

# Soft Borders

*Essays / Poems*

Matthew Clegg Angelina D'Roza

Pete Green Alistair Noon

*Photographs*

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Longbarrow Press





From *Doggerland Chronicles* by Karl Hurst.

*Time is my country, fog is my land.*

*Sea and Fog*, Etel Adnan

*For we are where we are not.*

*Lyrique*, Pierre-Jean Jouve

*Soft Borders* is the second in a series of themed digital supplements published by Longbarrow Press. This selection of poems, photographs, and essays explores the relationship between perception and place, and the rethinking of place that occurs when we vary the focus and scale of our attention to a particular locale, or attempt to read one environment through another. In their contributions, Matthew Clegg, Angelina D’Roza and Pete Green foreground the shifts in perception that transform our understanding of place (and, perhaps, ourselves), while Alistair Noon considers the movement of poetry across geographical and linguistic borders towards an ‘imaginative translocality’.

Brian Lewis

Sheffield, June 2020

## *The provincial sublime: transcendence and the post-industrial*

Pete Green



What does the word *sublime* mean to you? For many, it connotes the grandeur of certain natural landscapes – rugged, mountainous vistas with the potential to inspire awe, and perhaps a sort of departure from the everyday. We inherit this understanding from the Romantics, for whom

magnificent scenery offers a kind of transformative power which heightens the poet's perception.

This power typically reveals connections between the poet, the natural world, human society, and sometimes a deity or immanent creative force. These connections are often profound and esoteric, and inaccessible except through this kind of sublime revelation. When the poet comes to mediate this experience into verse, their tone is typically one of wonder, their language 'elevated' far above the everyday.

In Wordsworth's case, the kind of scenery that offers an experience of the sublime is found in the Cumberland fells. Other Romantic poets look further afield – Shelley, for example, to Mont Blanc in the Alps.

This experience of the sublime might have been a long way removed from the everyday lives of most people in Wordsworth's time. But this was at least a time when those lives were largely connected quite intimately with the natural environment. After two hundred years of urbanisation in the developed world, we find ourselves profoundly estranged from that natural environment and the Romantic sublime is less accessible to most of us than ever.

True, we can take walks in the countryside. We can visit the Lake District or (if we can afford it) the Alps. On those occasions when we are permitted to ‘connect with nature’, though, our potential experience of the Romantic sublime has been pre-empted by visual media. We’ve seen those places a thousand times in photographs, film and television. We can never perceive those landscapes in the same way as our forebears in the era before mass communication.

As a reader or a writer of poetry in 2019, then, you might be tempted to discard any notion of the sublime as an experience of place. Instead, I would suggest looking somewhere different.

Wordsworth’s contemporary John Clare was born into the agricultural labouring classes and spent his life in the pleasant but unspectacular landscape of rural Northamptonshire. He found glimpses of the sublime not in majestic scenery but in the smaller details: the motion of a robin, or the sounds of thawing ice and snow.

Clare demonstrates how the sublime might be reconfigured in terms of both scale and location – from the grandiose to the humble, and from the notable to the obscure. In doing this he offers us some cues towards an understanding of how we might find a kind of transcendence in poetry (and perhaps other art forms) today.

When I come across this characteristic in new poetry, I think of it as a sort of ‘provincial sublime’. It’s typically located in scenes that are ostensibly mundane or inconsequential, often marginal in some sense, often where the natural and the built environment interact. They are obscure places. They may embody some kind of social, economic or environmental dysfunction. A sort of transcendence is attained in these locations through a particular gaze, which might narrow down to those small details or expand outward into an imagined or remembered wider landscape.

If you are watching a Boeing Dreamliner taking off from Heathrow for Singapore, there is no Romantic sublime to be encountered in the humdrum periphery of west London. But you might think about the hundreds of passengers on board, and conjure some riff on the grand sweep of humanity. You might consider the many intertwined processes – technical, industrial, financial, political and personal – that have combined to lift and propel this 250-tonne mass of glass, kerosene, titanium, and human flesh and bone over your head. You might reflect that these

processes can also move backwards, and when Concorde served the route the same journey could have been made 40 years ago in half the time.

Or you might focus on the gentle swaying of the rosebay willowherb at the airport fence below.

Here are two poems, with very different tones but some similarities of form, which seem to me to relate to this notion of the provincial sublime. The first is from Natalie Burdett.

**Birmingham,**

you're blossoming new curves. A warm glow skims  
them, ribbons out across your city roofs  
from Selfridges' bright aluminium discs  
to flick around the library's gold hoops.

At night a colder, more fluorescent sheen  
accentuates your skyline's harder-edged  
old towers. Polished steel casts well-built beams  
of light which flash back from wet tarmac beds.

Inside the markets people claim a space.  
Chermoula chicken couscous in deep bowls  
steams up the glass; revives, illuminates  
the dust-grey faces, highlights natural tones.

Outside, down low where nothing shines at all,  
a sycamore seed sprouts against a wall. <sup>1</sup>

Burdett's Birmingham is a scene not of decline and dysfunction but of renewal. The distinctive "new curves" of the library and the Selfridges building are both 21st-century additions to the landscape. Although the expansive, rooftop-roaming gaze of the first two stanzas narrows down to a human level in the third,<sup>2</sup> the celebratory tone remains, and the focus remains on the built environment rather than the natural. Neither prepare the reader for the quietly astonishing final couplet.

And that, in fact, is the point. The understated power of this closure derives precisely from its reversal of expectations. The richness and gleam of the regenerated cityscape, together with the convention of the sonnet form, invite the reader to anticipate an even grander, further-reaching finale. But the gaze becomes narrower still and, in a wonderfully surprising twist, shifts abruptly from the built environment to the tiny interloping organism from the natural world.

The bathos here is profound enough to prompt a reappraisal of what has gone before. Is the city's much-heralded revamp somehow all in vain? Will human endeavour forever be overtaken by the natural environment that preceded it? Regeneration has been practised by urban planners only in the few decades of the post-industrial era – but nature has been doing it for countless millennia.

Matthew Clegg's poem 'Open to the Sky' is rooted not in a city but an unnamed location, recognisably neither urban nor rural. There is no sign here of any form of regeneration, just glimpses of an inaccessible otherness.

### **Open to the Sky**

England – my England – amounts to this:  
a Hull-bound train stalling by a landfill;  
gulls and crows scatter from the rubbish

and delay evolves into total standstill.  
This is no more than I deserve, no less.  
If I ever dream, the place is unable

to deliver. The big guy opposite  
sucks on his Coke, bites deep in his burger.  
He unwraps *The Matrix* DVD box set.

His balding fleece is endorsed by NASA.  
We live on what we find. Like crows. Like gulls.  
The sun ebbs and the landfill loses colour.

Lacking anything else, two teenage girls  
take photo after photo of each other.<sup>3</sup>



If western society in the 20th century was characterised by social and technological advances in tandem, then perhaps the defining feature of the 21st is the way technology has continued to race ahead while social and perhaps cultural progress – like the train in Clegg’s poem – has stalled. Advances in technology are no longer driven predominantly by the need to solve a problem or improve society: some

items and services seem to be developed and marketed simply because they can be.<sup>4</sup>

It’s this disconnect between possibility and reality – “If I ever dream, the place is unable // to deliver” – that defines ‘Open to the Sky’ and sets its tone of matter-of-fact desolation. The girls’ cameraphone and the mention of NASA remind us what miracles can be achieved by human ingenuity, but the concept of space exploration makes for a sharply ironic contrast with this rickety, paralysed locomotive and the predicament of its stranded passengers.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, while the adjacent landfill stands replete with rubbish, the stalled train comes to emblemise another kind of waste. Instead of merely salvaging scraps, how much more could all these passengers be doing now, had a functional railway already taken them to their destination, or a functional society delivered on their dreams? The image of the girls photographing each other just for something to do is not a reversal, in the style of Burdett’s closing couplet, but is equally arresting, even as it completes the sense of malaise. Outside of war poetry, it’s perhaps as complete and devastating a symbol of futility as you will ever find.

If we insist upon the notion of the sublime that developed two centuries ago, in an utterly different world, then we'll not find it in the poetry being written today in Yorkshire or Birmingham, or any other post-industrial setting. If, on the other hand, we understand the sublime to be defined by a sort of transcendence from one's immediate surroundings – rather than necessarily by beautiful or majestic settings, and a tone of great wonder – then it is there for our taking.

'Birmingham' toys delightfully with our expectations, skipping adeptly between scales and scopes, and snatches us away from human vanity to point out the timeless endurance of nature. 'Open to the Sky' hints at a magnificence or redemption that is insurmountably elsewhere, offering a bitterly ironic kind of transcendence. In their different ways, in similar forms, both poems represent a model of the sublime that is perfectly attuned to our times.

<sup>1</sup> From the pamphlet *Urban Drift* (smith|doorstop, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The "dust-grey faces" of the market people here reprise the "sleep-stupid faces" of factory workers in another study of the second city, by Louis MacNeice, dating from the 1930s and also entitled 'Birmingham'.

<sup>3</sup> From the collection *West North East* (Longbarrow Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> When cameraphones first became available, owners typically lacked ideas for their everyday use. For the technology to acquire a widely perceived purpose, a culture shift was also necessary; this followed later, when social media lifted some of the stigma around narcissism, as seen in the normalisation of the selfie.

<sup>5</sup> Regular users of Northern Rail, which serves the Hull region, will need no reminder that its fleet still comprises many obsolete Pacer units, built in the mid-1980s with an anticipated lifespan of 20 years.

Photographs by Pete Green. An earlier version of this essay was presented at *Modern Nature*, a two-day symposium (organised by The University of Sheffield) at The Hepworth, Wakefield, 25-26 April 2019. This version was published on the Longbarrow Blog, 26 June 2019.



*from* Sheffield Almanac

Days since the cold's grip slackened  
    Last week's snowfall lasts at the kerbsides  
Where shovelled piles have shrunk to blackened  
    Stumps like bombed-out igloos  
And rush-hour carbon particulates hammer  
    At my lungs for admission like the  
Early-morning drinkers' scarlet clamour  
    For the doors of the Bankers Draft to open.  
A chain of cheap pubs lays down beer mats touting Brexit,  
    Poised to profit when a frail economy  
Falters, and that very isolationism wrecks it:  
    And so the halls that once set in flow  
The finance that established foundries  
    Today dispense the balm of industrial  
Cider at two quid a pint. The tram's crossed boundaries  
    From Castle Square to University:  
Blue route, yellow route, a severed demographic  
    And I stand between faculties and council flats  
On an island, marooned in an ocean of traffic  
    And shoulder to shoulder with the Chinese  
Students donning facemasks against pollution —  
    We've pressed the button and we're waiting for the  
Green man and the green revolution.  
    When the smoke clears, it's a trade-off,  
A Machiavellian pact we strike with the city  
    And these are the metropolitan clauses  
Inserted by the Prince's legal committee:  
    That we'll accept a respiration peppered with  
Monoxide specks in exchange for our distractions:  
    The multiplex, the multi-storey, coffee shops,  
Casinos, concert halls — these transactions  
    List their price as tainted air.

Pete Green

# *Not Daffodils: Beauty, Fear and Poetry 'in residence'*

Matthew Clegg

*'I was reared / In the great city...'*  
'Frost at Midnight', Samuel Taylor Coleridge



In 1998, I'd abandoned a part-time and self-funded English Literature degree at Leeds University because I'd run out of cash. I was working in telesales for Sky TV, living in Kirkstall with P, a close friend who'd been fighting schizophrenia and losing ground. An intelligent man, he suspected that the side effects to his

medication were in some ways more undesirable than the condition itself. He was experimenting with not taking the pills and his daily behaviour was getting simultaneously more brilliant and more worrying. We had been walking in the grounds of Kirkstall Abbey. P had been talking about sexual selection – the subject of his PHD – and then he had broken down. 'We're all just barking dogs', he was telling me, and I was struggling to offer an angle that might ground or release him. My morale was at its lowest, and then a day or two later I got a phone call from Robert Woof, Director of the Wordsworth Trust. He'd been thinking about setting up a modest residency at Dove Cottage and would I be interested.

'Of youthful Poets, who among these hills  
Will be my second self when I am gone...'  
'Michael', William Wordsworth

I'd met Robert at a Centenary Conference marking the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*. The idea was to celebrate that landmark of Wordsworth and Coleridge as well as reflect on where poetry was now, and what it might owe to the Romantics. I was part of a small writers' collective at that time. We'd had an anthology published with some money from Yorkshire Arts. Steve Dearden – then a Literature Officer at Yorkshire Arts – had alerted us to some bursaries that could pay for places for us at

the conference, and we were lucky enough to get the money. We ended up lodging in a holiday cottage owned by some local magnate that Robert had wangled for selected conference attendees who might be strapped for cash. After meeting Robert at the conference he offered us a reading the following summer. Out of that reading, and subsequent correspondence, Robert got the idea of offering me the residence. When interrogated, I was never very good at justifying the opportunity. It had just happened to me.

‘...Within the bounds of this huge Concave; here  
Should be my home, this Valley be my world...’  
‘Home at Grasmere’, William Wordsworth

I arrived in Grasmere in the New Year of 1999. After checking in I was shown to an 18<sup>th</sup> Century cottage in Town End, just off the coffin path that connects Rhydale and Grasmere. I remember going into the front room and being struck that the carpet was speckled by dozens of tiny black dots, in a peacock-fan spray around the fireplace. There must have been a hailstorm, and as the hail passed down the chimney it picked up soot. As the ice melted onto the carpet, it left the soot behind as a signature. This seemed entirely appropriate for a place built around such a strong sense of history. The only other thing in the room was a bucket of coal with a welcome note attached. I had brought no furniture and there was none in the house. Only a king-size bed upstairs. For the first few days the only room I inhabited was that bedroom, before a sofa and chair and assorted bits and pieces were found for me from various donors. I liked the idea that everything in the house was cobbled together from people in the immediate community. It generated a strange sense of hospitality even before I got to know anyone.

‘...O Lakes, Lakes!  
O Sentiment upon the rocks!’  
‘Elegiac Stanzas’, Geoffrey Hill

It was raining on the day I arrived. I think it may have rained through the whole first month. The world I entered felt like it had been under water for the whole winter. The moss that cushioned the walls on either side of the coffin path was luminous green like some exotic seaweed. The coal dust in the leaky coal shed was a greasy paste. On my first night I walked into the centre of Grasmere to find a call box. There

was one on the edge of a car park on the approach to the village. The car park was flooded and the call box was surrounded by water. I waded into it and stood watching the rain pound down around me as the cold soaked into my feet. I looked up at the dark bulk of Loughrigg and Silver How. The rain was more intense and more violent than any I could remember. It even seemed to be beating down the smoke that rose out of the chimneys of Town End.

‘...it is hard to explain how he could have climbed to that height in the dark and wet night without falling to his death...’

*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

It was midwinter. I had been to see the Jacqueline du Pré biopic, *Hilary and Jackie*, with Sean and Jane Borodale at Zeffirelli’s in Ambleside. When the movie was over we took off in Sean’s Land Rover for a late night drive. After twisting down A-roads, up and down inclines, skirting lakes and surprising many stray sheep in the headlights, we ended up climbing a steep road that might have been at the end of the Elterwater Valley. I’m not sure because, as a passenger, I just went with it, excited by not knowing or not being in control of where I was. When we got to somewhere near the top we stopped and paused for a second or two to take in the scale of the landscape dropping away beneath us. Steam from our breath filled the Land Rover. I opened the door and jumped down onto the road and instantly fell flat on my back. The road surface was a rhino-hide sheet of black ice. We looked at each other in amazement at how we had made it up that road. Then panic set in about how we were going to get down again.

‘The Mind is its own place...’

*Paradise Lost*, John Milton

P had come up to visit me for a weekend whilst on his way to visit his new girlfriend in Liverpool. He had again been experimenting with not taking his medication, probably out of a fear that it would make him impotent. He came in the summer of my first year in Grasmere. He was lucky. He landed smack in the middle of one of those breathtaking stretches of summer weather that can persuade you that Cumbria really is heaven on earth. We went out walking, choosing to climb up past White Moss Tarn and up and across to Heron Pike. We paused halfway up to eat some

lunch and look out across Grasmere towards the green of the landscape beyond – the sky a vacuum swept and immaculate blue. P’s psychosis was taking hold and he was gradually persuading himself that he had in fact died and this was the afterlife. He struggled with this feeling for the rest of the weekend. He told me he was having real trouble not walking out into passing cars or stepping off ledges as he had all but convinced himself that it would do him no harm as he was already dead. My role was to make and maintain an argument to convince him otherwise. This consisted mainly of pointing out details that could not possibly be found in nirvana. Pepsi cans by the edge of the tarn. The never-ending coach parties. The low-flying fighter jets scalping the trig points.

‘...beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror...’

‘The First Elegy’, *Duino Elegies*, Rainer Maria Rilke

It was the middle of the Wordsworth Winter School during my final winter. I had been getting uptight about this business of being a Poet in Residence. This would typically kick in during the schools and conferences in the presence of the various academics and validated connoisseurs. How was I to negotiate the value system of that world and play the role of poet in public? I had acute status anxiety. I’d asked a friend to get me something to smoke that would relax me in the evenings. He did. I wasn’t a self-sufficient user of any form of recreational drug, but late one afternoon I rolled myself a spliff and put some vegetables in the oven.

I’m guessing the skunk I was given was probably very strong and spiked with something else, most likely speed. The sense of euphoria that first came upon me just kept pushing up the ante until suddenly it was my heart turning into a bullet train. I tried to calm myself by lying on the cold stone floor and breathing deeply but it had no effect. I couldn’t believe my heart was going to be able to stand up to this punishment. Quite by coincidence another friend called round to say goodbye before he went away for the weekend and he was able to explain what I was experiencing. I was having a whitey. He didn’t seem too worried – just said I should lie down and it would pass. I did and it didn’t. Normal social interaction had become almost impossible to me. I couldn’t form sentences.

‘...men’s intellectual errors consist

chiefly in denying...’

*Anima Poetae*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge

I learned a lot about myself during the hours that followed. I was entirely possessed by fear. I was afraid of the dark, of strong light, of stillness, of anything that moved, of company, of being alone, of every change or lack or change in my body rhythm. And all this despite knowing there was nothing tangible to be afraid of. For a very long time the only thing that seemed to remotely stabilise me was to walk backwards and forwards along the snow-covered road by the woods and lake. 100 yards one way, then 100 yards the other. I did this for what must have been hours. I'd persuaded myself that I had to keep moving. If I stopped, the contrast between the speed of my heart and the inactivity of the rest of my body felt too extreme. Also, cold was better than warmth somehow. Surely, it would slow my heart down. Something primal had woken up and it wasn't going to go back in its kennel. All my senses had sprung awake. I imagine this is what happens to animals in times of extreme danger. During those hours, the starch-white of the snow on the roads and fields represented a kind of total oblivion and so did the dark in the woods. It was only by constantly changing my focus from one to the other that I managed to stop myself from feeling overwhelmed. De Quincey writes of how 'space swelled and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity' under the influence of opium. When I looked out over the snowy fields I had the same feeling. But when I looked into the dark of the woods, I had an equally powerful feeling of claustrophobia, as I did when I considered returning to Town End or my cottage. Internal and external were equally terrifying and normal rational thought was little defence. It reminded me of something P had told me about psychosis: 'when I'm mad I know in my rational mind that what I'm thinking is madness but still, my rational mind has no power over those thoughts.' I'd experienced what that meant, at least.

This piece reworks a memoir that first appeared in *Staple* magazine (Spring 2006). The reworked version was published on the Longbarrow Blog, 17 April 2014. Accompanying photograph by Karl Hurst (from the series *Born Under a Bad Sign*, 2014).

# The Host

*i.m. Robert Woof*

Robert, were we reading Keats  
or Shelley  
when you paused to tell  
how Ian McKellen  
had sat in your chair,  
lit a cigarette,  
then leant to exhale  
each drag  
up the chimney  
as if to whisper  
a secret pledge.

Our door was open  
and bats snickered circuits  
round your eaves.

‘A toad’, you cooed,  
announcing its entry  
on the rug –

attentive  
even to toads.

Matthew Clegg

From *The Navigators* (2015).



From *Doggerland Chronicles* (2016), Karl Hurst



# *Translocal Underground: Anglophone Poetry and Globalization*

Alistair Noon



This article first appeared in *Bordercrossing Berlin* 3 (2007), a Berlin-based literary journal active between 2006-2008.

Poetry has long been on the move. Its practitioners have been diplomats, soldiers, sailors, spies, exiles, refugees, immigrants, tourists, teachers and followers of where the rent is cheap,

picking up new ideas and images along the way, or looking back afresh at where they've come from. Its texts have moved around via translation, influencing and changing literatures as they go. Some poets have imagined themselves into places they've never been. Others have moved around between different linguistic varieties, writing for example both in a "standard" language and in a dialect or creole.

Yet despite the many ways that languages and cultures can meld and mesh in poetry, there's still a tendency to view the art first and foremost through a national gaze. In the phrase "one of our leading poets" – a cliché of book blurbs and reviews – that "our" refers, implicitly, to the nation. There are a number of reasons why this particular way of categorizing poetry has so far had priority over others. Language is one: if literature is, as Ezra Pound said, "the news that stays news", it clearly gets around faster if it doesn't have to be translated first. But it's more than just the common language that's at work here: check the contributors' list in a US or UK poetry magazine and you'll typically find a resolutely national selection of American or British plus Irish poets respectively. Australian, New Zealand and Canadian poets often complain of the difficulty in getting a foothold in such magazines. Like everyone else, poets establish and maintain loyalty groups for the purpose of mutual support, with networking, publishing and event organization – at least until recently – taking place primarily within state borders. In spite of communications technology, it's still easier to co-edit a poetry magazine if all the editors can meet up in the same bar. A further factor, both a cause and an effect of the national gaze, is that most

poetry funding – indeed arts funding in general – is organized around cultural institutes whose remit is to support writers and artists from the particular nation-state they represent.

It's also worth bearing in mind here the origins of national literature as a subject of study in schools. In the case of Britain, English literature began to be taught in the nineteenth century as a supposedly humanizing pastime for the middle classes, while the upper classes read Latin and Greek. Reading Keats didn't send British schoolboys straight to the trenches, but it did play a part in solidifying the national consciousness that would determine on which side of no man's land those schoolboys ended up. To paraphrase Wilfred Owen, who nicked it off Horace, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria legere*: it is sweet and fitting to read for your country. And language itself is conceptually bound up with the idea of the nation. Standard languages, currently the most widely accepted medium of poetry, came into being largely through the agency of nationally based states, whose ministries of education would send minority-language or dialect speakers to stand in the corner if they spoke anything other than the official variety. In the UK today, really existing multiculturalism and regionalism, with their integration of minority and regional languages and cultures, have only modified, but not negated, the centrality of the nation and national language.

Thus, the category of the nation has partially eclipsed other possible ways of typologizing poetry: poetry written by those with or without a university education, poetry written by women and by men, and also, increasingly, poetry written by those for whom, whatever national identity they may feel, their daily experience is shaped by a place and a state whose national norm is not their own. As part of what's been termed "globalization" over the last decade or two – not actually something new but rather the intensification of a process that's been going on for centuries – large numbers of people, with all levels of experience in writing poetry, have moved and are moving around the world. Some of those poets are to be found in the pages of magazines like *Bordercrossing Berlin*, based outside the poets' countries of origin.

What are we to call such poets? If they are "American", "British", "Scottish" poets etc., then not in the same way as those who live in New York, London or Glenrothes. We can usefully begin by ditching the term "expat". It defines its subject negatively:

you're outside of your patria. This is, at best, only half the story: you're also, to a greater or lesser extent, inside somewhere else – how else could you function on a day-to-day basis? “Cosmopolitan” implies a rootlessness that does not match the felt reality of those who live abroad for a longer period of time, as they cycle their bilingual children to childcare every day. “Intercultural poetry” might be useable, as long as it's clear that “culture” refers to something whose borders are blurred and whose shape is constantly changing (a concept, by the way, at odds with the static notion of the “national genius”, a term now seldom used but still implicit in the idea of a national canon).

The classic form of culture for many people is national culture, but gender, class, sexuality, occupation and other parameters may play at least as important a role in the way that people's beliefs, behaviour and hierarchy of values are socially shaped. There's a problem with the prefix “inter-” too – can anybody really be “between” cultures? Again, if we take culture to mean the changing set of procedures, assumptions and interpretations with which people lead their social lives, you can't not be right “in” at least one – admittedly poly-faceted – culture. “Crosscultural” and “transcultural” might be improvements as terms because of the dynamism implied in the prefixes, but still include that messy, misunderstandable and misusable word “culture”. The term “transnational” concedes respectability to the category of “nation”, a concept which is, at best, based on a number of illusions: though national myths attempt to suggest otherwise, nations weren't always there, they're never identical with state boundaries, and they're never homogenous. At worst, the concept of the nation represents a disastrous warping of the human need for group solidarity, having played a key role in many of the greatest large-scale inflictions of human misery in world history.

New times need new words. A term that some anthropologists and historians are now using to describe some of the processes and shifts of globalization is “translocality”. Though you could also go and deconstruct the term “local”, it has a whole deal less excess baggage than “national” and “cultural”. We can probably all agree more or less on what we mean by a locality in a way that is much more difficult with the terms nation or culture. It can take in the mobility of both the English-teaching, experience-seeking university graduate in Prague on the one hand, and the migrant manual worker remitting wages from Dubai back to the Indian subcontinent on the other. The term's very inclusiveness makes it vulnerable to meaning nothing

more than going on easyjet stag weekends to Riga, or watching films made in Los Angeles, so it's useful to distinguish between weak and strong translocality. Weak translocality is everywhere these days – fewer and fewer people never set foot outside of the locality in which they were born and brought up, or are never confronted by images produced in other regions of the world. Easyjet stag revellers are translocal in this weak respect. A stronger translocality is more likely to emerge from a longer-term shift in location, and an increased sense of the self as having been shaped by more than one set of influences.

But why bother at all with a special word for this kind of poetry? The American poet Charles Reznikoff once wrote in a letter to a friend: “There is a learned article about my verse in Poetry for this month from which I learn that I am ‘an objectivist’.” He was referring to a special issue of the Chicago literary magazine, an issue edited by Louis Zukofsky, bringing together a number of poets as Objectivists, most of whom, like Reznikoff, were hitherto unaware that that was what they were. I don't wish with this article to co-opt unwitting fellow poets into a movement of translocalists, still less to posit stylistic affinities simply on the basis of either a negatively defined geographical setting (not the Anglosphere) or a shared (inter)cultural position. Berlin alone is home to Anglophone poets who could be labelled – with fuzzy and problematical terminology – as mainstream, late modernist, experimental, performance, post-surrealist, New New York School, and turbocosmopolitan. But poets in this position, i.e. who are strongly translocal, are often faced with a stock of interrelated questions concerning audience, reception and publication. Not all of them face all of these questions, and some of these questions are also faced by non- or weakly translocal poets. But strongly translocal poets will tend to be confronted by more of these questions, and to an increased degree.

First of all then, audience. Who am I writing for? Some poets say they don't think or care about this question, but this is a misapprehension. Consciously or unconsciously, every poet has some kind of reader in mind: if they didn't, they couldn't make choices about what goes on the page and what doesn't. What background knowledge do I expect my readers to have, what can I take for granted? For the non- or weakly translocal writer, the answers to such questions, if reflected upon, may be more self-evident: I write for people who know what Sainsbury's is, or where the Lower East Side is, for example. What if you are an Anglophone poet who shops at Kaiser's and lives in Neukölln? This is the stuff of your daily experience, and at some point is

likely to find its way into your poetry. But there is a difference between mentioning Sainsbury's and mentioning Kaiser's in an English poem, at least in one potentially destined for, say, a British poetry magazine. "Sainsbury's" is a shared cultural reference for much of the readership of that magazine in a way that "Kaiser's" isn't. Metonymy – using a word to stand for a concept with which it is associated – gets more difficult, at least if you want to draw on your own experience for it: who, outside of Germany, is aware of the associations that the Berlin districts of Neukölln, Kreuzberg and Pankow have? A reference to a tram wouldn't strike many people who live in Berlin, Germany or Central Europe as odd – we all ride in the things from time to time – but with the exception perhaps of inhabitants of Manchester and Blackpool, that tram is a piece of exotica to a Brit Brit. And if it were somehow important to the poem that the tram is yellow, that fact wouldn't need to be stated for the Berlin Brit or any other Berliner, but would for other readers.

Just as with jokes, explanation is the death of poetry. There is, thus, a tension between the idea of poetry as compressed language and the probable cultural knowledge of its probable audience. It's a challenge for any poet to take their local knowledge and observation and make something larger from it, but the challenge is greater for strongly translocal poets: to be able to name and use their local, everyday, physical experience, without exoticizing it (if they do exoticize it, they help perpetuate modes of seeing that are insular and, ultimately, xenophobic). Even more than the poet who stays more or less put, the poet who moves may have to learn how to write "from" rather than "about" a place, if their poetry is to find a wider readership.

On one level, none of this matters. Different people understand the same poem in different ways, and that's part of the appeal and power of poetry. But some ways of understanding, or even not understanding a poem, have more cultural clout behind them than others – for example those that do not challenge a stable notion of national identity. Compile a special issue on Australian poetry, and non-Australian Anglophones will often put up with – even enjoy – some unfamiliar cultural references, bits of slang, images, names of birds they don't know. It's in English, but it can be typologized as an "Australian" poem. A kind of unconscious labelling may go on in some readers' minds: is this a domestic or a foreign poem? A foreign-looking name and the knowledge that a poem is in translation may also create a willingness to accommodate the unfamiliar, for example when reading Russian poet Nikolai Gumilev's "The Lost Tram".

There also seem to be, in the British poetry scene at least, some residual prejudices against and/or lack of sympathy for writing that comes from “foreign” experience, at least if the poet is marked as being “one of us”. Note: not the experience of being or feeling foreign – magazines are full of this, the dreaded “Holiday Poem” that fails to go beyond observation and simply exoticizes its “foreign” particulars – but experience which just so happens to have taken place outside of the Anglosphere. Philip Larkin famously wrote: “Nobody wants any more poems about foreign cities” (he was using this as a stick to beat the Modernists with, but the formulation betrays his own prejudices). Thing is, Phil, some poems in English are written by people living in those cities, for whom they simply aren’t “foreign” any more. A strongly translocal poet is not using images picked up on the run, but the stuff of their day-to-day experience: the Berlin TV Tower is visible from all over the city.

Reception is tied up of course with publication. Short of doing a quantitative study of the percentage of Anglophone poets living outside of English-speaking countries published in prestigious places, compared with the percentage of those living in the “Home” countries, it’s difficult to make a statement about this. Leaving aside subjective perceptions of quality, networking is an issue here. In spite of cheap and environmentally unfriendly air travel, broadband internet access, and the greater prominence of poetry from Anglophone peripheries in the last few decades, it’s still advisable to work at an American university or drink in London pubs if your game plan involves becoming a prominent English-language poet. The stipulations of funding, prizes, grants etc. tend to work, if anything, against the Anglophone poet living outside of the Anglosphere: the Eric Gregory Award, one route into publication for young British poets, stipulates “ordinary British residency” as a condition, begging the question of what “ordinary” might mean. This wouldn’t be so much of a problem if it weren’t for the fact that the funding bodies of the country of residence may well be equally unresponsive to funding poetry written in that country but not in the national language, or a recognized minority language. This kind of poetry can’t easily be pressed into service as an extension of foreign policy and as a tool for increasing the nation-state’s cultural capital.

The best answers to these questions are to be found in the actual practice of poets. Swiss-based Irish poet Padraig Rooney’s “The Released Starlings” (published in full in Issue 2 of *Bordercrossing Berlin*) begins:

Outside the marble gates of the temple  
the karma seller stands. His cages  
surround him, one-bird wicker cages  
the visitors to the temple pay to open  
and release the starling chirping inside.

And continues:

And why wouldn't they break into song,  
these conductors of karma, birds  
whose souls fly free for a few baht?

If you know your currencies, it's not hard to work out that the setting is Thailand. Just the word temple is enough to place it outside the Anglosphere. But by hanging back with details such as the name of the temple, the poem gets a balance of specificity and generalizability that should satisfy both the weakly and the strongly translocal reader. I like the way that the poem has starlings in it rather than a myna or a munia – familiar birds may also live in unfamiliar places. There is a sense throughout the poem, lacking in the typical holiday poem, that Rooney knows what he's talking about. He can get away with the word "soul" because it is the right word for the cultural script that he is presenting, but not, not assuredly, exoticizing. The "foreignness" is almost incidental. The poet is looking at the action neither with the gaze of the Orientalist, seeing in the "East" some inscrutable, strange, untrustworthy, backward Other, nor is he flattening the scene into something that could have taken place outside of Sainsbury's on a Saturday morning. His attitude is a different one altogether: a translocal one. Similar tactics are used in a poem by John Hartley Williams which makes use of the tram as an Image: "Lament for the Subotica-Palić Tramway". A poem which itself says something about one possible translocal mind-set is Gael Turnbull's "A Landscape and a Kind of Man".

One – partial – answer to the problems of audience, reception and publication is the internet. It might not have turned out to be quite the democratic, levelling forum it was once hyped up to be, and too much looking at a screen is still bad for your eyes, but it's noteworthy that web-based magazines tend to break through national barriers more frequently than print magazines do. Money is another thing. Perhaps we could do with an EU fund that doesn't deal with the Arts as if they're an extension

of national foreign policy. But then that's what much Arts funding, at the end of the day, actually is, and I doubt EU funding would have much to offer poets who were born in Zimbabwe, Argentina or the United States but are resident in the EU. Translation is another (related) issue. "Host" countries could look to the communities within their own borders for poets to translate, rather than taking their cues from the nationally anointed poets of other countries. This has begun to happen recently, for example with the Poetry Translation Centre in London, which has initiated translations of poets from refugee communities in the UK.

Another solution can be to write to and for a translocal audience. It's possible that this strand of poetry, in its various forms, appeals more to those who, themselves, have undergone the experience of encountering and adapting to a new cultural environment. This requires infrastructure, of which *Bordercrossing Berlin* is a part. A translocal poetry scene needs to be named (it exists already) for it to be taken seriously as a simplifying but necessary label. Perhaps the homogenizing aspects of economic and political globalization are such that poetic globalization will become easier: there are Lidl's in the UK now, Kaiser's may follow. It may also be helped by the increased awareness today that cultural identity isn't, never has been and won't ever be subsumable to the identity of a state.

Without wanting to suggest that the new Shakespeare is just waiting to be found somewhere in Central Europe or Southeast Asia, I'd also like to try and show how the activities of strongly translocal poets are not nearly as marginal as they might seem to be if you take the mononational, monocultural, monolocal poet to be the norm. I'll do this by making what is probably a provisional and perhaps less than watertight taxonomy of translocality in relation to poetry. One part of translocality is physical, involving the simple fact of having moved from one place to another. Poetry's full of this: Ovid at the Black Sea, Du Fu all over China, Heine in Paris, Goethe in Rome, D.H. Lawrence in Mexico, Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil, W.H. Auden in the US and Austria, Sylvia Plath and T.S. Eliot in England, not to mention the hordes of writers and poets on the Rive Gauche in the 1920s. The move need not be international, it can be interregional: W.S. Graham's poetry, written mostly in Cornwall, draws on his Glasgow childhood. In fact, the move might not, in physical terms, be very far at all for it to play a big role in the poet's work.



Nazareth-based Taha Muhammad Ali's poetry is rooted in the village of Saffuriya, from which he was displaced in 1948: Saffuriya is only 2 km north of Nazareth, but it figures very much as a different place to that from which he is writing. This leads onto the second element of translocality, the imaginative: the production of poems in such a way that more than one locality is involved. This may emerge from physical translocality in some of the ways I've been describing. Or it may derive from other sources: typically, an encounter with other locations via texts – Shakespeare, in his plays, makes use of contemporary and classical historiography; Charles Reznikoff draws on Jewish history – or, more idiosyncratically perhaps, via Class A drugs, as with Coleridge and “Xanadu”. The impact may be on both content and form, as in Chaucer's use of French and Italian tales on the one hand and his Anglicization of iambic pentameter on the other. Finally, there is a linguistic translocality: making use of more than one linguistic variety in poetry. This may mean writing poems in both “standard” British English and Scots or Caribbean English, or – far more rarely – successfully writing in a second language. The term also covers the incorporation of words from different places and times into one poem, not only as some of the Modernists loved to do, but as poets from the Middle Ages onwards have done by raiding Latin, Greek, French and Italian for words with which to pep up English.

Physical, imaginative and linguistic translocality are aspects rather than categories: in practice, the three types merge and blend into each other. Johannes Bobrowski, a German-language poet writing from East Berlin, reimagined part of pre-war East Prussia, now Lithuania, making use of words from the extinct language of Old Prussian. David Dabydeen has written about slavery – a brutal, enforced translocality in itself – partly in song-like Guyanese creole, partly in lines that jam off iambic pentameter. Translation is poetic translocality par excellence: linguistic in its method, imaginative in its transference of a new set of ideas, and physical in the likelihood that the translated texts will be read in a different geographical setting to that in which the source texts were produced. Typically, physical translocality leads to imaginative translocality: the poet moves on, away or abroad, and alters their imaginative landscape. It can work the other way round though, too: Basil Bunting learnt Old Persian in order to be able to translate medieval epics into English, on which basis he got posted to Persia during World War Two as an interpreter and spy.

The figures on the Persian art upstairs in Berlin's Museum of Islamic Art are East Asian in their facial features. At Hangzhou, where China hits the Pacific, there are some Buddhist wall figures whose style derives from Indian sculpture, with influences from the Greek art which Alexander the Great brought with him on his imperial conquests. Footnotes in editions of Milton refer back frequently to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *The Bible*, Virgil, and other "foreign" sources. Chinese and Japanese poetry kick-started 20th century Anglophone modernism. Chicken Tikka is believed to have been invented in Birmingham. This stuff is only hybrid if you conceive of cultural products as ever having had some kind of primordial essence, such as national genius. They don't: synthesis is inherent in the process of creation. Whole groups of poets now live in one place but think in two (or more). In some respects, re-recognizing the existence of the translocal in poetry is one more chapter in the tussle of periphery and centre, and a further problem for the idea of a national canon. Padraig Rooney: "I wanted to solve the problem of the poet who does not have a natural constituency, rooted in the local and national, such as Seamus Heaney began with. My aim was to draw together different strands of my experience without falling into the trap of the exotic, of merely local colour." One person's exoticism or local colour is another person's lived, felt experience and observation.

Other people's work I've drawn on in the writing of this article includes Jonathan Rée's essay "Cosmopolitanism and the Experience of Nationality" (in *Cosmopolitics*: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Arjun Appadurai's "Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization" (University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Edward Said's "Reflections on Exile" (Granta Books, 2001); Ulf Hannerz's "Transnational Connections" (Routledge, 1996); and Jeremy Hooker's "Reflections on Ground" (*Free Poetry*, Vol.1 No. 1 March 2005). Thanks to Felicitas Macgilchrist, Ken Thomson, Ian Almond, Fiona Mizani and Chris Jones for their comments. — Alistair Noon, 2007.

Accompanying photograph by Karl Hurst (from the series *nie eine perfekte zeit*, 2013).

## The Molecule Man

Three huge flat figures walk on water,  
their aluminium selves are filled with holes.  
They grapple with each other where the H<sub>2</sub>O flows,  
once part of the solid, silent border

between the two great drainage systems,  
between two special economic zones,  
the mazes that millions mapped out as homes,  
till the wire and walls came down, and the river

flowed over the lower, shoddier bank first,  
flooded the buildings with new carrier bags,  
TVs and cars, till the freshwater washed back  
to the far shore and levelled the earth.

New towers berlined on the banks,  
and new banks berlined in the towers. No more  
landscapes of flowers in the miracle talk,  
but the red and green men in their Quaker hats

continued to light up the pedestrian crossings  
as alternating icons, luminous ideograms:  
designed in the Old East, they're less lamps  
than candles for a change some chant as loss.

Now in the New West, the Molecule Man  
is static at his place on the central river.  
His three heads and six arms form a Shiva  
turned inwards and away from the land.

Alistair Noon

From *Swamp Area* (2012).



asked me to write  
this new word on his hand.

There's more to the desert, and deserts are various, in their reach, their wildlife, the stories they inspire, but spending a little time in such a different landscape has made me look harder at how home and its hills affect the ways I perceive the world, the stories I tell. I love Yorkshire for its seasons. I have something good to say about them all. The visible changes in spring and autumn are magical, the little drops of blood, and the shoots that are just now turning the garden green in my absence. All that transformation is a good setting for a fairy tale, albeit a specific kind of transformation, tree-covered, cyclical.

In my poem, change comes at a cost, a "sacrifice", and elsewhere, the speaker's transformations are quite traumatic:

Heavy with buds, I took to bed, dreamt  
of being a woman –  
    the weight of nesting birds  
on my chest was only grief, the body taking  
its share of the pain.  
    I lost my silver bark,  
its counter-light reflecting the names  
of passersby cut into my ribs.

e.e. cummings's "Spring is like a perhaps hand" appears to offer transformation without the pain, a gentle placing and arranging – "a perhaps / fraction of flower here placing / an inch of air there) and // without breaking anything." – but so many carefulls can't be what they seem ... really, we're only looking through a window, while spring affects how we see the world. Somewhere else days are getting shorter. And somewhere else again, spring and autumn are barely words.

Change as part of a season or cycle only looks like change close up, doesn't it? So it's not always obvious that you're going round in circles. In her short story, "Her Bonxie Boy", Sara Maitland combines fairy tale, spring and science, using the method of charting seasonal bird migration with microchips that record light intensity; length of day tells latitude, and you can tell longitude according to the hours of sunrise/sunset, so you can work out where a bird was twice a day. Except when

it's equinox because days and nights are the same length across the hemisphere: "The vernal equinox is exactly when migratory sea birds are migrating. So, at the very moment I want to know most what they're up to, they disappear. Vanish somewhere between winter and summer." Is that what I've done? Have I disappeared? Will this passage really bring transformation or is it just part of a circle too big for me to see? Truth is I'm holding onto more than I've let go, and if some days it hurts, I don't know if it's change that's more painful or trying to stay still.

I wrote 'Fairytale No. 9' while thinking about Rebecca Solnit on pain and empathy (in *The Faraway Nearby*), about pain and touch as a boundary of the self: "Those who suffer are considered to be worse off than those who don't, but those who suffer can care for themselves, protect themselves, seek change [...] recover." It might take a long time to work out where that boundary is, what it means or how to use it. But it is, perhaps, how we break cycles, change course. Hornby describes it as peeling away "yet another layer of skin [which] thus allows us to hear things, chords and solos and harmonies and what have you, properly". He adds that he wishes he still had those layers of skin, but as my son grows up I realise life is much longer than I'd imagined, and I wonder what it would be like to go through it and never change or be changed.

In *Ultimate Classic Rock*, Michael Gallucci wrote, "[Browne] sang like someone who had the end of the world in his rear-view mirror and a wide open road in front of him". In those "chords and solos and harmonies", in "Late for the Sky", I hear that potential for transformation, to take the open road more surely for having the end of the world in sight. The lyrics, sad as they are, are about waking up. Once you see "the changing light", you lose what certainty you thought you had, but what do you gain?

In *Hope in the Dark*, Solnit says change happens in the imagination first. You have to be able to imagine the possibility of a different future, before you can head towards it. And if you think that's scary, she's saying that's where the hope is. There's no hope in certainty, only in the dark, and perhaps a little in the desert.

Photograph by Karl Hurst (from the series *Leaf Studies*). 'Fairytale No. 9' appears in Angelina D'Roza's collection *Envious the Birds*. An earlier version of this essay first appeared on the Longbarrow Blog, 23 March 2016.

## Fairytale No. 16

*After Aesop*

*The tortoise at last looks up  
envies the birds.*

That was the day we climbed Mam Tor. Gabriella blistered her heels and flirted with a man in a glider, who was probably waving back through the sunshine bouncing off his tinted dome of cockpit. She's on tiptoe, hand upstretched, her soft underarm skin exposed, waving like a schoolgirl to the glider, the man, the sky, and we're that close, in vest tops, lit with sweat, watching him smooth down the one cloud, easy as, I think if I could just get up there, catch on the wing, let go over the Hope Valley... Gabriella says *maybe*. But she has a thing for pilots. I have a thing for heights.

*I hollow my bones with spoons,  
one of those sets for measuring sugar.  
The tablespoon works my sternum  
but my collarbone, the bones in my wrists,*

*only take the quarter teaspoon.  
You dig out each of my vertebrae,  
the heart of my pelvis, for weeks  
my marrow under your nails.*

Another man tied himself to a hundred helium balloons today, set himself sail over Glossop. They are not all red like the song. Or blue like the ones along the Berlin Wall. I love balloons let go: the South Koreans sending news north, or Maori kites flying letters to the gods. Sometimes I think about this when I think about you. So much depends on wind speed, direction. I watch the footage, mute the commentary trying to predict (a), when he'll land, and (b), where.

Angelina D'Roza

From *Envies the Birds* (2016).

## Further Reading

### *In print*

*Cazique* (2018), *The Navigators* (2015), *West North East* (2013)

**Matthew Clegg**

*Correspondences* (2019), *Envy the Birds* (2016)

**Angelina D’Roza**

*Sheffield Almanac* (2017)

**Pete Green**

*QUAD* (2017), *Swamp Area* (2012), *Across the Water* (2012)

**Alistair Noon**

### *Online (click titles for links)*

*Fugue, Shimmer, Pulse and Fuse: Musical Principles in ‘Trig Points’*

further reflections on the Wordsworth Trust residency

**Matthew Clegg**

*Hotel California*

on song, poetry, place, and loss

**Angelina D’Roza**

*Nothing Lasts Forever: Hope Gardens and the Meaning of Permanence*

on precarity, transience, and the built environment

**Pete Green**

*Doggerland Chronicles*

photoset comprising 92 images

**Karl Hurst**

*The Idea of Translocality on Krymská*

contribution to *Poetics and Translocality* panel discussion at the 2011 Prague Microfest

**Alistair Noon**