 'The Moose'. She also experiments with sustained passages of comment, irregular (not strictly stanza) breaks and breakings-off in her observations. Edit – a rare move in a typed letter – and one risks losing or spoiling a fresh and swiftly detailed effect, thereby diminishing the lived experience of place or event, but punctuate, syncopate – that is a technique with marvellous emphasis. Exclamation is natural to Bishop when discovering, but notice she does not use the exclamation mark lightly. '[P]erfect! – But – impossible.'

In 'Poem' she happens on a childhood place-experience in an old painting. 'Life and the memory of it cramped, [...] dim, but how live, how touching', she enthuses.¹⁷ The revelation of her great Uncle George's 'sketch done in an hour, "in one breath," is the economy of his shorthand, denoting a barn by 'titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple | filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,' marks which re-connect 'visions is | too serious a word – our looks, two looks:' to the landscape of her childhood. In completing only nine poems for the collection she is also working out an intrinsic relationship between her present and the past's 'places, and names, and where it was' ['One Art'].¹⁸

Although Graham's *Overlord* consists of twenty five poems and Ammons's *Northfield Poems* forty three, and both contain more beach-walks than Bishop's one, their shore poems advance like hers from witnessing to reviewing what is lost or risks being lost. In modern beach walk poems, as in many films, the beach and sea stand as symbols of detachment and displacement, but by naming her beach, *Duxbury*, I sense Bishop re-attaching herself to a place, like a kite to the string.

¹⁷ *Complete Poems*, pp. 176-177.

¹⁸ *CP*, p. 178.

I have heard the mermaids singing ...

Readers remain mystified by what, if anything, alters Bishop's vision at Duxbury but I maintain we cannot access and verify all that contributes invisibly to a poem. While Emerson claims that in literature 'we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty', I argue (encouraged by Bishop connecting string to the sun) that even a modest walk by the sea, reported as poem, connects dispersed images, echoes, rhythms, from memory and the unconscious more readily than from the actual world.¹⁹ After Heidegger, Altieri defines poetry as 'the taking up of sites in which being, or the numinous familiar, discloses itself and testifies to the power of the attentive mind.'²⁰ I tend to read poets literally giving powerful attention to the 'familiar' things at 'sites' as regions of possibility:

Fundamental to the idea of place would seem to be the idea of an open yet unbounded realm within which the things of the world can appear and within which events can 'take place'.²¹

The poems I have interpreted are untidy and rambling, hinting at rather than disclosing belief and superstition. What each does is to *realise* in the literal sense events without realness, existence without appearance. None is 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,' Ezra Pound's 1918 definition of the *imagist* poem, because all take their time, like films, to assemble and relate evidence of place, person and preoccupation.

I was always interested in perambulation, the journey along the edge of words, the step from straight talking (the directness Graham so admires in Bishop) to extemporising and even fantasising. Hollander describes how simply the act of

¹⁹ 'Self Reliance' in *Selected Essays*, pp. 175-203, (p. 176).

²⁰ Altieri, p. 225.

²¹ Malpas, p. 23.

writing can carry a writer into the open realm: 'One crosses the brink of literalness into poetry by desiring, remembering desire, noticing, fixing on something, and wondering what to make of it.'²² Poems divulge 'the desire to keep what we have lived', in Gilbert's words (p. 253). Their writing confirms our progress through a certain day, a territory, retaining evidence of phenomena that affirmed our presence there and then, enhancing notions of identity and belonging. Impressions and intuitions may pass from inspection to introspection, since we use the walk 'to examine and represent the area in which mind and world interact most closely, losing hard-edged definition as they modify each other by turns and at once'.²³ The blur or reduction of things seen at a distance, blanks and erasures – 'no kite', 'No made ... No *now*,' 'no mood', – negations taking precedence as a description is sought or fought for, attest to the mind at work on its knowledge of the world, its maps and gaps. In beach walk poems with their walkers strung between land and sea, we observe a process of *poiesis*, the pull and push of thought, matter, time, accompanied and manifested by the tide. The observance is a way of honouring place, affirming, as the Modoc song does, both you and 'I walk here'.

²² Reviewing 'Stanley Cavell and "The Claim of Reason"', cited by Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry Democracy, the Environment and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 29.

²³ Gilbert, *Walks*, p. 12.

A. R. Ammons

The Constant

When leaving the primrose, bayberry dunes, seaward
I discovered the universe this morning,

I was in no
mood
for wonder,
the naked mass of so much miracle
already beyond the vision
of my grasp:

along a rise of beach, a hundred feet from the surf,
a row of clamshells
four to ten feet wide
lay sinuous as far as sight:

in one shell – though in the abundance
there were others like it – upturned,
four or five inches across the wing,
a lake
three to four inches long and two inches wide,
all dimensions rounded,
indescribable in curve:

and on the lake a turning galaxy, a film of sand,
co-ordinated, nearly circular (no real perfections),
an inch in diameter, turning:
turning:
counter-clockwise, the wind hardly perceptible from 11 o'clock
with noon at sea:
the galaxy rotating,
but also,
at a distance from the shell lip,
revolving
round and round the shell:

a gull's toe could spill the universe:
two more hours of sun could dry it up:
a higher wind could rock it out:

the tide will rise, engulf it, wash it loose:
utterly:

the terns, their
young somewhere hidden in clumps of grass or weed,
were diving *sshik sshik* at me,
then peeling upward for another round and dive:

I have had too much of this inexhaustible miracle:
miracle, this massive, drab constant of experience.

Elizabeth Bishop

The End Of March

For John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read: Duxbury

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
– *it* was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost...
A kite string? – But no kite.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of – are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a *grog à l'américaine*.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window.

There must be a stove; there *is* a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
– at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by – perfect! But – impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
The sun came out for just a minute.
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
the drab, damp, scattered stones
were multi-colored,
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
– a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

Jorie Graham

EUROPE (*Omaha Beach 2003*)

Walking I try to tell the plastics from the kelp –
 green lettucing, wiry reds, soggy,
 whitish, papery, brushing – all intermeshed – a tire-track
 crossing through, water still dripping downslope,
 and bits of green – right here in front of me – puffing up as sun
 releases them from their own weight and water is lifted
 away.

A trailer tries to pull a boat upshore.
 How is it that “representation” became “ornamentation.”
 Children as usual at work in the tidepools.
 Made larger here by bits of mostly submerged landing-craft.
 Now not submerged.
 The tractor growing smaller as it aims towards the breakers.
 Small piercing birds suddenly made audible
 because of the full sound of the distant surf
 now pulled across the whole – rip where
 jet-skis cut and (without looking up) the single-engine
 plane. What are you leaving, species of mine,
 people, fuels, enemies, other – you, you there – what
 for me to stand on, from which to shade my eyes and
 peer. To shade and look out – long and slow – into
 the “beautiful” oncoming day. When was it you last
 woke to that? Yes you. I’m going closer to the
 tidepools and the kids to listen and look. One boy, maybe eight,
 moves cat-like, ankle-deep,
 bent over, net in hand. Whatever he has
 caught he places in a bright green tub. He calls
 his brother urgently in Dutch (I think) they
 change the plan. The bottom of the pool is deeper and they
 move towards it. They do not see me on the other side.
 They’re running out with buckets now, up shore, hands full.
 I walk into the pool myself. Sun looks
 as usual back up at me. Three
 new kids are approaching now.
 Green bucket has returned. He has a shovel now and
 larger friend – also blond and very pale. They bend to work. Their work
 makes ripples that now lap my way.
 Huge kelp-pods floating from the bottom are avoided
 but they sway. I barely make out numbers on
 the landing-craft – barnacles, brightest of velvet greens, also a hinge,
 a giant ring embedded in the deep concrete, which they
 now find, and drop their buckets to climb on.
 A mother calls. The bucket has been left to float. It cants
 into the center of the pool where all the kelp-heads
 stop. Boats, surf, cries, miles, pools, bars, war. No

container, friend. No basic building blocks “of
 matter.” No made. No human eye. The rules?
 Everything speeding towards “the observer.” Who is
 that? The other who is me perceives
 the tiny stream of particles, hazy,
 the superimposition of states. Entanglement. Immediacy.
No time has passed from then. No now. A mother to my left
 with high-pitched, lengthy reprimand. I do not speak
 the tongue although I can hear rise and fall.
 A ball – orange and white – is kicked my way. I
 look up quickly, skip to kick it back. A small
 boy running towards me startles-up, surprised. It makes him
 fall. Why is he so afraid of me? Or isn't he? Why can't I
 tell. Electrons hum. Photons attach
 to my gaze now upon his face. Is it, his face,
 a version of a possible outcome
 only mathematics can explain to me?
 What should I do to make him not afraid?
 I watch the other children work the
 ball – sand kicking up – a father in the game –
 some disagreements as to where
 the boundaries are.
 What can I do to make him not afraid?
 The electron lives in a *literally* different space.
 It is called Hilbert's space.
 You can't go there. It is not what we mean by
 “real,” but it is real. Not theoretical. Just made *entirely* of
 prediction – but is real. A kind of box
 made out of all of our predicted outcomes. Yet is real.
 Someone *goes on* in it.
 Don't seek. It is not open to seeking.
 A set of rules?
 Have you radical doubt?
 Is there enough left to doubt about?
 What must I do to make him not afraid?

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