OF CYCLES AND DISTURBANCES

by

Justin Foster

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Abstract

As a hybrid text, *Of Cycles and Disturbances* is blend of creative and theoretical writing that explores the complex and sometimes destructive relationship humans have with nonhuman environments. While writing towards an apprenticeship of the land, my creative and theoretical texts explore: language and story; memory and things remembered; connection to place and a rooted sense of place; the relationship between home and the wild; the negative effects of resource extraction and processing on nonhuman environments; and my complicated relationship with resource extraction. By combining lined poetry, prose poems, experiential creative non-fiction, photographs and a theoretical framework, my thesis surrounds and works towards an understanding of nature and my own involvement in the cycles and disturbances of the wild. The forces that work to transform and destroy nature and the ways in which poetry can work against those forces as both a form of activism and a didactic tool is the focus of this project.

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Acknowledgements

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Creative and Theoretical Choices:
A Rationale

There are places we carry with us wherever we go; environments we know with such intimacy and acceptance they cannot be forgotten. For me, it is the land – a natural environment of complex truths – that I am rooted in. My attunement is with the wild. It is where I grew up, where I spent my days. It is in nature, in the wilderness, in the creeks and stands, the mountains and waterways, the soil and air; it is in the sub-boreal forest in the Cariboo north-central region of British Columbia. There are others who feel, much like I do, that the wild, the land that begins at the edge of the city, the rancher's field, the cutblock, or the bush-road, is something to be a part of. Viewed from the inside, with an ecology of perspective, I see a diversity of environments with natural cycles and disturbances, and the possibility of a reciprocal non-human/human relationship. I desire to take care of the wild, to live with respect alongside nature with a continued use perspective. The concept of continued use is a way of looking at nonhuman environments with a focus on sustainability. If we take resources from the land – weather they be plants, animals or water – in a respectful, nonviolent way while trying to mitigate disturbances and reduce our environmental impact, we can approach a continued use perspective, thereby supporting long-term ecological balance. Some have encountered the wild in a different way. Those who do not share a connection with the living land, who do not *practice the wild* (Snyder), view it from the outside, from a safe distance. They see wilderness as a commodity, an affluence of natural resources, an adversarial wilderness, a landscape, the *other,* rather than places that can let you in.

The nature of the sub-boreal forest in the Cariboo north-central region of BC is in a

continual state of change. For the past one hundred years, settlement and industrial development have drastically impacted the natural environment of this region and disrupted the process of cycles and disturbances. The industrialization of resource extraction and processing has transformed the nature of the Cariboo north-central region; it has affected the health of the wild and its many ecosystems and in turn affected the health of those who inhabit its human communities. It has irrevocably altered the land and I too feel the force of these changes. This is cause for concern, and the question remains: what can be done?

I first began exploring and experiencing the wilderness in and around Quesnel, BC as a young boy. I can trace my memories of being in nature, of smelling rotting logs and stagnant pools, of touching leaves, needles and the bark of trees, of tasting fresh mountain water and wild strawberries, almost as far back as I can remember. Even then, as a child, I knew there was a territory, a place in the wild that I was connected to. I have been away, but I always return to this land; I carry it with me. It is deep rooted, but I know that if I don't live with attention and responsibility to the land, if I don't continue to "take in the genius of the place ... the place will throw [me] out" (Lilburn, *Thinking and Singing* 173). Until recently, I had no way of explaining the connection I felt to a particular land. The feeling was persistent but I didn't have the words to express it or the theory to explore it. This project and the process of writing towards an apprenticeship of the land have firmly established in me an environmental consciousness that is foundational to my identity.

From an anthropocentric perspective, the *value* of nature is subjective; it depends on who you are and where you are from as well as your exposure to and experiences with the wild. The idea of objective *value* occurs when nature is viewed as a commodity rather than a

complex living organism. An anthropocentric perspective[1], however, is by no means the only approach to understanding the relationship between humans and nonhuman environments. Proponents of *deep ecology*, for example, assert an ecocentric perspective, which suggests that nonhuman organisms are inherently valuable regardless of their utility to human needs (Morton 2). My writing does not attempt to define the wild, nor does it aim to arrive at some conclusive accord – rather, it surrounds and works toward an understanding of nature and my own involvement in the cycles and disturbances of the wild. I am exploring the forces that work to transform and destroy nature and the ways in which poetry can work against those forces as both a form of activism and a pedagogical tool. Like Ken Belford, my goal is to "take on a type of [writing] that pushes outward, into the resistant, or into the unknown, or into the ideas and philosophical questions about how we might not just live, but live better, and with more attunement and responsibility to the complexity of it all" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*), striving for, as Tim Lilburn suggests, a way of knowing the land and "a course of contemplative inquiry" (*Guest Lecturer*). I work towards living here, as a resident of natural environments, "with a particular attention to the land" (*Guest Lecturer*). For me, this way of life, and by extension this type of writing, values the land and lives with it. A coexistence that is firmly rooted in respect, that looks to understand rather then destroy nonhuman environments, is what I am trying to embody here.

C*ycles and disturbances* is an ecological phrase that refers to a repeating series of occurrences within an ecosystem and the distinct changes within that ecosystem which upset the recurrent process. The idea of cycles and disturbances is at the root of this undertaking. Both my creative and theoretical texts work toward an understanding of the human impact on

[1] Anthropocentrism is discussed in detail *in Section 8: Writing Activism.*

natural ecosystems. The human impact can be described as an aberrant disturbance to the natural cycle of things. All natural environments and nonhuman ecosystems have cycles. Within these cycles, there are stages[2] and there are naturally occurring disturbances. A disturbance is any temporary change in the environment that produces a distinct change in the ecosystem (Rykiel). The key here is *temporary*, suggesting that eventually the ecosystem can return to a healthy equivalent of its pre-disturbance condition. Natural disturbances are those which have not been induced by human intervention – such as fires, floods, windstorms, and insect outbreaks.[3] Unnatural disturbances take many forms and are often more destructive. Practices such as logging, resource road-building, mining, damming, and introducing non-native species into ecosystems are unnatural breaks in the cycle. When an aberrant disturbance occurs, the ecosystem often does not return to its pre-disturbance state; what was there is forever lost. I am not, however, advocating for the complete removal of humans from natural environments but rather a reconstruction of our understanding of and approach towards nature.

As a hybrid text, my work is a blend of creative and theoretical writing, a fusion of poetry and methodology. While writing towards an apprenticeship of the land, my creative and theoretical texts will explore language, memory, place, home, ecological poetry and activism. By combining lined poetry, prose poems, experiential creative non-fiction, photographs and theoretical frameworks, my thesis emerges as an environmentally conscious hybrid text. I have come across several authors who have used the creative and theoretical

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[2] Every cycle has multiple reoccurring stages. The poem titles that begin with *Stage* are in reference to the many stages of cycles and disturbances, natural or otherwise.

[3] It should be noted that all of the aforementioned disturbances can be a direct result of, or accentuated by, human activity.

hybrid text approach to writing (Jan Zwicky, Tim Lilburn, and Don McKay). Although there are authors before me who have written in this form, my approach is somewhat unique in its method and structure. The blended form I am using throughout my texts allows for a complex presentation of information and ideas and the possibility of adoption within the subsequent acceptance of those ideas. My approach to language and diction shifts between poetic, academic/theoretical and self-reflexive. In this way, the expectation of traditional sequence and narrative is thrown out. Although many of the subjects and ideas that I am engaging with have been addressed by others, I have largely come to them independently, and in my own way. I have approached each subject carefully through theoretical discourse and experiential reflection. The research method I have used for much of my work is based in personal experience and observation (informed by critical/theoretical research). This has resulted in a self-reflexive, autobiographical tone intertwined with theoretical analysis.

Each section contains, first, a theoretical discussion that presents my ideas on a particular subject or subjects, followed by several creative texts and interspersed photographs. The creative texts work to further explore the theoretical ideas being presented in the section while at the same time engaging with some of the overarching themes. The theoretical components of each section vary in length and scope and are written in both academic and autobiographical diction. Some sections explore the theories of others at great length while others do not. This is a conscious choice based on the relative weight and importance of the subject in relation to the overall work and the scope of exploration and engagement being employed within the creative texts. There are sections that warrant only a brief theoretical presentation and discussion of the subject and its relevance, while other sections require thorough academic research and documentation. The function of creative

texts as a form of theory is an important distinction. Many of the theories and ideas that I am presenting in this thesis are explored at great length within the creative texts themselves. I believe that poetry in particular has the possibility of opening a dialogue between ideas and meaning, presenting questions and revealing cultural cues that are unique to its form. Poetry as a pedagogical tool can inform and uncover certain ideas and feelings that no other discourse can, a position I explore (theoretically rather then poetically) in *Sections 8* and *9*. The photographs serve to further explore a personal connection to the living land with a particular focus on my perceptions and permeative gaze.

Photography has allowed me to examine my cultural positioning and physical perspective on a particular environment at a certain time. My choice to use photography as a supplementary "text" is methodologically informed by a subgenre of participant-employed photography (PEP) known as Photovoice (Castleden 1395). Photovoice is often understood as a participatory approach to conceptualizing an individual's circumstance with the aim of *giving voice* to marginalized groups or perspectives (Hay 383). Although I do not consider myself a marginalized individual, the basic principles of Photovoice are relevant to my work. My decision to use photography is reflected within the three goals of Photovoice as identified by Caroline Wang: (1) assisting individuals with recording and reflecting on selected issues; (2) encouraging a dialogue surrounding these issues; and (3) creating change and/or influencing policy-makers. Each of my photographs endeavours to record and reflect upon certain issues while at the same time questioning and promoting a discussion of possible outcomes and forms of action. In an increasingly visual culture, I argue that visual data should be recognized as an effective method for exploring position and perspective. The issues I am presenting within my thesis are culturally contextualized and questioned within

the accompanying photographs. My intent is to create an engaging dialogue with the viewer/reader and to offer visual texts that contribute to the overall meaning.

As a requirement for many humanities texts within the academic sphere, a positioning of the author is necessary. I have found this to be perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the thesis-writing process. I struggle with the idea of a clearly articulated gender and identity. What's clear on the surface, though, is that I am of mostly white European heritage, I am male, I am able bodied, I am privileged and university educated. Below the surface things are not so straightforward. I do not identify myself as a traditional white man who is a part of the academy; I define myself in different terms. Throughout the creative and theoretical texts herein, I explore who I am, who I might be, and what influences have allowed me to be here today. In this way, my positioning of self is a part of all my writing; it is within the whole body of work itself. Particularly, *Section 7: A Resource Town Raised Me* examines my relationship with the land and how my views of the land are conditioned by my position. Many of my creative texts – *stage 9* and *stage 14*, in particular – work to culturally position myself and my writing.

There are certain themes that are present throughout the breadth of my creative texts. The six key themes I am working with, all of which are explored to some degree within the theoretical sections, are as follows: (1) language and story; (2) the effect of memory and things remembered; (3) my connection to place and a rooted sense of place; (4) the relationship between home and the wild; (5) the negative effects of resource extraction and processing on natural environments; and (6) my complicated relationship with resource extraction. The thematic settings of my creative texts are located in a certain region: the sub-boreal forest in the Cariboo north-central region of BC. The narrative of my poems is often

set, physically or viscerally, in the wild, on the land or in the city nearby. Waterways and environments located in and around Quesnel and Prince George are the focal settings of many of my creative and theoretical texts. The Baker Creek watershed is the most significant location throughout.

My childhood house in West Quesnel backed onto a network of trails that led into the unroaded forests beyond Uplands. From there, it was only a short hike to the Baker Creek watershed. Running east from Punchesakut Lake draining into the Fraser River, Baker Creek flows both through the city and the wild. I have spent many days negotiating this waterway. I learned how to be in this place and it was here that I began to understand the way of cycles and disturbances. Much of my current writing is interested in Baker Creek as it is now and as it was then. Remembering my childhood experiences, those moments in place I carry with me, and finding ways to contextualize them within my current understanding of the wild, is part of what I am trying to do in my creative texts and elsewhere.

Like tributaries flowing into a main stem, the distinct sections of my thesis coalesce, developing a strong current of ideas. Each section builds upon the theories and concepts of the last. From one to another, my thesis incorporates both theoretical and creative writing while employing a balance of experiential and research components. My hybrid thesis comprises nine sections. The following is a brief introduction to each of the sections.

Section 1. Language and Story: A discussion of the relationship between language, stories and words is presented here. The ways in which stories educate and create meaning is explored as is the relationship between poetry and story. Robert Bringhurst's theory of linguistics, as presented in *The Tree of Meaning and the Work of Ecological Linguistics,* is foundational to my understanding of language. Baker Creek is introduced as an area of

particular interest in the creative texts of this section.

Section 2. Nature, Wilderness, and The Wild: In this section, I examine the similarities and differences between the various terms used to discuss nonhuman environments. The problematic nature of defining and labeling nonhuman environments is discussed within a framework of ecocritical discourse. My own understanding and rationale of nature, wilderness, and the wild is presented alongside the work of various ecocritics such as Timothy Morton and William Cronen, and poets Gary Snyder and Ken Belford.

Section 3. Things Remembered: Much of my writing involves digging back, peeling away, and drawing on memories. This process allows me to begin again at the source and find meaning in the now. For me, remembering is a series of overlapping, blurred and unspoken indices, an arrangement of emotive materials towards a feeling. As such, these memories are skewed by my own evolving perceptions and affected by the limitations of language. In this section, I discuss the nature of things remembered and how the remembered experiences are distant, and the words are carefully considered, but the feelings are, as far as I can tell, honest. The way things change over time within memory is also an area of consideration.

Section 4. A Rooted Sense of Place: To write *from place*, to understand its subtleties and nuances, and to capture the feeling, memory, and identity of a particular environment, a *rooted sense of place* is necessary. In this section, I discuss the concepts of *place*, *rootedness* and *sense of place* as they pertain to writing in particular. The distinction between *space* and *place* is examined as is the difference between *landscape* and *place*. The importance of writing *from place* is explored within the context of my creative work.

Section 5. Places Home: For me, home is a place in nature that I am a part of. Here,

I posit that there are two types of home: home as it resides in people and home that is a form of residence. *Home as place* and my rationale for a *home in the wild* is the focus of this section. My connection to the living land is further established in both the creative and theoretical texts of this section. The limits of language in relation to describing an individual's connection to home is an important distinction.

Section 6. Violence at Home: A discussion of how resource extraction and processing can be viewed as a form of violence that poisons my home is presented in this section. My experiences doing silviculture work and my perceptions of corporate logging practices versus small woodlot management are examined. Here, I offer a critique of resource capitalism as the source of irrevocable disturbance to my home. The personal struggle and lingering effects of working in a pulp and paper mill are questioned in both section 6 and 7.

Section 7. A Resource Town Raised Me: Section 7 addresses my complex relationship with the resource extraction and processing industry and the ways in which I have benefited from being a part of the "problem." The possibility of complicity is exposed with respect to my critique and involvement in the resource extraction and processing industry. A positioning of self in relation to violence against the land is explored along with a detailing of my various levels of involvement, both past and present.

Section 8. Writing Activism: Creative writing, and particularly poetry, as a form of activism, is the primary focus of this section. The way in which a poem can go beyond the page and advocate for real-world change is examined. The adoption of ideas through poetry is also explained. A discussion of ecological poetry or ecopoetry, and those writing that form of poetics – such as Don McKay and Ken Belford – is presented. Writing from a anthropocentric position and the potential dangers of anthropomorphizing nature are

addressed. The concept of the *inappellable* and that which goes on between the lines in poetry is further examined.

Section 9. Becoming Birch: Metamorphosis and Environmental Change: In this final section I attempt to show the pedagogical nature of poetry that employs a specific literary trope as a means to inform the reading or listening audience. As a literary motif, metamorphosis has the potential to shed needed light on the correlation between environmental degradation and the health of a community. In this section, I argue that the imagined process of metamorphosis from an of-nature, organic form such as a birch tree, to a body with reflexive human awareness, can be used as a vehicle to explore the impact of environmental change in a specific transitional region. Focusing on air quality, I explore the ways in which the health of the land and natural environment is directly linked to the health of the people who inhabit that region. In some ways, this section is a culmination of the themes and ideas that have been presented throughout the previous sections.

-Section 1-
Language and Story

> *...the text is just the map; the story is the territory. The story however is also a map – a map of the land, a map of the mind, a map of the heart, a map of the language in which the story is told.*
>
> -Robert Bringhurst *The Tree of Meaning* (175)

Language is alive; it is living, breathing, moving and changing within environments. Language is substance, content and reason. Language is what we are. Among other things, my writing is concerned with language as a theoretical construct and the perceptions of meaning inherent therein. In some cases, my creative texts are self-consciously aware of their own language, while at the same time questioning and challenging the meaning of the words themselves – the poem as self-reflexive. Language can be looked at from many perspectives, approached from many angles. There are two aspects of language that will be examined further here: words and stories. Both are particularly relevant to my work, and in many ways, to all writing.

A *word* is defined as a unit of language, "consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representation, that functions as a principal carrier of meaning" (*Collins English Dictionary*). By themselves, however, words carry little weight. They are only as relevant as the other words which surround them. Context is everything. Each word has its referents, has its own story. Take, for example, the word *resource*. On its own, *resource* means "a source of supply" (*Collins English Dictionary)*. Combine it with one or more words though, and additional meaning is created, an image is evoked: *resource extraction*; *non-renewable resource*; *a resource town*; or *human resources*. Meaning is dependent upon the position of the selected word and what it signifies within the string of words which precede and follow

it. When words are used to describe a succession of incidents that explore an idea, stories emerges. Although stories are often thought to reside within the boundaries of traditional narrative techniques, stories can take many forms and can exist within many mediums. As long as there is purpose, a retelling of any encounter with the world can be a story. Whether it is designed to entertain, interest or instruct its reading or listening audience, a story creates meaning through language.

In his collection of essays, *The Tree of Meaning*, Robert Bringhurst explains the relationship between language, story and literature through an ecological metaphor:

> A story is to the sentence as a tree is to the twig. And literature is to a story as the forest is to the tree. Language – that metaphor – is the wood the tree is made of, an engineer might say, but a biologist would notice something else. The wood the tree is made of is created by the tree. Stories make the language they are made of. They make it and keep it alive. (169)

I am neither an engineer nor a biologist; I am a poet who sees the tree and the wood as inseparable, as co-creators and architects of a self-informed, self-defined connectedness. Stories are the keepers of language and ideas. By this measure, stories serve an important function of language. They are the plot and the narrative of all incidents and events; they are at the pulse of life. Poetry, I would argue, can be understood as a kind of story: not necessarily a traditional narrative, however, but a dialogue that questions and explores the meanings and ideas of that which can be felt in either a physical or visceral capacity. In this way, the poem tells a story: the story of life and experience.

In order to truly understand a place we must intimately know the language of that environment. This can be achieved over time through a deep investigation of the stories of that particular place. The relationship between place and language is complex and not easily defined. In his ecological metaphor, Bringhurst approaches an understanding of the value of

stories and the ways in which we can come to understand the meaning of those stories within the context of place:

> You can kill the tree and take the wood, kill the story and take the language, kill the earth and take the ore, kill the river and take the water – but if you really want to understand the wood, the water, the minerals, and the rocks, you have to visit them at home, in the living trees, the rivers, the earth. And if you really want to understand the language, you have to encounter it in the stories by which it was made.
>
> What's more, if you really want to understand the tree, you have to encounter it in the forest. If you want to understand the river, you have to explore the watershed. If you want to understand the story, you have to go beyond it, into the ecosystem of stories. (169)

My *rooted sense of place* (see *Section 4: A Rooted Sense of Place*) which connects me to my home has something to do with language and the stories which create that language. I try to write with a curiosity that is rooted in an "ecosystem of stories" (Bringhurst 169). Through this curious gaze, the poem becomes both the tree and the wood the tree is made of; the language and the story. As Ken Belford notes, this way of looking at the world, being both open and questioning, in writing or otherwise, is healthy: "the growth of curiosity must be a quality that takes the vulnerable soul by the hand and guides one forward into knowing, and that knowing appears to be something that leads forever onward" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*).

The tree as a metaphor is successful in exploring the relationship between language and story. The tissues of interconnection that exist between these two things are similar to the relationship between wood and tree. They are at once different and the same. They are inseparable, each creating the other and existing simultaneously therein. The function of the story, like the poem, is guidance, is to better understand the environments we live and the complex relationships we have:

> Those trees, the trees of meaning we call stories, grow in your brain and the rest of your body. And there seems to be a symbiotic relation between those

> trees of meaning and ourselves. What the stories get out of it is that they get to exist. What we get out of it is guidance. Stories are one of the fundamental ways in which we understand the world – and we may yet come to learn that the reason for this is that stories are some of the basic constituents of the world. (Bringhurst 172)

Although it is not directly stated here, my understanding of how a poem, or any other creative text, can be understood as a story is explained through an associative reading of the above quotation. The function of a poem is to explore, to inform, and to surround with questions, that which helps us "understand the world" (172). Pedagogic poetry guides its reader or listener through ways of looking at the world; "it teaches / is instructional" (Belford *Notes on Lan(d)guage).*

In poetry, the process of word selection should not be taken lightly; it should be given the same weight and consideration as the ideas which inform the text itself. In my creative work, I try to make complex use of language while simultaneously going beyond the words and into the realm of feelings. As Belford suggests in *Notes on Lan(d)guage*, poetry does go beyond the complexity of language – it speaks to the bigger strands of interconnection: "Languages are indexes of belonging - and the matter of concern is not so much where the poet comes from but what the poet is" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). When exploring a particular environment, if you spend enough time there, being *in* that place (figuratively or literally speaking), a language will emerge. When stories develop from language, when they come to life in the air or on the page, a literature is building; real work is being done. My writing is grounded in the stories and language of experience; it looks to question and inform; it speaks to what I am and how I think. More importantly, language allows me to take what I see in the world, its beauty and its tragedy, and share it with others.

stage 2

a contrast is
there looking back to the trail

without pretence or translation

the northern raven, smooth, thoughtful, still
against the frost covered cottonwood

black and white

baker creek below, heavy, flickers
hardens where the water meets the air

the story exists at any point
where the ideas surface

they do not need to be heard
these *stories creatures are*[4]

where there is meaning and recognition

beyond the constraints and values
of our colonial language

this, a grain of thought
before it sounds like anything

silence/language

the words are only markers
to something bigger

a poetry of life

when standing there on the trail, in exchange
a discourse is far from necessary

the balance and the measure

like freezing water

---

[4] *stories creatures are* is an idea I borrowed from Robert Bringhurst's essay *The Tree of Meaning and The Work of Ecological Linguistics,* (2008).

there is a literature of contact

a dialogue with the moisture of the creek
the falling air and the raven in the cottonwood

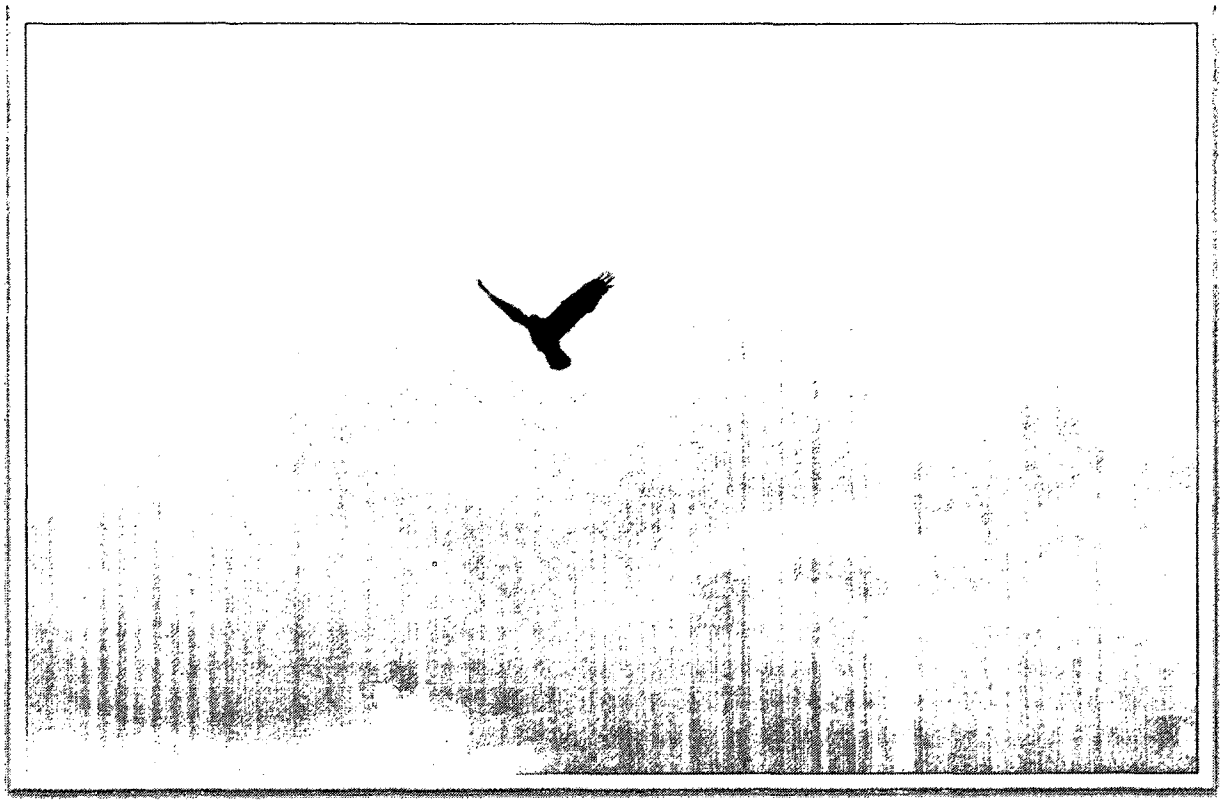

Figure 1. The Wild: A Northern Raven

stage 5

the northern raven slows
dips and lands on a lodgepole pine

the bow bends under the weight
releases a cone to the underbrush

a logging truck takes a corner near the sign at km 88
its tires grind, slide and regain position

a narrative builds
requiring complex linguistics

experience is
without such constraint

the black bear steps heavy into the creek
breaking the water's course

the creek swells slightly with the heft of exchange
while an eddy forms and quickly fades

a cigarette butt hits the ditch
bounces twice and chokes out in the dust

a language is to a story
as the forest is to the tree

but what happens, happens either way

the brook trout startles
darting smoothly upstream

small rocks carom into the current
reeling and rumbling until settled again

the weight of the words shifts

the wind changes course
a tree falls in the woods

and the question goes on without me

stage 11

the value of such

a place for every poem
and every poem in its place

investment opportunity
in geographies of language

and the product, in its accumulation
is made on paper still

followed only by its ego, the poem slips away
unnoticed into the wild which outlines this place

the intention begins to evolve

a culmination of peripheries
afterthoughts and pre-emptives

a reflection of assemblage

tributaries of language flowing into a main stem

the linguistics of favour
are sad to see me go

without food or water, using only its formal reserves
the poem can last a staggering twenty-one days

resource arteries form the centre
between subject and proposition

the poem in its place, bereft

this product, having little to do with values
and more to do with utility, pushes and shapes

offers us into existence
for the benefit of the poem

the latitude of northern

no, further...[5]

as a last ditch effort for survival
the poem will begin to consume its own language

a sort of cannibalism

at this time the value of a poem
will begin to unfurl

taking back the sense of agency
from the land, of the land, as you are

there's a story here, a mournful coming of age
frankly, I wish I'd thought of it first

in its final days, the poem is a fragment of its former self
worn and weakened by thirst all that remains

is a memory of becoming

[5] the latitude of northern / *no, further...* is borrowed from Hardy Friedrich's and Rob Budde's blog *the culture mill*, where Friedrich writes: *bored? / drive north; / no, further...*

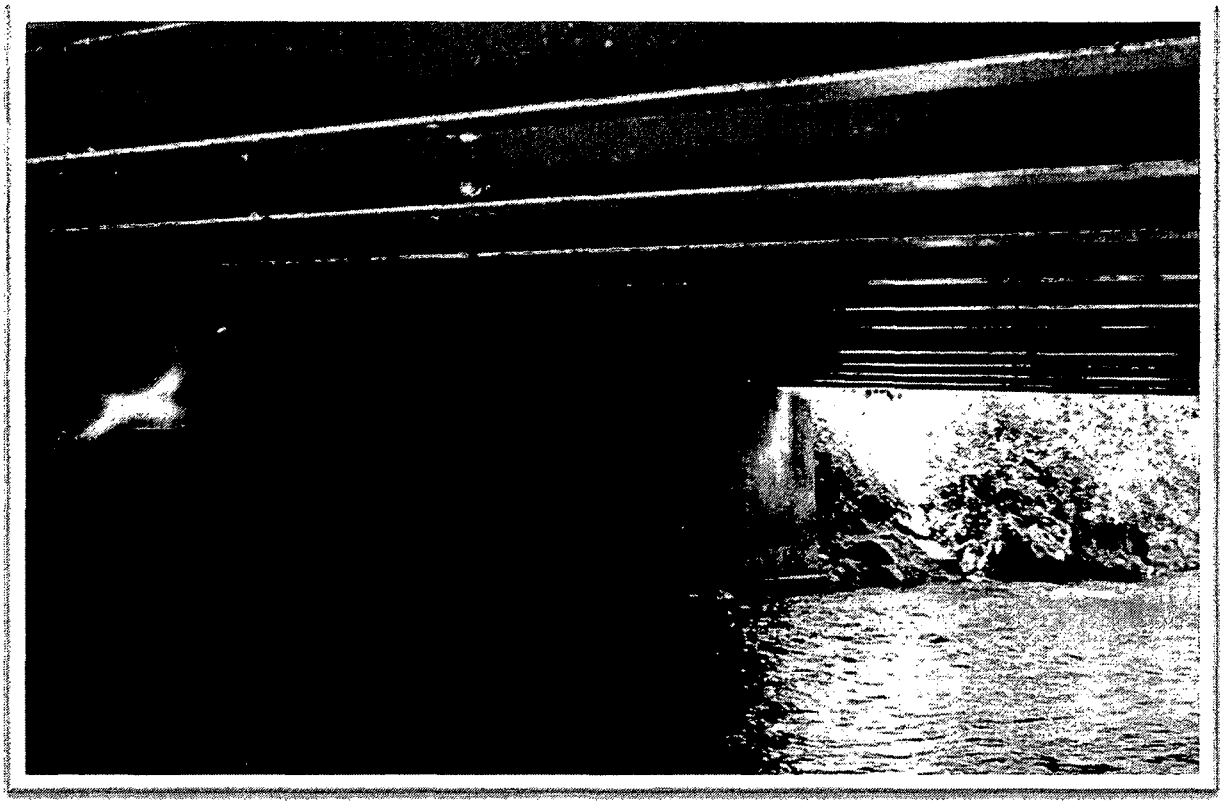

Figure 2. Baker Creek: The Bridge at Marsh Drive

-Section 2-
Nature, Wilderness, and The Wild

...the term Dao, the way of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple.

-Gary Snyder *The Practice of the Wild* (10)

Throughout my writing there are several terms that I make use of to either reference, engage with, or connect to, nonhuman environments. In each instance, the words and terms I have chosen when exploring these environments are carefully considered. As in most creative texts, and mine is no exception, the diction and word choice is integral to the *meaning*. My connection to the nonhuman, along with my reflections and self-conscious ruminations on the human impact on natural environments, requires well thought out terminology. As to better understand how and why I have chosen to use these terms, nature, wilderness, and the wild, will be examined here. The similarities and subtle differences between these terms are important within both my creative and theoretical texts.

Within the broad fields of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities considerable debate surrounds the discussion of labeling and defining nonhuman environments. Nature, wilderness, and the wild, in particular, have been widely criticised as problematic. It is not the terms themselves, however, that most critics take issue with; it is how they have been defined and what they are supposed to represent within the human/nonhuman dichotomy that is being questioned.

Traditionally, nature has been understood as the physical world which is outside civilization and human intention and which includes all nonhuman beings, living or

otherwise. Gary Snyder is an advocate of this view, suggesting that nature is the "material world or its collective objects and phenomena" that are apart from human action (Snyder 8). In this view, human and nonhuman environments are entirely separate from one another – they are diametrically opposed. An acceptance of this position begs the question: how can one write about being *in* nature? Are we not a part of what we experience in nature? And further, how can our connection to the nonhuman be explored without human-constructed language and modes of knowing? In his book *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton identifies the problem with the binary oppositional definition of nature. Morton posits that the term "nature" should be altogether abandoned; "in all its confusing, ideological intensity, nature ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its life-forms" (2); it is "a term that holds us back from meaningful engagements with what, in essence, nature is all about: things that are not identical to us or our preformed concepts" (7). Unlike Snyder, Morton argues that nature cannot be apart from human intention. In attempting to achieve this end we are essentially 'othering' nature itself; "[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Women. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (Morton 5). When writing about nature, Morton suggests that the subject/object binary comes into play, and that by "setting up nature as an object "over there"—a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact—it re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish" (125). I agree with Morton's assertion that in nature writing the subject/object binary can be detrimental. An acknowledgement that nature and culture reflect one another can provide a starting point from which meaningful ecocritical investigations can be undertaken. Although I support Morton's position on the problematic binary oppositional, subject/object idea of nature, I do

not agree with his "down with nature" (13) suggestion that we altogether abandon the term. Rather then resting on the dismissive idea that "nature is getting in the way" (Morton 1), can we not find a better way to understand the term within the complexity of human/nonhuman relationships? I argue there is a place for nature in culture, philosophy, art and politics.

Human and nonhuman environments are connected; this is especially apparent when considering the ways in which humans write and talk about their experiences with the nonhuman. Nature is an idea that we constructed as to better understand and articulate our relationship with the nonhuman. In the idea of nature, there is an understanding of environments as having a range of possibilities with a complexity of potential relationships. As Belford explains: "Nature is about an acceptance of individuation and diversity" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). Humans, then, are very much a part of nature.

Wilderness and the wild, like nature, are often described as being apart from human action and intention, as a place of cycles and disturbances all their own. In his book of essays, *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder describes how he understands the wild:

> Of animals – free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.
>
> Of plants – self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.
>
> Of land – a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine. (9-10)

Again, Snyder's definition is problematic. The absence of humans in the wild, when considering our place in the writing *of* wilderness and our unavoidable presence in the natural world, seems contradictory. William Cronen discusses this paradox in his essay "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature;" "wilderness embodies a dualistic

vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not" (17). If one is to write about a wilderness environment how can it be believed that they are not a part of that environment? Snyder describes the wilderness as a natural environment "where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order" (12). I would argue, (as many others have), that humans are one of many living beings present in the wild.

Another significant point that contradicts the binary oppositional idea of nature, wilderness, and the wild is that of traditional lands. Because an environment appears "unharmed" by human interaction it should not be concluded that land has always been uninhabited by humans. Aboriginal peoples have been a part of the land for time immemorial. To suggest that a place is untouched by human interaction is naive and particularly insulting to those whose traditional land it is. Because aboriginal people have been largely removed from their traditional territories, and have been "rounded up and moved onto reservations," it should not be forgotten that they are the "prior human inhabitants of these [wilderness] areas" (Cronen 15). Cronen argues that "[t]he removal of Indians to create an "uninhabited wilderness"—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the ... wilderness really is" (15-16). Historically speaking, we have always been a part of the wilderness (however destructive our relationship has been over time). The terms we use to describe and define nonhuman environments are constructed through human intentions. This is something we cannot escape.

In my work, when I refer to nature, wilderness, or the wild, I am exploring that which cannot be defined; that which is beyond the city, the streets, the bush-roads and the cutblocks; but also, the forest that starts at the end of the street, the creek that runs through the city, the trail that begins behind my house, and the grove of trees that grows at the edge of the highway. I am exploring environments that have not been cleared or significantly altered by humans and environments that have; anywhere the nonhuman can do its thing; almost everywhere. Belford describes it as the "unroaded land that begins at the edge of the rancher's field, wherever that is. It is that territory that exists beyond the colonizer's restless, ongoing and most recent efforts to clear and commodify, to make land safe..." (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). For Belford, the wild is an idea more then a location. When I write about places in nature, the wilderness, or the wild I am acknowledging my own aberrant presence; I am positioning myself within the idea of that environment.

There is a great deal of overlap within my understanding of these three terms. Particularly, a focus on the nonhuman and the cycles and disturbances of natural environments is central to each. A straight-forward definition, however, is seemingly unattainable. What is clear though, is that nonhuman environments and their various terms should be treated as "a discursive construction, something whose 'reality' derives from the ways we write, speak, and think about it" (Mazel xii).

In some cases, the terms nature, wilderness, and the wild can be used interchangeably. However, each evokes a slightly different image. Depending on the context, tone and subject engagement, I maintain that there is a need for multiple terms to describe the human relationship with nonhuman environments. Both my creative and theoretical texts question, explore and are concerned with issues of nature, wilderness, and the wild.

stage 16

belief in a name and the power of its action

the brook trout charges upstream

the paper birch and its fluttering dances

the act of saying it and considering it as true
is the way we learn to believe[6]

linguistics as the science of language
informs various cues and inconsistencies

not as the object of control but as the subject of necessity

a deep and resonant prruk-prruk
and kraa-kraa

the steady thrum of writing
the sound of water

the languages of the nonhuman are considered less
operating in one dimension fewer

and still we can't make sense of them

the indian paintbrush and its methods

the northern ravens' careful eye

the act of naming is, in its own way, a form of oppression
while at the same time a courtesy

communication is a function of survival
and the pleasure of humanity

languages have come and gone
and the names have changed

fort george

---

[6] *the act of saying it and considering it as true / is the way we learn to believe* is based on an idea I borrowed from French author and critic Michel de Certeau (1925–1986), in his highly influential *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974).

quesnellemouth

as a species we aim to control

respect is learned and given priority
in a hierarchical structure

this poem will not serve its purpose
having surrounded itself with questions

not to lie, but to take the words and languages the world has spoken
and to say, in one way or another, what-is is[7]

[7] Robert Bringhurst explores the idea of *what-is is* in his essay *The Persistence of Poetry* (2008).

stage 3

the wild is not a theory
but rather, an idea at the centre of things

in the wild poetics do not measure
like a pack-frame, they carry

thinking back to the image after so many years
to the creek, the fireweed, the spruce and fallen pine

everything in its place

the reduction of memory to an earlier form

the wild is about cycles and disturbances
it is not about truth

there are trails that would lead us back
back to the thread of ideas

a rooted sense of place is being there
is stepping in with the wild

the wild does not apologize for anything
like the water does not chose its course

as such, the language of the wild is innate

the wild thought moves slowly
through the grass and over the arc of the rock

to revisit the wild there is a returning again in thought
to the particulars of a place as it was

even though the creek has moved
the water still flows

in the wild there is a cadence
a thread of musicality

every memory has its dance
like every story has its language

the wild, like the poem, then
has away with words

old growth rhetoric

1.
here it's a stream of intake

words that are not language
but sequential metaphors for things which lack

and it's not something trees can take back
but the images hang

2.
ecologies of discourse
and seeing the pattern

awe that takes us
and the exploit of watching

tiny monsters with inkjet fingers

casting lines, setting traps
swinging with intention

or taking back the sense of clarity

3.
etching our names into imagined histories
and finding a smoothness that lets us be

throwing ourselves at one another
until we crash like too many facts

giving ideas their place in the wild

or that last feeling
that informs what you know about home

Figure 3. The Wild: White Indian Pipe Flower

-Section 3-
Things Remembered

I remember the heat, the burlap and the cotton,
and the blood spreading like a sunset, the sturgeon
a black chapel for flies. But the air of memory
is cloth. I press my eyes against it
and the bones in my face make a different person.
-Tim Bowling, *Fathom* (52)

Time and memory have a unique and transformative relationship. There seems to be a certain level of distortion that distends within the longevity of their union. They act both as a balance and measure. All the factors are unclear. And yet the value of things remembered, with respect to self-identification and positioning, has no equivalent. What's more, truth and objectivity become in-determinants within the reanimation of our past.

Is it not curious, the way a place is remembered? Not the memory itself, but the facts of existence, the truth of a place, when returned to. This is the trigger, the pump in a vein of ideas that flows through this investigation. In memory, *what-is is*. Things look and feel a certain way, everything appears where it should be. When drifting back to a location of particular significance, we try to revisit the feeling, and tell it a certain way. The story is yours – to visit, to detail, to remember – but things change. Truth becomes a slippery slope. We can vocalize or internalize these stories. Either way they are lived experiences. Telling the memory aloud, or writing it down (as the case may be), does seem to have an effect. The details have a greater significance when being passed along. A poem, then, can be a sort of retrieval of memory traces and a sharing of lived experience.

Memory is central to the development of home and a *rooted sense of place* (see *Section 4: A Rooted Sense of Place*). Forming memories of a location temporally connects us

to that place and evokes a sense of being-in-the-world; "repeated encounters with places, and complex associations with them, serve to build up memory and affection for those places, thereby rendering the places themselves deepened by time and qualified by memory" (Cloke and Jones 651). The act of remembering further establishes our emotional ties to a particular location. Memory, then, creates meaning and acts as a visceral link to the value of home.

My creative process involves a great deal of remembering. Going back to certain environments at particular times has had a major effect on my writing in terms of subjectivity and identity formation. When returning to an environment after some years away, it often appears different, changed from how you remember it. Wasn't the bridge longer, the water faster, the trail somewhere over there? What was the truth of this place? Truth – that elusive term – maintains that certain environments do transform physically over time, while others transform temporally through memory. Either way, change is constant. The memory of a place, though, is as real and meaningful as the reality or truth of the place itself. Although being present is important, the past is what constitutes our sense of identity. Writing in the moment is worthy, but even the moment itself is situated within a temporal understanding of the world. Histories inform our present ruminations; this is a truth that cannot be avoided.

Writing from the environments of my childhood, whether real or imagined, is part of what I am trying to do here. Realizing what has changed upon returning is equally important. Childhood connectedness to place, to nonhuman and urban environments, as it exists in memory, is central to my current understanding of my position in the world. Many of my creative texts further explore the relationship between memory and time as it pertains to place, rootedness and cultural positioning. For the purpose of this thesis, a theoretical understanding of memory seems less significant than a creative exploration. When

considering the ways in which poetry can plumb the depths of theory and approach the unspeakable feelings that surround a subject, I argue that the topic of memory can be let stand here. The poems can speak for themselves.

stage 4
for Andrew Foster

remember your 92 blue jays world series baseball cap
and your white reebok pumps

that green shirt you brought back from méxico
when you went to stay with your grandma that summer

remember our clothes flung on rocks
shoelaces tied in knots

the sound of water breaking as we jumped

remember the words we used to use
and the wind through the tall-grass

remember walking upstream, calling out to the wild
as the water flared around us and the chickadees chattered

sitting on the shore with fish stories in our eyes
throwing rocks at a flicker in the water

remember getting in, arms stretched out
letting the lazy current float us away

the freedom to be
with and without

sand in our socks
home by dinner

baker creek has changed since then
a lot happened and it seems different now

the bark beetles came and the trucks came later

a quick cut wood salvage prescription
and an increased risk of flooding

people have done good work too

mitigation, adaptation and education
certain habitats are being restored

the creek continues to be a wild
vivid, place in our memories

but we live in different environments now
and the water is getting higher

soon, even our clothes will be swept downstream

stage 8

in a parking lot behind the mall
watching the water move

a confluence of provocation
and a conflict of theories

the subject of value

there are many places on baker creek I carry with me

most are locations of no particular interest
to those who do not *practice the wild*[8]

the other ways of knowing

outside this, there is a rope swing
gliding out over a sharp bend in the suburbs

a pair of shoes hung on telephone wire
near the skatepark

there is a smashed-up truck in the water
having been pushed down from the cut-bank

there is a walking path and a modern bridge

a half dozen, maybe more
shopping carts caught on logs or in the shallows

there is asphalt and cement blocks
challenging the water's course

there is evidence of our proximity

beyond all this, heading west toward punchesakut
where contact declines, the wild appears different

there are bush-roads in and that which follows

natural, but in a way less so

---

[8] The idea of the *practice of the wild* was borrowed from Gary Snyder's book by the same name: *The Practice of the Wild,* (1990).

where access occurs
ecologies are

and the value remains even here

Figure 4. Near the Skatepark: Hung

At Baker Creek

Where the water moves. East from Punchesakut draining into the Fraser. Its many tributaries accumulating. I have learned to read this place, its cycles, with attention. The many days I've spent negotiating this waterway. From its spring high-water to its slowly summer currents, from its warm pull to its icy casing, padded with snow.

Listening attentively. Watching the water move, the roll and drag as it navigates the rocks. Each ripple and swash, an exchange, a discourse with that which is beyond my gaze. I know this place, its movement, its evocative story. I expect the smells, anticipate the sounds, the cycle. It listens, hears everything and remembers. I listen back. Our allusive discussion resonates. The Chinook and the Brook Trout, the Otter, the Tailed Frog and Long-Toed Salamander, the Yellow-Rumped Warbler, Dark-Eyed Junco, and Black-Capped Chickadee, the Bald Eagle and the Northern Raven, the Red Fox and White-Tailed Deer, the Cottonwood, the Indian Pipe Flower and the Lodgepole Pine – all know this place, depend on it as home. And what more? What else? The ecology speaks to everything in its place.

Feeling so alive at Baker Creek. I shed my socks and shoes. A sandbar below cutbank walls. Laces tied together, slung over shoulders, an easy carry upstream, with hands free. Rolling pants to thighs, high as I can get them, I walk out into the current. Just standing there feeling the water against my shins, breaking and curling. The push and pull, a churning. Its life a welcome pressure, a familiar tension. Digging my toes into the soft silt bars, feeling the worn rocks under foot. Deeply present. Knowing each bend and where the fallen logs have gathered, where the current is too strong to stand upright and where the water pools, deep enough to strip down and dive in. I'll spend the day here, and many to follow, wandering up and downstream. Baker Creek sings to me, sounds with a particular cadence, and I too feel alive here.

Flooding

The shopping cart is now completely submerged. Only a small wake tells of its underwater whereabouts. Three weeks ago it was half in and half out. Baker Creek is flooding and the melt is still flowing. I imagine what could be holding the shopping cart in its place with such promise under these conditions. Wedged there indefinitely it would seem. Immovable by forces, fixed, fused into rock. Now a part of the ecosystem. Going further I imagine fish, weary from travel, resting against the cold steel on their way upstream. Late in the summer, an otter catching rays on its tight weave grate. Leaves collecting in its catch. A raven feasting on stolen goods, alighted safely out of reach.

Thin plastic caught between the grate in early spring, has since been washed away. Debris is pushed along, spinning in the back-eddies and washing up where the water is shallow and the current stagnant. Many log jams have been broken and channelled into the Fraser, while others gather us here. Under the bridge on Marsh Drive, the jam is of particular concern. Access is considered. The mucky water edges toward the skate park, the walking path and the houses nearby. A warning is in effect. For now, my gumboots will do just fine.

I remember one year, in the early 90s, the year of the flood. It must have rained a hell of a lot that spring. And fast heat. This was before the skate park and some of the houses. Water levels where so high, so swollen, they exceeded the embankment, burst through sandbags, flooding the parking lot at West Park Mall. I'm sure the damage was costly and the experience scary for some. But for me it was a beautiful thing, a water world. I was a sailor. Everything connected. I dreamt of paddling. The streets lit by iridescence. I swear there were fish in that parking lot. Big fish, all kinds, resting in the still water. Although this cannot be verified by anyone.

At the bridge on Marsh there is a scene. People have stopped, left their vehicles running, children in the back seat, mouths open, fingers pointing. One kid dropped his bike in the street. An older gentleman, on his way back from the grocery store, left his bags on the sidewalk. Someone in a hurry lays into their horn, outraged by the single lane delay. At this,

most don't look away, transfixed by the possibility. Seems like the sort of situation where someone should be yelling "the end is nigh, the END IS NIGH!" But everyone just stands there, shifts from one foot to the other, observing the curiosity. An outbuilding of some sort, maybe it's a tool shed or a playhouse, is floating down Baker Creek. Some of the structure is submerged, but at least half is sticking up out of the water. Bobbing and reaching. From here, it looks like it will be crushed against the cement bridge, further disrupting the water's course. I imagine the possibilities: perhaps it's a very small house and somebody is still sleeping inside, dreaming of wet shoes. What an unpleasant surprise as it comes into contact. Maybe it's a luxury dog house, one with a view, built by a pampering owner. Maybe it's a boat house – wouldn't that be ironic?

The flood and all its reasons, traceable or otherwise. Many are affected and frequency is an issue. I watch the mucky water break against my gumboots. There is pressure. There is disturbance. There is a log-truck pulling through. I think of my childhood. This I am sure of: floods are reckless, I'm a good swimmer, some will continue to fight against it, and the silt will linger long after the water has dropped. This I have seen.

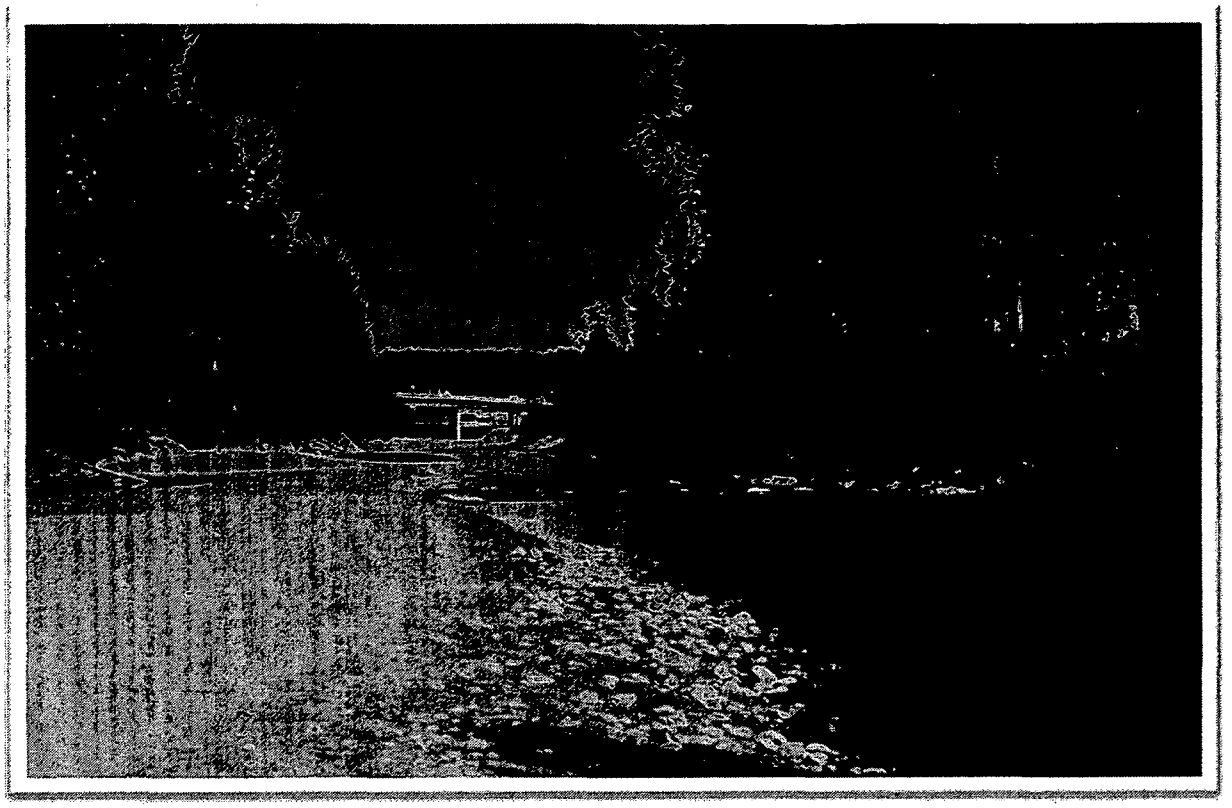

Figure 5. Baker Creek: Moffat Bridge in the Distance

When Returned To

We began at the confluence. It seemed like the right place to start. A natural beginning and a point of significant access. It was muggy and bright with a warm breeze from the north. We arrived just before noon, having hustled over after a late breakfast at the Caribou. I parked the van in the lot behind the mall. With the sun rainbowing off pools on the concrete and the smell of recyclables lingering I began my story. A raven hopped hesitantly as I fiddled with the settings on my camera and took flight when the sliding door slammed shut. We walked down to the water. The shopping cart wasn't there and the cement blocks were fewer then I remembered. The water rippled over the rocks as it merged with the faster current. I snapped a photo of Moffat Bridge as a log-truck shifted gears mid-crossing. A familiar sound, echoing off water. Baker Creek looked smaller, the current flowed a different way.

From the confluence we walked along a dark sand bar – still wet from this year's late high water – heading west towards the bridge on Marsh Drive. The River Front Trail spans this section of the creek, from the Fraser River to the bridge. Between the parking lot and the apartment building there is a grassy area with massive cottonwoods here and there. I watch a couple, about my age, sitting close on a bench overlooking the creek. A lone soldier is drinking beer from a Gatorade bottle near the skatepark. The skatepark is still here, right where it always was, but the features appear changed. Perhaps, I consider, the perspective is different from water level, from where I'm standing. I thought there was another box, a tabletop, and a few more rails? As I remember it, the telephone wire ran across the corner of the skatepark, over the stairs, towards what used to be a Moviemart. There are still shoes - albeit different styles - hung from the telephone wire, but the wire itself runs parallel to the skatepark boundary. At no point does it cross above the smooth cement. And the Moviemart is long gone.

On the north side of the creek, after crossing the yellow bridge, there is a trail. The trail is well used and publicly maintained. In one section, crushed rock has been added for increased footing. You can walk three abreast here. We pass one of my closest early childhood friends who now has a son of his own. His son looks about four. He is learning bike etiquette on the

trail; they pull off to the side as we walk by. We acknowledge each other in passing with a nod and a half-smile, but don't stop to chat. I'm pretty sure he recognizes me but I can't be certain. He has put on a little weight since then and so have I. The trail leads to a rock beach. Someone has made a sort of inuksuk. When I was young, I always approached Baker Creek from the south; the paths I knew were all on that side. Back then, they where single track trails, always walking one behind the other.

Past the streets and houses, with our water shoes on, Jesse and I amble upstream. Some spots I remember and others I do not. The rope swing isn't there anymore, or it's possible that I just can't find it. I've lost count of the cars, trucks and tractors dumped into the creek. Further upstream, the evidence of human contact is less and the nonhuman environment appears healthy. We strip down and swim in a familiar pool. The water is as cold as it ever was. The fish are still here, flourishing it would seem and there are just as many cottonwoods as I remember.

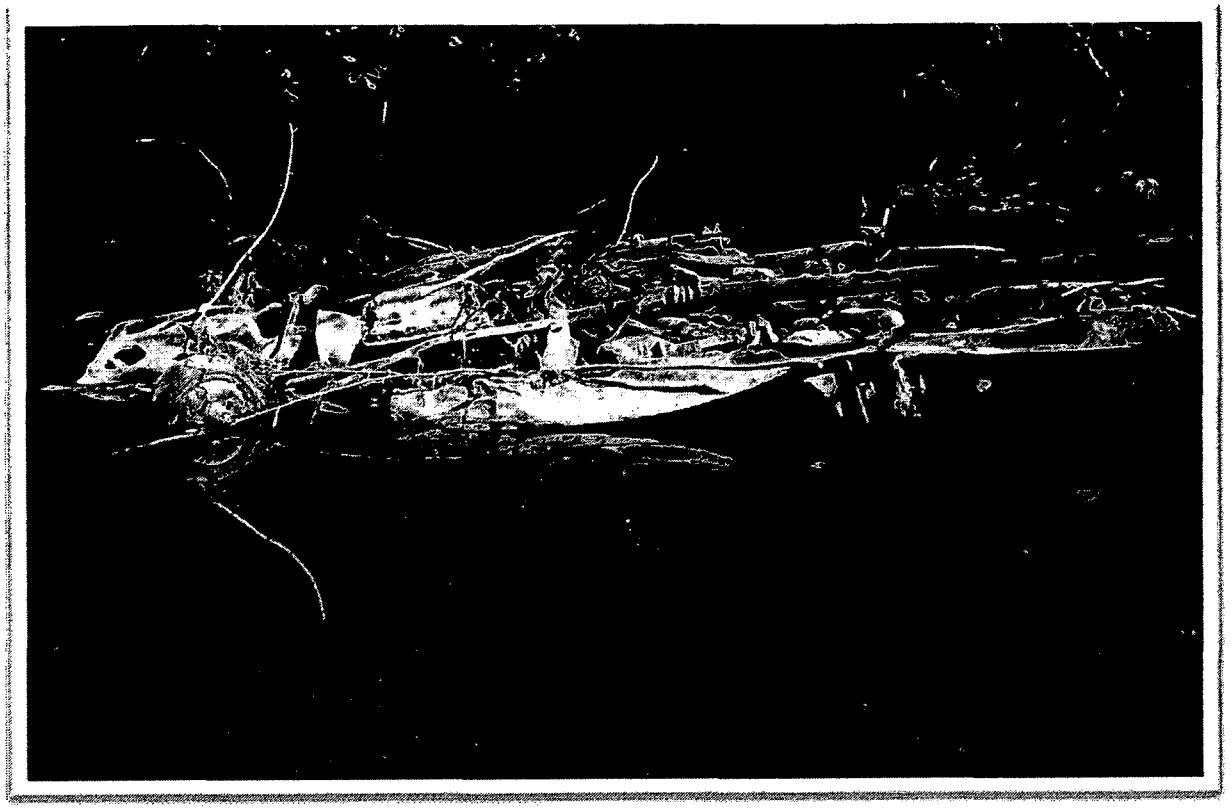

Figure 6. Baker Creek: All Smashed Up

-Section 4-
A Rooted Sense of Place

Place, as a theoretical construct, is "a portion of geographical space" wherein social relations, meaning, memory, and identity are constituted (Johnston et al. 582). When a particular environment becomes meaningful, when complex human connections are attached to it, and subjective value and temporal significance establish an emotional or memorial connection to the specifics of that location, it becomes *place*. Writing that explores, engages with, or is a result of, this connection to a particular environment is described as *place-based writing* or *writing from place*. There seem to be varying degrees to which individuals write from place; naming and detailing physical attributes of an environment is one such way. These are, however, only surface attributes of place; it can go much further. If the connection to place is deep rooted, the writing becomes a part of the environment itself. How, then, does one write more or less from place? The significance of this question cannot be understated; it is one of the most foundational themes that thread through the breadth of my creative work.

A feeling of *rootedness* and a *sense of place* are integral elements that delineate depth in place-based writing. The phrase *sense of place* describes the physical qualities and characteristics of specific geographical locations in relation to the character of a place: "a localized, bounded and material geographical entity, and the sentiments of attachment and detachment that human beings experience, express and contest in relation to specific places" (Johnston et al. 731). *Rootedness*, although similar to *sense of place*, describes the "feeling of unself-conscious dwelling" in place that is firmly established, settled or entrenched (Hay 245). To further clarify the difference between the two: *rootedness* is a state of "being at home in an unself-conscious way," whereas *sense of place* describes a "certain distance

between self and place that allows the self to appreciate a place" (Tuan 4). To write from place, to understand its subtleties and nuances, and to capture the feeling, memory, and identity of a particular environment, a *rooted sense of place* is necessary. To achieve this, the writer must embody both a visceral and material sense of belonging that connects their words to the physical location from which they are writing. Thus, the ability to produce meaningful literature that is *of place* hinges on the writer's *rooted sense of place* and his or her ability to engage, in writing, with the feeling and subject of a place. Of course it should be noted that the feeling of a particular environment is entirely subjective. Although there are commonalities between places, experience and connection to a place can be both individual and/or collective.

For many, the most notable location of connectivity and *rooted sense of place* is to home. My writing is largely interested in constructions of *home* as *place*. For me, home is a land I am connected to. The sub-boreal forest in the Cariboo north-central region of BC *is* my home. Before going further into this discussion of home and how I have come to understand it within the context of place, it is necessary to have a further understanding of what place is and is not.

The way in which *space* and *place* differ is an important distinction. As Tim Cresswell explains in *Place: a short introduction*, "[s]pace... has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning – as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way, it becomes a place" (10). Place is about the way we engage with a space, the interaction and the signifiers; "[p]lace is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world" (Cresswell 12). All things start as space

and only become place once we have invested a system of value and meaning into it.[9] One can have a better understanding of what place means when it is examined alongside that which it is not.

In some cases, place has been confused with the idea of landscape. They are, however, quite different. Landscape is something that is gazed upon; it is a visual concept. Regardless of your intention, landscape is something you can see and cannot help but see; it is "a portion of territory that the eye can comprehend in a single view" (Silko 32). In this understanding of landscape, the viewer is outside or separate from "any immediate encounter with the world" (Eyles and Litva 258); whereas places are "constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations" (Eyles and Litva 258). As Cresswell notes, "in most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place. Places are very much things to be inside of" (10). This is not to say that place isn't located in a specific geography; it very often is. The difference though, is that landscape is viewed from the outside, it is framed from a safe distance, whereas place is something within you or something you are within.

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[9] Conversely, it has been suggested that all things start as *place* and only become *space* through an imposed process of abstraction or mathematics (Kevin Hutchings). This possible analysis, however, does not change the distinction between *space* and *place* significantly. In either case, *place* is where the meaning is, and that is the focus of my work.

culture

i
d
e
i n
d it
e d i
n e t
a t i ny fungus growing from a fallen pine
id t
te i
yn t
t y
i
t
y

stage 14

the slap of wings, the echo
as I pass under moffat bridge

toward a place of meeting
of history and many names

chuntezn'ai, ndazhot'en, ndazkoh

quesnellemouth

my home
but not mine to give

and I remember this place has tradition
when these streets were trails and stories were spoken

currents solder and momentum builds

conflicts rise and fall
with the times as water levels do

at the confluence of the quesnel river, the fraser river
and baker creek is

a point of interest
of slippery truths

reflections of axe and blanket
an old wooden bridge, a steam shovel

a noose remembering

precious metals, horse drawn, gunslinger
green gold

it was a sawmilling site at the turn of the century
and a sign tells you so

even truth has its cycles

the chilcotin war ended here
white men have written

with the hanging of two chiefs and four others
under the pretence of negotiations

trust, an echo of wings

I am a white man
but not as some would understand it

and they called this place
the last frontier

stage 10

without ownership, without the dangers and pitfalls
of the traditional anthropocentric view

the persistence of place and the search for distinctiveness

that singularity does not fit in to this awareness
is one reason why we must return again to that spot

when locales become layers on a map
that sequentially define us

to arrive again at the source

it demands more than this, the many views
varied, *an ecology of perspective*[10]

thus it is rooted in our nature

default coordinates shift
and the contours place us here

to adopt a way of living with, in and of a land
brings us to the edge of benign consciousness

where the grind halts

much like groundwater
it goes on beneath the surface

not as overt as its related channels, but always there
diverting and subverting what goes on above

a love of place
and sense of identity

to become educated of a particular land there is a necessary returning
again and again to the places and ideas that have produced those sensibilities

the command of the north arrow

---

[10] *an ecology of perspective* is an idea that came out of an extensive dialogue with poet Josh Massey during the editing process of our poetry film *Vice Versa: Prince George Poetry On Screen* (2012).

measuring the loss

while approaching the page
as a field for tactical skirmishes[11]

[11] *a field for tactical skirmishes* is a line I borrowed from Jonathan Skinner's *Small Fish Big Pond; Lines on Some Ecopoetic*, (2009).

stage 15

Jesse and I are raising a tent in heavy wind

the orange fly acts like a sail
tries to take off, animate our soft bodies

toward the northern raven, above an ancient balsam fir
the tallest in its stand at this bend in the crooked river

looking down this environment appears map-like

the contour lines and tiny waterways
running into larger bodies

summit lake, bear lake, train tracks, highway
and land cleared for harvest

bush roads work the shape of the land
nonhuman trails crisscross

nature grows in symmetry
and the wild appears organized

thousands of mountain white fish breach
so it looks like rain

a hatch of mayflies

the slow current fill
ripples out in all directions

below, Jesse catches a fish and cuts it open
squirming parasites spill out from its belly

the sound of semi's gearing in the distance
flies landing, birds

there's a sickness here
a disturbance

natural or unnatural
it's hard to say

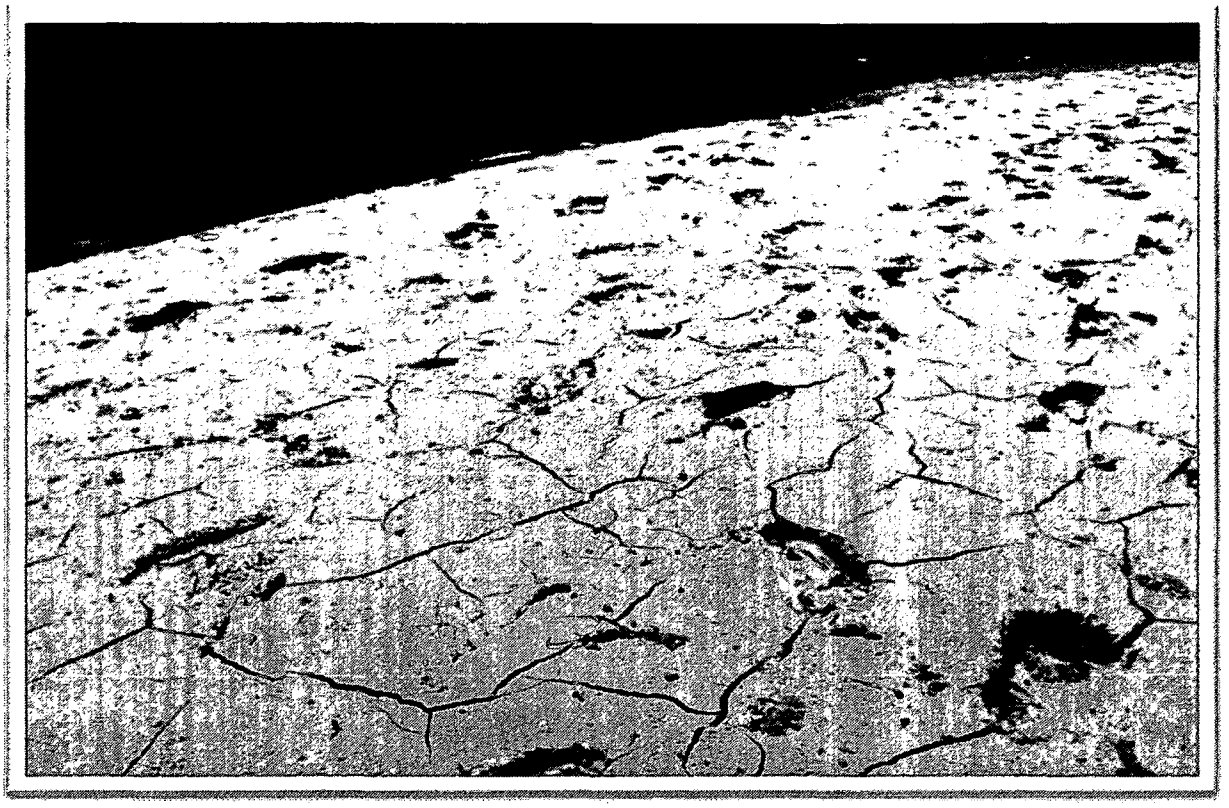

Figure 7. Baker Creek: Tracks After The Flood

-Section 5-
Places Home

We need to find our own way to take this place into our mouth;
we must re-say our past in such a way that it will gather us here.
-Tim Lilburn, *Going Home*

The place I call home is a meaningful location in which I have invested a great deal of time, value and significance. A *rooted sense of place* describes my connection to home. One of the most significant factors which contributes to the development of a *rooted sense of place* is feeling *at home*. An extended period of residence along with a degree of personal involvement and commitment to a particular location enhances the development of connectivity to home (Hay 246). Divergent from Lilburn's notion of "homelessness" ("Guest"), which posits a societal and interpersonal disconnection as a result of immigration and migration, I feel a deep connection to the place I call home. Although I may be somewhat removed from my ancestral roots, there is something that gives me meaning, a point of contact, for which I have no better term. Home is a feeling; it is both a physical and visceral connection. My relationship to home is admittedly positive. However, this is not always the case. It should be noted that for some, home can be a place of terror and abuse, a place of violence, victimization and captivity. Mine takes a different path.

Home, as a child, meant two things for me, two kinds of residence. It is a complex connection that is blurry and unspoken; it is an arrangement of temporal and emotive elements towards a feeling. Although I may not have been able to articulate it then, I have always known what home is and how it functions. Home is both inside and outside me at the same time. A land I am connected to and a place in the wild. It is a visceral connection to the

things that have moved and continue to move me. It is a conversation, a dialogue between things tangible and intangible. It exists both in language and in silence. We can approach an understanding, a definition of home with words, but there is a silence, that which cannot be said, that connects us to the place we call home. It is a physical reaction, a sensory experience. It is what goes on behind the words, between the lines.

Despite the limitations of language, I will attempt to define home as it has come to me, in both its capacities. There is a great deal of overlap between the two places I call home. The lines that divide my impression of home are blurry and intertwined. An ecological map comes to mind when envisioning this area of intersection. Keeping with this analogy, an ecotone seems fitting when describing these areas of overlap: "a transitional zone between adjacent biotic communities, as between a forest and grassland or a river and its estuary. An ecotone has its own characteristics in addition to sharing certain characteristics of the two communities" (*The American Heritage Science Dictionary*). Ecotones are similar, different and unique all at the same time. There are certain ecotonal qualities to the positioning of self at home. My identity has developed from within a transitional zone, from a place of intersection. It is informed by both my senses of home as it resides in people and my sense of home as a place of residence. Fitting, but not precise, this quotation leans towards the distinction of *home as place*: "[t]o ecologists, a place is rooted in a distinctive ecology – as a bioregion. To a Philosopher, place is a way of being-in-the-world" (Cresswell 12). I see reflections of my own rendering within both of these ideas.

First, home resides in people: our immediate family and closest friends, those who we trust and love. This impression of home moves with us wherever we go. It is a feeling of connectivity with a group of people who are essential to our understanding of the world and

how we define ourselves within that world. This sense of home is not localized to a specific geography. No matter where I am in the world, I will always be *at home* with these people or with my thoughts of these people. As Don McKay notes, "[h]ome, we may say, is the action of the inner life finding outer form; it is the settling of self into the world" (*Vis à Vis* 22). Home is movable, transcendent, and always with me. Based on and steeped in the traditions we share, the time we've spent, the intimacies and secrets we carry, and the intrinsic value we place on those things, home is *home when it moves you* (Wigmore). We establish this notion over time, through conversations and ongoing dialogues with our core group of people. This core group for me, as it likely is for you, is made up of parents, siblings, children, partners and those few friends who we love truly. This sense of home, as I have come to understand it, is neither localized nor bonded in the particulars of a place; it is from within, based on human relationships and connectivity.

There is, however, an impression of home that is of a specific environment, a fixed location. A place – as small or large as it needs to be – that one feels *at home* in; the geographical home. My definition, in this sense, is very much akin to the ideas of the "three fundamental aspects of place as a 'meaningful location'" (Cresswell 7) outlined by John Agnew (1987): 1. Location: "They have fixed objective co-ordinates on the Earth's surface..." 2. Locale: "... the actual shape of place within which people conduct their lives as individuals..." and 3. Sense of Place: "...the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place"(7).

For many, a geographical home would be linked to their place of residence, (given that they had been living at that location for an extended period). Although I do feel *at home* in my residence, there is another place I feel an even stronger *rooted sense of place* towards.

For me, it is a land that I am connected to. It is where I grew up, in nature, where I spent so many days. It is the wild beyond the houses and streets; it is Baker Creek and the Quesnel and Fraser Rivers; it is the cottonwood, the birch stand and the trail that runs beneath; it is an area of the sub-boreal forest in the Cariboo north-central region of BC.

Much like my understanding of home as it resides in people, home in nature is developed over time, through many conversations and ongoing dialogues. These conversations, however, cannot be recreated – they are ineffable. The dialogue is silent, insomuch as there are no words available to express that which is inexpressible. The limitations of language are present. I am playing here with the idea of the "inappellable" (4) which is presented by McKay in the introduction to *Open Wide a Wilderness*. According to McKay, the constraints of language limit our ability to present certain ideas, feelings and possibilities, especially when attempting to discuss nature. As McCaslin suggests in her essay on McKay "[t]o use words without labeling or fixing is ... 'a deliberate chastening of noetic hubris,' that tendency of language to grow too big for its boots and consume what it signifies" (68). The limits of language to explore nature should not be viewed as a hindrance, but rather an inevitable outcome of any attempt to capture and define the complexity of the living land.

I remember exploring the forests and waterways around Quesnel BC when I was young. Some areas in particular have stuck with me all my life. My connection to the land as a child was simple and easy, but also naive. I practised then what I have just begun to understand now as "simply looking," a notion from Lilburn's ideas of apprenticeship and "contemplative courtesy" (*Going Home* 12). Being there was enough, paying attention, spending time engaged in a conversation with nature, a conversation with home. There was

no reason to over think it, to intellectualize it in any way. I didn't have to try, just to *be,* present. In his book, *Going Home*, Lilburn unpacks the method of simply looking:

> Being in a place demands a practice: it isn't tourism or Romanticism: things aren't laid on, nor are they occultly given: here the practice is putting yourself out there and walking...
>
> The walking, though, is not an instrument, not a means to arrive at some chthonic accord; as you walk, you are already as there as you're going to get, though you hardly feel this... (190-191)

In this way, walking is a sort of meditative state of connectedness and vulnerability – of being-in-the-world. For Lilburn, the destination is insignificant, it is the process and the time spent getting there that is meaningful. Simply looking is to be simply present in the world and in the wild as a part of the cycle.

Even then, before I had the words to express it, I knew that this territory was in me. I've been away, but I always return to this land, I carry it with me. It is deep rooted and I know that if I don't live with attention and responsibility to the land, if I don't continue to "take in the genius of the place ... the place will throw [me] out" (Lilburn, *Thinking and Singing* 173). When I was young I had no way of explaining the connection I felt to a particular land. It was an ever-present feeling, but I didn't have the language or theory to explore it outward.

And then I found poetry.

I am interested in further exploring my sense of home in nature and how it has affected my sensibilities as a writer and as an environmentally concise[12] and concerned individual. Memory of experience is key to the writing of home. Having a territory you are a

---

[12] For me, environmental consciousness denotes a certain level of commitment to the protection, conservation and restoration of wilderness environments as well as an active voice in ecocritical and environmental discourse.

part of requires a reading of place – a give and take, a reciprocity of awareness. As Bringhurst put it: "walking in the forest or sitting by the stream, we know it works both ways: being fed and feeding, reading and being read" (9).

stage 12

under the ice, thoughts correlate
intentions mingle where currents merge

the mouth of the creek
a watershed deposit in mid-winter

each with its own practice and language

a speaking of the interchange

northern dialectics
and the shifty laws of truth

poetry up here is not unlike poetry of position
or elsewhere

rootedness plus a sense of place
and home is

the weight of snow on slopes and conifers

the names and paths we know
without needing to descant

a frozen trail
months after city snows have melted

the taste of fall

the moan of air trapped under ice
and the squeak of 30 below

a wild raspberry in the snag of a crow

log jams and ice jams – either way thoughts collect
and ideas emerge at the site of impact

where the poems meet
a moment of reflection

breaking up the ice
looking back from the melt

a dialogue between the lines
where the wild thought occurs

at the confluence
a few dozen poems swirl in an eddy

the words have many voices
take on many shapes

the politics of being northern

spring is coming and the ice is getting thin
still, I am heavy on my feet

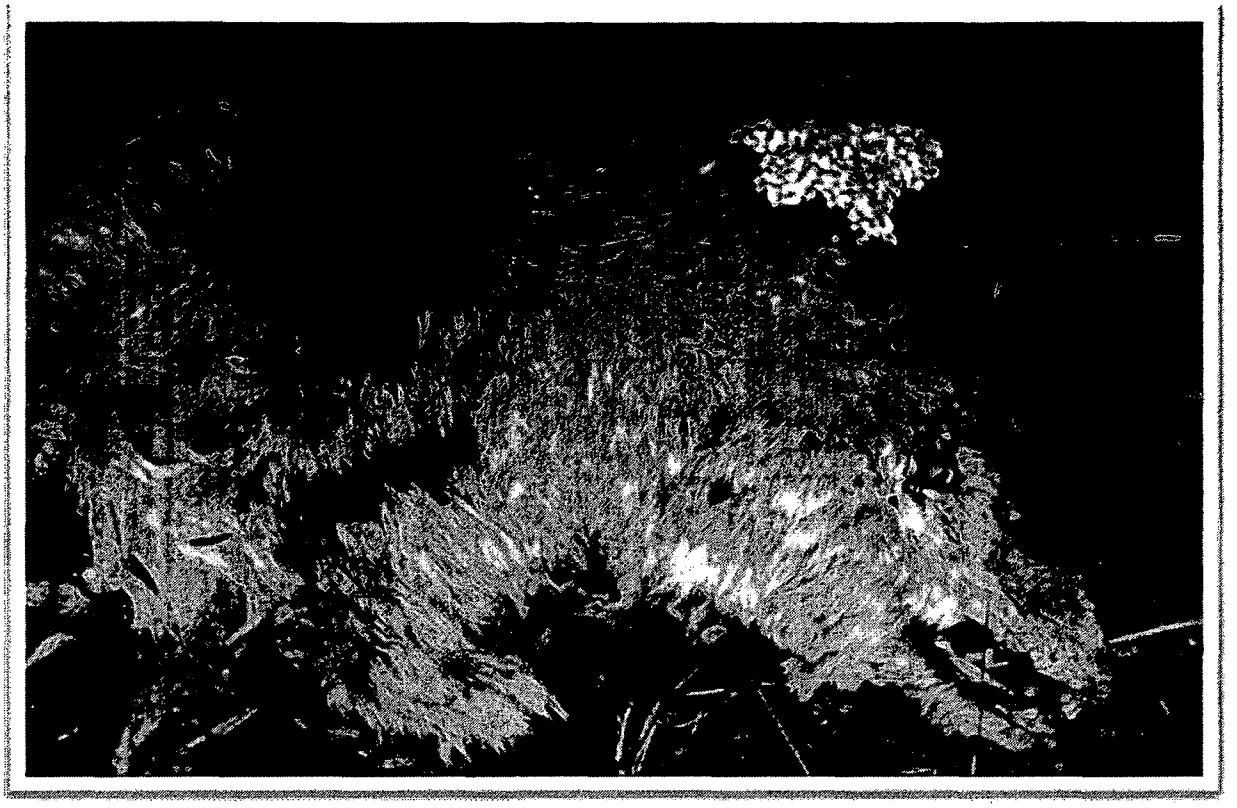

Figure 8. The Wild: Decompositions

Beyond Uplands

In the distance, where I'm going, the trees sway without me, the leaves flutter, a murmur, the water rushes, and the berries ripen on shrub. My house in West Quesnel backs onto a network of trails that leads into the unroaded forest beyond Uplands. I woke up early this morning, and while the rest of my family sleeps, I ready my things for the day ahead. Today, at eight years old, I will explore the wild again. At 6:30 my mother wanders into the shop where I've been packing my supplies for the hike, sleepy eyed but not surprised. My knives are sharp, boots ready, survival equipment carefully checked, rechecked and neatly organized into a day bag. She tells me it's still too early and that I'll have to wait until after breakfast. So I wait, thinking about the places I intend to learn, the wild strawberries to be eaten, the Coyote and the Moose I might chance to see, the smell of fireweed and the taste of pine needle tea.

I start out on a well trekked trail, heading up into the forest. Once I've gone far enough, an hour or so on short legs in quick stride, I break off and head into the untrailed wilderness. Now I'm where I need to be, in the wild, in the thick of it. I'm not surprised but delighted to find a small patch of Saskatoon berries, their sweet, nutty taste a welcome favour. I gather just enough, knowing the value of continuance. The tips of my fingers and tongue stained with the evidence of our conversation. Dripping sweat, the late summer sun straight above, I find shade under the quaking leaves of an Aspen stand. On my hands and knees, I dig into the dirt here, just to see what I might find. A beetle shell, a broken wing full of holes, decomposing sticks and leaves make up the litter layer, and below that I find roots and more roots. I use my thumb nail to cut open a sap pocket on a nearby aspen. The sap smells more pleasing than it tastes, its bitterness fitting. I use dirt to remove the stickiness from my skin, rolling it through my thumb and index finger. I watch as a group of ants carries away a fallen beetle, while a crow west of the murder circles overhead. From there, I carry on, keep looking, talking, and taking it in. Later, as I walk back towards the trail that will lead me to my home, to my people, there is a glimmer of unselfconsciousness. In that moment, I know this place is in me, this too is home.

A View

On this morning clouds hang low, the height of my intention, held afloat on the tops of White Spruce and Lodgepole pine. A collection of water droplets suspended. There is a noted difference between temperature and dew point, the result of which clings to my body, collects on the needles, lichen and leaves. I see fog peeling off a ridge-line in the distance. My boots are damp from the walk in, pants soaked to the knees. I wait to watch drops form in the veins and angles, pool in the cuppings and low spots where the earth has reached its saturation. I'm looking for no place in particular and the view is everywhere. Already here, I navigate the groundwork with a given awareness. I rest my body against the land, listen to the moisture, feel it in me. My back pressed firmly against the rocks and soil and flora, a young body, nearly motionless, on the surface, pulling apart, then back together again. The weight of my legs leaves indents; nothing is forgotten. I breathe heavy, the smell tingles, earthy tones, awakens in me a feeling of being. Looking out over the features of this land: a lake in the distance, moss at my feet, a copse of aspen here, a solitary White Spruce there, all the fauna, everything in its place.

Some months later, I'm back at the same spot, in the heat of mid-summer, bolstering on its hot surface. The Fireweed fills in the gaps now. The paintbrush low and the Wild Roses prickle. I imagine how the sun pulls the plants up from beneath soil, dirt and rock, just a tiny seed hunkered down, coaxed out with the promise of exchange. The up and down cycle the seasons carry. Thinking about how my steps could effect this cycle, I walk lightly, tread cautiously, each move a meaningful placement. I take care, a speaking of the interchange.

When the snow falls here it seems to linger, just above the surface of the rock bluff, for a few seconds longer than it needs to. My boots are higher than when last I was here. My tracks intersect a trail of many hooves. Longer moments with the shorter days, I note the way the snow hangs about the bows. They look thinner now and at the same time dense with contrast. The evergreens are still, looking out over this land. I bump a young pine; it sloughs off its winter coat, down the back of my jacket onto bare skin. The ridge-line is powdered, the lake long since frozen. In the distance, a solitary someone hopes for fish beneath the ice,

motionless and waiting. I too am waiting, not for anything in particular, not this, but to see what happens. I brush snow off a fallen log, sit, watch a Northern Raven preening on the White Spruce. I breath in deep, lungs tighten against the cold mountain air. This is a place to wait, to watch, to be.

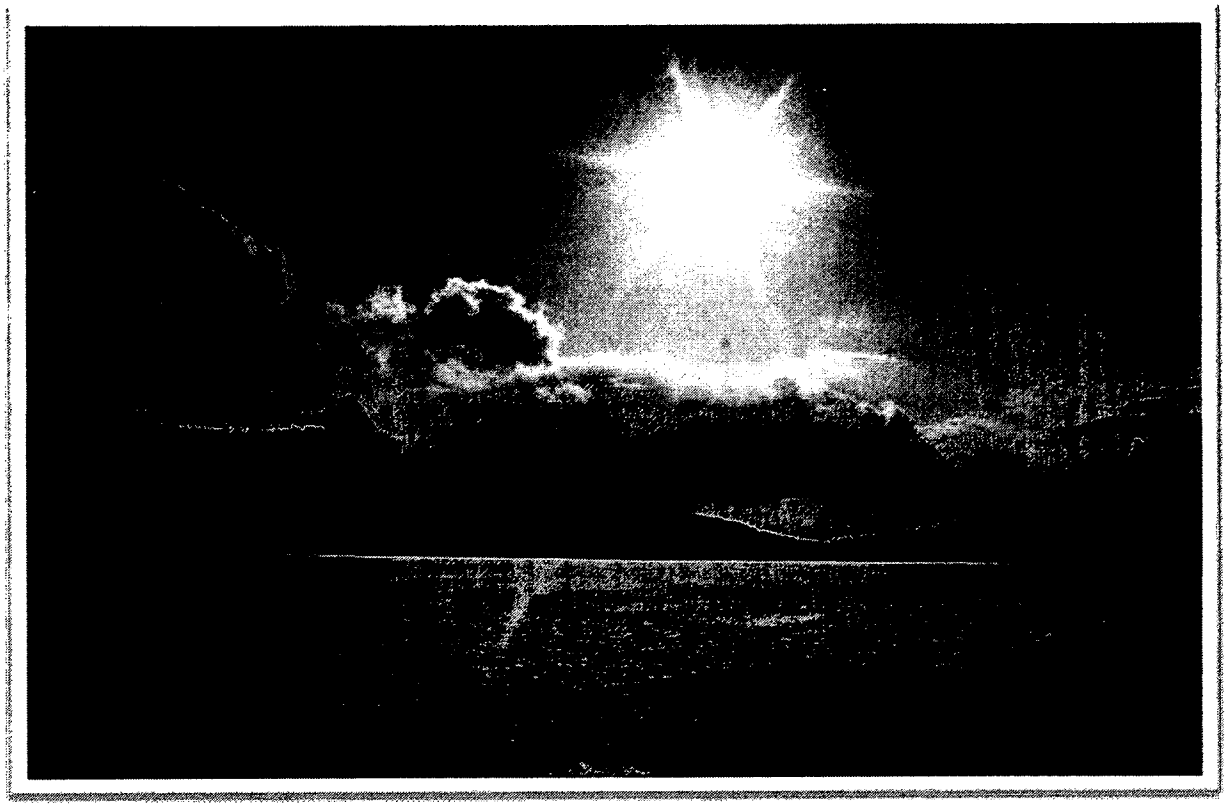

Figure 9. The Wild: A Frozen Lake

-Section 6-
Violence at Home

> *Institutional indices are the measure of success or failure in today's society. ...Human institutions manage forests for narrow institutional values. ...Forest communities, on the other hand, exist for all values. There are no indices of success or failure in a forest. The quality of air, water, sunlight, and soil shapes the diversity of life in the forest community. Institutional indices are meaningless to a forest. ...People can only see this index if they are part of the forest, because the whole is greater than the sum of any indices—economic, societal, or ecological.*
>
> Herb Hammond *Seeing the Forest Among the Trees* (46)

Wondering off the trail into the wild, picking up sticks and rocks, watching the squirrel collect or the fish jump – these are some of my earliest childhood memories. As far back as I can remember the sub-boreal forest in the Cariboo north-central region of BC is a place I belong to, a land I am a part of. In many ways it raised me and taught me to be. My environmental awareness and sensibilities developed from and with this land. It is my home. I learned to see the wild as a complex living organism, an ecology with many branches. "Nature is about an acceptance of individuation and diversity" (Belford), Belford explains, and this rings true for me. When I was young, it was easy to enjoy nature, to simply look and be, to accept. As I got older, what I saw happening in nature was not so easily accepted. My connection to the land has transformed over the years. My awareness and understanding of the human impact on our forests has challenged my perceptions. The wild is still a part of me and I'm as connected to the land as I have ever been; but I see changes happening all around me, the results of which are overtly negative. When I head out along the trail to find myself at home, there grows in me a sense wonderment and curiosity. I find solace in the forests of my home and sadness there as well. In places that should be wilderness, where the trails run and the creatures are, there is beauty, there is surprise and there is sickness.

When I was 20 years old, after working two summers in a pulp and paper mill, I found work in the forests as a treeplanter. Although it was not evident to me at the onset, this decision would have a significant and lasting effect on my understanding of my home in the wild. When I began treeplanting my primary goal was to work hard and make good money. I was focused and driven to be the top rookie planter in the company's employ. Working outdoors, in the elements, near the undisturbed wilderness, with creatures all around me, was a pleasure for the most part. I was successful as a bush worker, fitting in, living the dream, as they say. But as I spent time on the cutblocks, as I opened my eyes to the situation around me, I became intensely aware of the scope of the problems. I began to realize how serious a disturbance we were creating. In the seven field seasons that followed, my perceptions of the human impact on nature changed significantly. The effect of resource extraction on wild environments, when you're out there in the thick of it, is heavy. All ecosystems go through cycles and disturbances; this is natural, balanced, but what the resource extraction industry is doing to my home and so many others like it is beyond unnatural.

There is something dangerous at work, an abusive, non-reciprocal relationship. The result of aggressive resource extraction, of transport road building and clearcut logging is overtly transformative. The cut and process policies enacted by regressive land-base management have radically changed the forests here. This transformation appears aggressive and destructive – irreverence towards the health of the land. In describing how humans use and exploit the wild an act of violence comes to mind. The wild is scarred and too often abused. Over time I came to understand that the land was sick. A sickness that has come about as a result of human efforts to clear and commodify, to extract only what is *valuable* from the land.

Violence takes many forms. Often violence is committed by men against women, children or other men.[13] There is a certain type of violence that affects both men and women alike: violence against the land. As with most forms of violence, aggressive resource extraction is perpetuated by a male-dominated industry and perspective. That is not to say that women are not involved in the destruction of the wild, as they certainly are. Although it is not the focus of this thesis it should be noted that the exploitation and domination of the environment is akin to the exploitation and domination of women via patriarchal values. Within the sphere of ecofeminism there are a number of theorists who have made a case for the masculinist oppression of nature (Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Françoise d'Eaubonne). Because my focus is on the effects of violence against the land and not ecofeminism (although I believe it is an important and invaluable field of study), and because I am limited by space within this body of work, I will leave this topic to rest here.

As a silviculture worker it was apparent to me that replanting a clearcut cutblock was a meagre attempt at rectifying a dire situation. I witnessed many ecosystems that where beyond disturbed; they were destroyed. The cycles of the wild had been permanently altered. The waste was excessive and the process was violent. Everything I saw while on the cutblock was unnatural and out of place. As Bringhurst notes "when you clearcut a forest and leave a strip of trees along the edge, to hide the clearcut from the highway. ...something will eventually grow back – but what was there before is gone forever" (162). The consequences of this transformation of the land forebode a scary future. In *Section 7: A Resource Town Raised Me* I discuss more specifically my perspective on the inadequacies of the silviculture industry.

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[13] It should be noted that women are sometimes violent as well.

It should be noted here that I am not criticizing all logging practices, nor am I advocating for the complete abandonment of logging as a means to fulfil human needs. It is the way in which it is being done by most, the motives and intentions of those big businesses whose primary concern is money, that is irreversibly harming the land. I am speaking here to heavy industrialized extraction, clearcut logging, monoculture reforestation, big business, profit-driven commodification of the land: resource capitalism. From my perspective, there are ways to use the land with continuance and care, to live *with* the land.

There are many small woodlots in the Cariboo north-central region of BC and elsewhere that are being managed properly, where cutting happens selectively and there is consideration and responsibility towards the future health of the forest. Which trees should be cut, how they will they be extracted so as not to damage the saplings, and what impact this will have – both short term and long term – on this particular bioregion, is something that many woodlot owners take care to consider. The vast majority of logging is driven by different motivations – profit above all else – and happens without due care and attention to the land. It is by these hands that the wild is being violated. That said, my own connection to the resource extraction and processing industry should be noted (see *Section 7: A Resource Town Raised Me*). I am part of the problem but I advocate for change.

This is what I didn't know as a child, what I could not see then – that my home was sick, it was being taken advantage of. When a form of violence is being perpetrated against your home, it stands to reason that you too would be adversely affected by these acts. When Tim Lilburn gave a presentation at the University of Northern British Columbia in Early 2011, he discussed what he called the *collective sickness*. This idea resonates with me. My understanding of his notion came from a sense of dislocation and disconnection from our

environment and its cycles, being non-aboriginal North Americans, removed from our ancestral lands. For me, the concept of a *collective sickness* does not result from a feeling of disconnection, but rather, as a result of a close bond with the land and the way it is being treated by our capitalist culture. I believe there are many others like me who are, in some way, facing a sort of sickness that is brought on by environmental and ecological disregard. For me, the result is clear: The health of the individual affects the health of the community and is directly linked to the health of the land.

In understanding that the place I call home was being transformed, in ways so damaging it may never recover, it became clear to me that something had to be done. As a treeplanter, my impact was minimal but necessary: a band-aid solution of sorts. Rallies, petitions, marches, road blocks, joining environmentalist groups; these are some of the ways in which people can be involved, can make a difference and start to heal themselves. Without discrediting any of these methods (although I support some more than others), there is for me another way. Writing it down: poetry with an ecocritical ear, the words, the poem as a form of both healing and activism as I move towards a method of exploration and advocacy.

stage 6

the working forest

in the way dust collects on the bark of fallen trees
in the way lending seems to outweigh return

the swing of economies
to extract and make ready

waiting for the language
to fall, to be weighed out

caulks and leather hands on chain and teeth
diesel smoke climbs and steel cables skid

prescription and outcome
are of different realities

and the contexts move

politics of the nonhuman
washed out by the sound of economics

stumpage left lingering
as subtle violence

and they don't get time at the bargaining table

when our wants out-weigh our needs
consumption becomes a marker of status

the nexus of parts
as we work towards some tragic end

non-reciprocal relationships emerge
and debt is at the tip of every tongue

on paper it suggests otherwise
but still the forest remains

unemployed

stage 7

cycle indigenous

absorb and release
a filter sponge

pending energy cast
and a storm storming

the forest canopy shelters everything understory

slows the force of it, finds the balance
tensions in flux and gyre

buffering effects lost and the literature displaced

rain water building momentum

the land slides
a broken network of fluency

the sodden ground
near a creek, a lake, a link

running tributaries of a watershed swell

bridges and banks break, silt streams
and the groundwater rises

inorganic soil and mineral depletion

the long and short term effects
are high marks rising

disturbances take many forms
many paths in

and progress is knowing
what's in the water is in everything

stage 13

a slight cough given context by way of words
and you can feel it in your lungs filling

hoof prints by the settling pound
and the mighty fraser is a pump line

capital and balance are diametrically engaged
and the stories are our only constant

a contrast is here too
far from the trail and the greased pig

gender is not a factor in this machine

steam like veins power and hiss

hand caught in a purling belt
the loss

the oppression and domination

the unlikely factors of a melt-down
clear with a 190km radius

and what would this town be without extraction
we came for gold, then settled for trees

and what could be done differently

the tallest building in the city is the digester tower
with a belly full of brown stock and black liquor

eating wood chips and shitting fibre
24/7 through and through

an ecosystem was severely altered
but there was food on the table and books on the shelves

the measure is a greased pig
and this is the product of our actions

living here

a collection of words, pages and stories
observations of possible outcomes

and it must be noted
the book is made of paper

in this way, the balance is thrown

health studies have shown that pm10 and pm2.5 particles
can have extensive and serious human health impacts

including: decreased lung function, worsening respiratory symptoms
asthma, cancer, lung disease

and staying in it for your family

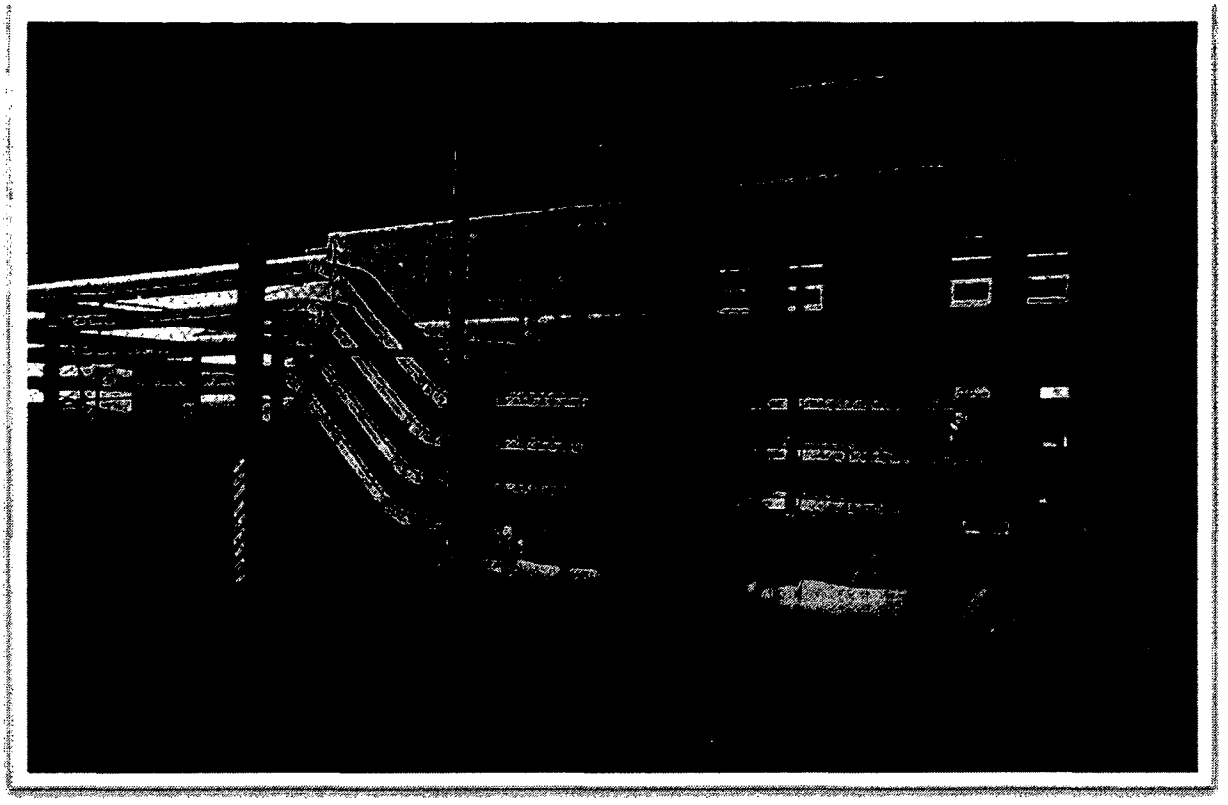

Figure 10. Shadows of An Industrial Park

-Section 7-
A Resource Town Raised Me

My town is a resource town and in many ways I am product of my environment. I am critical of the methods and practices, and yet the industry that disrupts and destroys the wild that is my home has given me opportunity; it has shaped the way I engage with the world. It has brought me here, to this place of privilege, to these words and ruminations. Resource extraction and processing are foundational elements of the culture I grew up in. My personal connection to the industry is both deeply rooted and conflicted. It is a part of me that I acknowledge and respect while at the same time challenge and condemn. It is easy to establish the negative, but there is no denying the positive effects and outcomes that the industry has had on my life. Despite my critical outlook, I have a financial and cultural connection to the resource extraction and processing industry in Quesnel. A resource town raised me.

When I was ten my family visited Cuba. At that age, travelling in a poverty-stricken, developing nation and observing another way of life – the struggles and successes of that culture – was revealing. It was there that I began to understand the world as a diversity of relationships with varied and complex needs. I saw the beauty of *the other*. I was able to compare the natural wild, the flora and fauna, of the Caribbean against the wild of my home in the Cariboo. Experiencing the exotic, as I did in Cuba, helped establish my *rooted sense of place*. The jungles there were so unfamiliar, so mysterious. I began to understand that I know the land in my home intimately, and that we as humans should "know what we know, and know what we do not know" (Belford *Notes on Lan(d)guage*). Being there evoked a feeling of connection to the land I was a part of.

My father, a journeyman steamfitter, worked most of his adult life in a pulp and paper mill. His well-earned income afforded my family the luxury of travel, education, mobility and option. In this way, I directly benefited from the resource extraction and processing industry. Most of my friends where I grew up also had similar experiences as a result of financial ties to the industry. My family travelled all over Canada and the western United States. During these trips I was exposed to wild environments that were different from my own, to forests of many shapes, textures and colours, and to rivers and lakes of many sizes. I hiked, skied, canoed, and camped all over BC. I read books and was exposed to art and music. I had time to study and lessons when I needed them. I played sports, went to wilderness survival camps, joined theatre, and played in the mountains. I chose to pursue a university education and was supported by my family. Because we lived in Quesnel and because my family was involved in the forest industry, I was able to have these experiences.

In one way or another, my post-secondary education has been largely funded by the resource extraction and processing industry. In this way, I am a part of the very system I am condemning. After high school, I worked at a pulp and paper mill for two summers. During this time, I began to understand the depth and inner workings of the processing/transforming side of the resource industry: the chemicals used, the dangers, damages and environmental outcomes, the way of life, the culture, and the money. There is almost no other summer job that offers earnings as high as I received working at the mill. This healthy wage put me through the first few years of my undergraduate degree, after which time I began working in the silviculture industry. Although tree-planting is often viewed as a response to tree-extraction, and in some ways it is, in this line of work money comes from the same source. And further, the intention of most industry corporations is to plant harvestable forests for the

future, improve public relations/image, and fulfil governmentally imposed regulations, not to plant diverse and healthy ecosystems. I would argue that much, even most, silviculture work is carried out under the profit-driven motives of resource capitalism.

The rest of my undergraduate and graduate degree was partially financed by work in the siliviculture field and the occasional inter-mill shutdown.[14] Most recently, I received significant contributions to my graduate work from scholarships funded by large resource industry corporations. The resource extraction industry helped pay my way through a university education. As such, I am directly involved in the destruction of my home and the disturbance of so many ecosystems.

From a certain perspective, it can be suggested that I am living a contradiction. This view, however, does not hold true from my perspective. Nor do I believe that my involvement in the resource extraction industry detracts from my critique. If anything, it brings me closer to the issues and allows me to consider the various perspectives and possibilities based on theoretical understanding and research as well as personal experience. Perhaps it offers me the potential for a balanced perspective with a degree of self-reflection.

As is so often the case, balance is the key. To suggest that one must abstain entirely from all things with which they take issue is unrealistic and impractical. Furthermore, without an experiential understanding of the problems themselves, critiques often lack a strong foundation. That said, I have harboured some level of guilt and at certain points in my life have experienced pure anger about my willing participation in that which sickens my home. With a long duration of reflection, though, I find I do not have a taste for extremism or

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14 A shutdown is an annual production line break wherein maintenance and upgrade work is carried out. A shutdown runs for anywhere from a few days to four or five weeks depending on the scope of the work needing to be done.

hardline outlooks. The more I know, the more I realize I don't know very much at all; every issue has so many positions and factors. A younger, angrier me had a hard time accepting my involvement in things I was ideologically opposed to. Through a process of self-conscious evaluation I have come to understand balance as the measure. The theme of balance is evident in certain areas of my creative work, trying to capture that moment of equilibrium.

stage 9

the ones that stand for something
and the ones that make decisions

it's a complexity of cycles
where nothing remains the same

to just wait and see what happens

leaning against a forklift in the early light of summer
warm in worn-out coveralls, rock in hand

a resource town raised me
my father worked in a pulp mill

my mother worked

something about persistence and cycles

the ones who get the jobs
and the ones who don't

the settling pounds settle

and beyond that a heavy mist
hangs coy over the quesnel river

there is a problem with the methods
a gap, a heavy disturbance

in the water, ripples spread evenly
naturally dissolve

a future as far as it can be thrown
like a rock and the splash thereafter

being connected means we have an impact

the land as commodity
where continuance is that which remains important

without use there is nothing

the ones who are a part of it
and the ones who think they are apart from it

I have been afforded the luxury of option
had the time to think, to read, write and measure

not to worry about the next meal or the fight

I had time to consider the impact

of extraction and processing
of the wild, the language and home

I had time to work in a pulp mill
and watch the mist rise from the river

to be there at that moment when walking became the destination

the one who writes the poem
and the one who lives it honestly

I had it easy
while still looking for a way to get it right

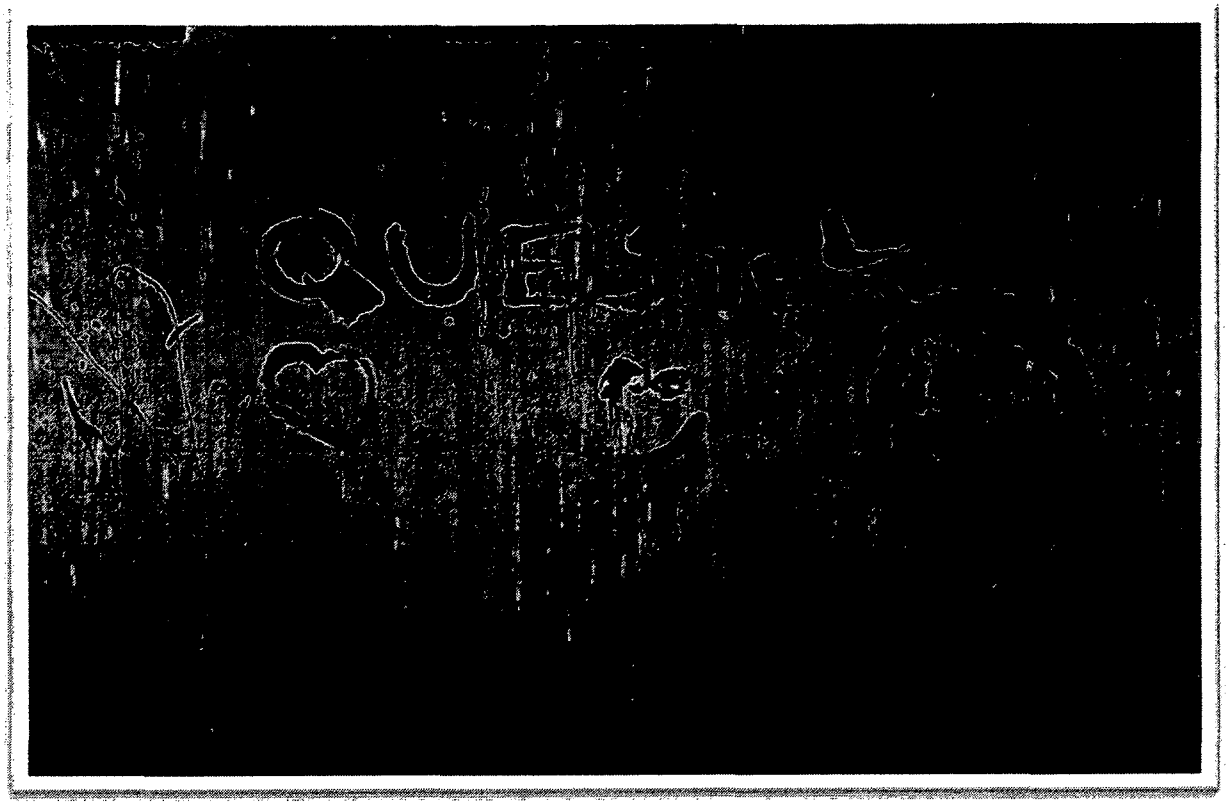

Figure 11. Baker Creek: Graffiti Under The Bridge

-Section 8-
Writing Activism

As for the poet himself
we can find no record
of his having traversed
the land/in either direction

no trace of his coming
or going/only a scarred
page, a spoor of wording
-Robert Kroetsch *Seed Catalogue (18)*

There is a certain type of writing that I am drawn to: writing that is concerned with the state of the natural environment, the land and its cycles, the balance of the wild (in all its natural chaos), and the ways in which humans effect that balance. I am most inclined to create and most likely to engage with writing that has a position on and considers the nonhuman. There are certain poets/theorists whose philosophy I value greatly, whose methods and processes have been influential in my own development (Ken Belford, Robert Bringhurst, Tim Bowling, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, Erin Mouré, and Jan Zwicky to name a few).[15] Among other things, these authors are writing about the wild, about nature in its many forms. *Ecological poetry* or *ecopoetry* is the most fitting description of the field or genre wherein my work, and the work of those writers who I am most interested in, is situated.

The ways in which nature is represented by poets as a defined literary genre has undergone multiple transformations in terms of definition and label over the years. First, it fell under the umbrella of *nature writing* which, as John Elder explains in *The Poetry of*

15 The line between poetry and theory is often unclear. At times, the two are interchangeable. Most of these poets also publish essays or theoretical documents that explore some of the themes they engage with in their poetry. My connection to the "theory," though, is often through their poetry.

Experience, was grounded in an appreciation of, or a desire to reconnect with, the living earth (1). Because nature writing was associated with the personal, or self-reflexive, engagement with the living earth, and because it was said to be a form "largely practised by white writers" (Buell qtd. in Elder 1), the more inclusive term *environmental literature* was adopted (Elder 1). Later, to avoid the negative connotation that was/is sometimes associated with *environmentalism* (particularly extreme environmentalism), scholars began to use the term *ecocriticism,* which "initiates a dialogue between literature and the science of ecology" (Elder 2). According to Buell, ecocriticism is to be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (35), thus suggesting a certain level of action and presence with a commitment to environmental discourse. Ecocriticism is a wide-reaching literary/philosophical field, encompassing many types of writing.

Ecopoetry or ecological poetry, which falls into the broad sphere of ecocriticism, is "a poetics full of systematic analysis and critique that questions the divisions between nature and culture while also acknowledging that humans use up too much of the world" (Spahr 29). In *Small Fish Big Pond; Lines on Some Ecopoetics*, Jonathan Skinner offers the reader ways to define the term: "Ecopoetics sounds the environmental unconsciousness ... Ecopoetics is impelled by the stress humans and their stuff place on the lives of other species ... Ecopoetics is as much about culture as it is about nature ... Ecopoetics approaches the page as a field for tactical skirmishes" (1-2). Like Skinner, there are a number of writers who have suggested that ecopoetics is, or can be, a form of activism (Forester; McKay; Phillips; Belford; Bringhurst) and that it presupposes "activist attention to the looming fragility of the environment" (Dickinson 34). While reflecting on the purpose and motivations of my own work, it has become clear to me that by bringing awareness to the subject of environmental

health while exploring my connection to the land (rather than attempting to "capture" it) and discussing the overtly negative impact that resource capitalism has on wild environments, my poetry can be a form of activism.

Poetry as a form of activism is much like groundwater; it goes on beneath the surface, it's not as overt as its related channels, but it's always there, diverting and sometimes subverting what goes on above. In a discussion of what poetry can do, the way it can function as a didactic tool, Belford explains: "[t]his method of delivery [the poem itself] allows messages to be subtly given to reading audiences, and then gives readers the control to pass that message along to their friends" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). Poetry *is* a form of action, a means to evoke change, both internally and externally, but it is not necessarily as overt as some other modes. When done right, the subtleties and complexities of poetry can evoke emotions and feelings, while at the same time asking questions and presenting possible outcomes. Over time, this can result in an altered perspective and ultimately an adoption of new ways of looking at the world.

To become educated of a particular land, there is a necessary returning, again and again, to the locations and ideas that have produced those sensibilities, in addition to the reading and studying of that place. Before one can write about a wilderness one must become a part of that wild. Through what Lilburn calls "contemplative attention" (*Going Home* 12) and McKay calls "poetic attention" (*Vis à Vis* 26), one can become more attuned to his or her environment, live with more responsibility to and respect for the complexity of the wild. Further, the poet must adopt a way of being with, in, and of the land, and must "keep coming back, figuratively speaking, to the trail – to the grain of the experience" (*Vis à Vis* 27), to the curious thought that leads forever forward. Through this process and with a deep

understanding of the location I call home, my writing is beginning to ask the right questions, rather than assert the supposed answers. In this way, poetry allows me first to acknowledge, and secondly to diagnose the causes of transformation in my home, while at the same time working towards something better.

A re-evaluation of the current practices and methods used for resource extraction and processing is necessary. Poems are a powerful medium for the transferring of ideas, orally or on the page, through cyberspace, across cultural boundaries, borders and languages, into the curious minds of others. Environmental activism, then, can be an important function of poetry. In order for a poem to be activist in nature it must result in some degree of action. The adoption of ideas, I would argue, is often the form of action poetry takes – especially when those ideas result in an altered way of viewing or interacting with real or imagined environments. It is necessary here to have a closer look at how a reading or listening audience can appropriate or be influenced by a poem.

As Belford suggests, pedagogic poetry, poetry that takes a position and is instructional, "should be constructed in such a way that the reader can come to their own understanding through the process of determining whether or not they will adopt the writing ideas based on the meanings and consequences of other decisions" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). This process of adoption goes through a number of stages, which include "reading or hearing a poem, making an analysis of it, deciding the available courses of action, taking action, and then accepting the consequences of those decisions" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). Once a reader or listener has gone through these stages the poem itself becomes active and is a form of action.

Ecological poetry can plumb environmental consciouseness in a number of ways and

can position itself within a variety of political possibilities. It explores the interconnection humans can have with wild environments and the ways in which we suffer through its destruction or revel in its simple beauty. It can be overtly condemning or prescriptive, subtlety suggestive, exploratory, or simply engaging. My writing tries to cover the breadth of these possibilities. Evoking a feeling or creating awareness, however, is most often the intent.

There are certain poets whose attention to the land is helping to give voice to that which has been silenced. In his poem *Stumpage*, Don McKay challenges the easy view, and makes a case for the land. Like much of my own work, McKay's work in this poem addresses a concern for current clearcut logging practices:

> How the slash looks: not
> ruin, abattoir, atrocity; not
> harvest, regen, working
> forest. How it looks. The way it
> keeps on looking when we look away,
> embarrassed. How it gawks,
> with no nuance or subterfuge
> or shadow. How it seems to see us now
> as we see it. Not quick.
> Not dead. (*Strike/Slip* 22)

Here, McKay facilitates a conversation with the damaged wilderness. There is a voice and a view being presented here that is advocating for a rethinking of current methods. This voice, and its gaze as situated in the land and directed back at us, can be viewed as a sort of anthropocentric positioning, a way of attributing human perceptions and modes of knowing to the natural environment. This tendency for writers to *make human* the wild and its voices is possibly dangerous, damaging even. But as McKay notes in *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry and Wilderness,* "nature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully. ... When ownership is set aside, appropriation can turn

inside out, an opening..." (29-31). [16] Some authors, however, have suggested that anthropocentrism is at the root of our current environmental crises (Foreman, Naess) and that we must overcome anthropocentrism and acknowledge that "'Man' is not the centre of the universe or the measure of all things" (Hayward 50). Other authors have suggested that humans are incapable of being anything but human-centered (Murdy, Morito) and that anthropocentrism should not be rejected but accepted "as a starting point for environmentalism" (Morito 33) wherein the human desire to protect the natural environment is motivated by factors intrinsic to human preservation (Hargrove, Norton). One is reminded here of Kate Soper's assertion that

> it is inevitable that our attitudes to nature will be 'anthropocentric' in certain respects since there is no way of conceiving our relations to it other than through the mediation of ideas about ourselves. To suggest otherwise is to be insensitive to those ways in which the rest of nature is different, and should be respected as being so. (13)

Although anthropocentrism is problematic, it is an unavoidable fact of our human existence. We cannot remove ourselves completely from the subject of ecological writing. I maintain that there is a place for anthropocentrism in poetry as long as the hierarchy of ownership and domination of nature is avoided. Conscious anthropocentric poetry has the potential to open the door to other kinds of knowledge – for instance, knowledge that is characterised by an "empathetic imagining" of what it could be like to be a part of the nonhuman world (Hayward 61). If one lives with contemplative and/or poetic attention to the land, it is possible to write with an environmental consciousness that is situated *from the wild*, without ownership, without the dangers and pitfalls of the traditional anthropocentric view. What

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[16] It should be noted here, that what McKay calls 'nature poetry' is very much akin to ecopoetry or ecological poetry; they are interchangeable terms in this case.

McKay achieves in *Stumpage* is exactly what I am trying to do in my own writing: an expression of respect for the nonhuman.

My connection to the land, even as it manifests in poetry, is limited by language. Yet, one of poetry's greatest pleasures is its ability to explore that which cannot be said. In discussing the work of McKay and Lilburn (and I would include many other writers in this discussion), McCaslin notes that "these poets are intensely aware of the limits of language to contain the divine, and by extension, the numinosity of nature within the ciphers of language" (68). The term numinosity describes a sublime connection suggesting a spiritually enlightened or elevated understanding of nature. Although this is more of a theological examination of ecopoetic praxis than a scientifically based approach (with respect to the previously posited dialogue between literature and science), I would argue that there is room for both in the discussion of ecopoetic language. Although the poet cannot speak for nature, the poem can, if it's lucky, open itself to the reader in way that no other type of writing can. Further along that thought, in response to the question 'what can poetry do that other forms of literature cannot?' poet Rob Budde explains:

> Poetry allows for the acknowledgement that it fails: to communicate, to make sense, to be logical, to mean anything. It privileges process over product so that 'meaning' at the end of the process is de-emphasized. Because of this, poetry can convey the un-expressible edges of human experience that no other discourse can. It approaches the unsaid. Surrounds it with questions. (Budde)

What underlies the poem, what goes on behind the words, between the lines, is what sets poetry apart. A poem can evoke a feeling; it can give voice to that moment of thought, that first silence, before it sounds like anything. Approaching the unsaid, that which is ineffable, is both wondrous and challenging at the same time. McKay acknowledges the difficulty; "A mystic who is not a poet can answer the inappellable with silence, but a poet is in the

paradoxical, unenviable position of simultaneously recognizing that it can't be said and saying something" (*Open Wide a Wilderness* 4). From a different position, Lilburn expresses a similar sentiment: "And what we must learn is not geography, not an environmental ethics, not a land-benign economics, not a history, not respect, but a style that is so much ear, so attentive, it cannot step away from its listening to give a report of itself" (*Thinking and Singing* 180).

For me, this is a welcome challenge. It is a part of the process that allows me to grow, to move forward. Through ecological poetry, I can explore the unspeakable connection that we have to the land, the value of this, and why and how it must continue. In his book *lan(d)guage*, Belford hints at the complexity of poetry to express the unsaid, engaging through poetics, what I am trying to convey here:

> Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference
> between a word and a decision.
> Understandings accumulate.
> There are bindings between words,
> a kind of retrieval of memory traces.
> ...
> There's something beyond what can be grasped
> even in poetry, beyond the list of words
> that do not appear. Subjects discriminate,
> and there's an infinite variety of forms
> in the background feedback cycle of cues. (37)

In this section, Belford is opening up the possibility of a poetic exploration into the complexity of what exists between the lines. Language and silence, that which appears on the page and that which does not – these are the cues of poetry. In the background, within the silence, there are understandings and ideas linked to "memory traces." Connections are made and something meaningful occurs.

My understanding of how I connect with nature has become clear to me via writing,

reading and studying ecological poetry and other forms of environmentally concise literature. I am working towards a new field of poetics (new for me, that is), where the audience and the writer is from the land/of the land, conscious of our impact and concerned for the future health of the natural environment. I am striving for, as Belford calls it, a "northern poetic," a genre of ecopoetry that is of a different convention, a different awareness and responsibility; "A new area of studies is in this term 'northern' as applied to poetics. Almost always that gaze looks from the urban centers to the forest. In this writing, when I say the word "northern", I'm talking about what it is to see these issues from the forest, looking out" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). I am part of the collective sickness, my home is in danger, the land is being broken, but there are ways to fight back. Attentive contemplation, recognition, attunement, awareness, being here and now, being present, simply looking, and *later* writing it down, passing it along.

> *A landscape without poets is a culture that is suppressed...*
> *Finally we have a land poetics that isn't naïve.*
> -Ken Belford, *Notes on Lan(d)guage*

stage 1
for Ken Belford[17]

the stories sound different and truths shift
depending on where you're standing

there by the well
a perfectly round stone

over the years, how many feet
have packed-down the trail this deep

it's a matter of ownership when ownership is loss
and use has always been the measure

he lifted his head and pointed to a spot on the mountain
about halfway up where the round stones would collect

the distance between ways of knowing

after that, permission and language –
everything in life is negotiation

this place is in you and you will resonate here
long after you're gone

when walking becomes the destination
and the names drip from trees

the subtleties and nuances of this northern dialectic

to clear and commodify, the hand that drew the map
and the developers restless lines

an ongoing dialogue between place and its colonizer

the inadequacy of language to be
to hold, to mean anything

in that moment he knew there was more to this 'indian' story

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17 This poem is for my friend Ken Belford. It evolved out of many conversations about his life at the headwaters of the Nass. Walter Blackwater, a respected bushman and dear friend of Ken Belford, is present within many lines of this poem.

then brown skin and brown eyes

what it means to settle, the way snow does
or sand in a body of water, to arrange and come to rest

and we called them settlers as though they're not expanding still

the names have never changed
and the translation is lost in the cycle

the shape of tsekwit mountian, the colour of balsam fir
the temperature of blackwater lake is only what it intends to be

you are welcome here
your name in this territory

the trails are all that would go anywhere

and we aim to see the whole of it
hear the names and stories as we pass through

a conversation with the living land

Continued Use

1.
still a days' work in the pines

winter down some back-road just north of quesnel
no one for miles stopping here

the heft of fresh snow
on needles and bare branches

a land in waiting

with leather gloves and steady hands
a lumberman like his father fells another tree

there is a moment
between sound and impact

a moment

on edge, looking up, knee deep
the wind and his eyes follow

down
that toppling feeling

2.
from this wood he longs to build a home
shape a cane for when his knee has weakened

a chair to sit in
a table to work from

carve a birdhouse from the smooth heartwood
of these trees

whittle a family
in perfect proportions

3.
he is careful not to crush
the saplings and young pine

a lumberman
thinking of his father

while limbing the wood
by hand

The Indian Paintbrush

is regional and methodical
considers the spatial a furtive matter

she reaches out below ground
at the open woods near tree-line

and it smells like a poem

pilfering from grasses
populus and other perennials

she appears freshly dipped
edging the drip-line of an aspen stand

the dangers of anthropomorphism
and the slippery nature of language

cloistered, indistinct flowers

clandestine by reason
of large fiery-bright, petal-like bracts

nonhuman and its methods
the words and stories are silenced

her leaves alternate, narrowly-lance-like
three lobed and linear

smooth-margined

revealing three parallel veins
and an honest hue of green

in nature the rhetoric is so far from relevant
she finds it tasteless

a thief under soil
roots fasten to neighbouring aspen

a little sucker of juices
already partially assimilated

her tiny hands gripping

just enough, not more than a taste
an agreement of sorts

or it would be known
marked by a loss of foliage, of green matter

a loss of self

Figure 12. The Wild: Indian Paintbrush

-Section 9-
Becoming Birch:
Metamorphosis and Environmental Change

> *All the poets of all times can only say one thing. They can say that what-is is. When he sees his people destroying the world, the poet can say, "we're destroying the world." He can say it in narrative or lyric or dramatic or meditative form, tragic or ironic form, short form or long form, in verse or prose. But he cannot lie, as a poet, and offer himself as the Savior. He can believe or not believe that salvation is possible. ...But he finally cannot say anything more than the world has told him.*
> Robert Bringhurst *The Persistence of Poetry* (44)

Didactic poetry, as Belford notes, "takes a position from the start. It teaches / is instructional" (*Notes on Lan(d)guage*). There are many ways in which a poem can inform or educate its reader or listener. Likewise, there are many literary tropes that can be used to achieve this end. One such method is metamorphic writing: writing that engages with the process of transformation. The following attempts to show the didactic nature of poetry that employs a specific literary trope as a means to inform the reading or listening audience, with respect to a particular environmental concern. Metamorphosis has not been widely used as a didactic tool (if at all), and certainly not within the realm of ecological poetry (to the best of my knowledge). As such, this particular literary trope is well suited to exemplify the possible educational capacity of poetry and the activist potential therein.

Although the wild is, and should be, in a continual state of change via cycles and disturbances, the negative effects of resource capitalism, of industrialized extraction and processing, are beyond the scope of sustainability. If continued use is not at the root of policy and intent, heavy disturbances will continue to irreversibly alter the land. The industrialization of resource extraction has transformed the nature of the Cariboo north-

central region; it has affected the health of our forests and waterways and, in turn, affected the health of those who inhabit its communities. As Marina Warner suggests in *Fantastic Metamorphosis, Other Worlds*, metamorphic writing often appears in transitional places and at the confluence of change (18). The transformations of both human and natural environments in this region can be viewed as forms of metamorphosis. In my review of literature on the subject, I have identified a gap in using metamorphosis as a didactic tool to illuminate environmental change.

I am proposing that the correlation between the health of the wild and the health of an individual or a community can be explored through creative writing employing tropes of metamorphosis. Region-specific health issues, such as those related to air quality, can be directly linked to the extraction and processing of natural resources. The changing forests and declining health of the environment in the Cariboo north-central region, and the health problems that have resulted from those human-imposed changes, reflect one another. The mirroring effect of these mutually inclusive transformations can be exemplified through creative representations of metamorphosis in literature.

I intend to show that the figural process of metamorphosis from an of-nature, organic form such as a tree, fungus or flower, to a body with reflexive human awareness, can be used as a vehicle to explore the impact of environmental change in a specific transitional region. Through this mode and with a focus on difficult processes of transformation, I hope to create an empathetic experience for the reader. Focusing on an area where resource extraction and processing is the defining factor, central to the history of the region, where logging practices have produced rapid environmental change, I will explore the ways in which the health of the land and natural environment is directly linked to the health of the people who inhabit that

region. The merits of employing tropes of metamorphosis as a mode to mirror our transforming environment will be the focus of this section. My creative work will exemplify the revealing possibilities of this mode.

Tropes of metamorphosis represent the transformation in appearance, condition, function or circumstance of one form to another. This concept of stated change has been used in literature to parallel cultural change or transition (as in Dante's *Inferno* and Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*), to explore permutations of personal identity (as in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*), and to give voice or make voiceless (as in Collodi's *Pinocchio* and Anderson's *Little Mermaid*). Representations of metamorphosis are complex and multifaceted in terms of effect and intent. Often depicted and understood as an external change manifested as a visible transformation of form, many representations of metamorphosis also include an internal identity shift, mirroring the external transformation.

In theoretical approaches to the study of metamorphic literature, there are certain strands of analysis that thread through a breadth of texts. Although there is overlap in some areas, theorists have examined metamorphosis through a multiplicity of literary lenses and have come to a variety of analytic conclusions. Some authors have suggested that metamorphosis can be allegorical in the sense that it explores transformations of identity as a figure for change in the character of the writer (Mikkonen; Clarke). Others have understood metamorphosis as a form of allegory or metaphor for creative inquiries in art, especially writing (Tymieniecka; Warner; Mikkonen). The search for, or loss of, identity through representations of metamorphosis is another area that some authors have engaged with (Bynum; Massey). Within the wide variety of theoretical approaches to metamorphic

literature, there appears to be no mention of metamorphosis as a didactic trope in writing. Nor has the potential of metamorphosis as a means to explore environmentalism been addressed.

In her book, *Fantastic Metamorphosis, Other Worlds,* Warner interprets metamorphic writing as a device with which expressions of artistic creativity can be presented: "metamorphosis is the principle of organic vitality as well as the pulse in the body of art" (2). For Warner, metamorphic writing is more a tradition then a literary genre. Similarly, in *Metamorphosis: Creative Imagination in Fine Arts Between Life Projects and Human Aesthetics,* Anna Teresa Tymieniecka describes metamorphosis as a device rather than a literary genre. Situated within the framework of metamorphosis-as-device, Tymieniecka explains that "in this continuity within discontinuity – a passage from old to new, from the past to the future – there resides the constructive power of metamorphosis to interpret for us the dynamics of the phenomena of nature and of creativity in the arts and literature" (xi). Tymieniecka describes metamorphosis as a revealing trope, expressing the transformative possibilities of art and literature as a condition of human desire for "unrestricted freedom" (xii). The aesthetic mechanics of metamorphoses are often discussed in terms of anthropomorphism in art, as art – while not recognizing the educational potential for stories of metamorphosis to go beyond the page and function as a form of activism, advocating for real-world change. By examining environmental transformation and degradation through stories of metamorphosis, and by positing a potential for positive changes within those stories, creative texts can become a form of education and activism.

To exemplify the way in which metamorphosis can function as both a story of creative transformation and as an ecocritical tool to expose environmental degradation and

explore possible corrective gestures to the issues of declining forest health, I will address the current problems surrounding air quality in Prince George, BC. In this particular narrative long poem, I have attempted to write a story of transformation that employs my own theoretical approach to metamorphosis. First, I set the stage for metamorphic change:

extraction/1

slash-piles and skidder tracks
a stretching expanse peeled back
banks erode and land slides
muddied streams flow
into larger watersheds
inorganic particles mingle
in the air and water
the smell of wood cutting

the sound of chains pulling
tones of progress
in the grumbling of a fellerbuncher
the promise of value
in the cackle of a skidder
a resonance of dislocation

when dust up from a nearby logging road settles
this place is a fragment of its former self
a transformation
a new aesthetic

from the melt/2

a northern cutblock
nestled into folds of old growth treeline
economies of extraction
separated from the din of a northern city
by mountains and waterways
by caulk boots and the hum
of machines off rock and wood

here the tailings of last winter
shift and linger, finding solace

in the shade of seasons

the ground is soft, forgiving from the melt

having never been subject
to a direct force wind
these trees let stand are feeble
against coming storms

newly exposed timber
pushes back against the wind
pulling at gnarled roots below
there is a shift in soil, a heaving
of the boreal landscape inward

neither trucked nor milled
old-growth windthrow
slash-pile stacked and burned
when the ground is hard
and the stumpage left
padded with snow

along with the blowdown
those that get in the way
birch, balsam and young pine
floored by default, pushed aside
to the company of inconvenient trees

at times, a well disguised birch
will slip in among the pine
take the dirt road
back to the city

with the thought
of permanence dangling
loosely at the forest's edge
there is a shift in awareness

By delineating some of the methods and practices of clearcut logging in a conspicuously negative tone, the poem informs the reader of both the content and context that underlies the pulse of the poem. Although the narrative of metamorphosis has not yet

begun, the mention of a shifting awareness, serves to adumbrate the coming change. From here, the transformation can begin.

from the make/3

a curious birch now finds its way
having been hoisted onto the back
of a loaded eighteen wheeler
wedged between stately pines

barrelling down the Finlay
load shifting slightly
with every curve
birch imagines the angles
and lines that form
an unknown destination
romanticizes the product
and feels the rush of wind
as it moves through her

thinking -
there is space between
the margins of these pine

her coughs muffled
by the sound of many tires
on blasted rock

the log truck ends up in the centre
a self-proclaimed northern capital
with clearcut tendencies
and a means to process

assimilation
is chain and teeth
still spinning

the unnatural landscape daunting
there is tension in her lungs
she lacks the context
from which this place
and others like it
find narrative to exist

pulling into the lumber mill, the smell
of sawdust nipping
birch learns quickly
there is no place for her here
no use

she moves toward the confluence
awkwardly stepping, her feet
attempt to dig in slowly
they won't take

a physical presence
never occurred to her like this
the grind of chipping, limbs unfurled
her fingers the bare branches

she sleeps in a culvert by the railroad tracks
goes unnoticed watching chip trucks pass

each night she wakes wheezing
a dream billowing from smokestacks
where the rivers convene

a sense of dislocation
she peels in thin papery layers
the loss of self

breathes heavy, the smell
of something unfamiliar
hanging dank and cumbrous in the air

birch ambles through the streets
concrete underfoot
a constant light lingers
while nothing moves with the wind
the natural continence of place
appears neglected and overgrown
a wild, wild space

the ground is hard, unforgiving from the make

a despondent birch
curled into thin pointed sticks and shredded paper
near the underpass where log trucks slow
and rumble overhead

she spends her time watching bodies
machines and the shapes they pursue

hears the sound of rail-cars pushing off
in the distance siren and tire spin
blend voices into a rhythmic hum

there is a loneliness
waiting, a deliquescence
in the shadow of a northern city

weeks in she wanders further
a row of houses with clipped grass
trees kempt and nothing understory
birch feels homeless for the first time

some days the inversion is so heavy
she finds it hard to breathe
struggles with the ins and outs

at the core on a busy street
a woman calls out
with a kindness and curiosity about her

seeing birch with a disparate gaze
the freshness, a palimpsestic form
she wants to be there with her

for her
beginning
they walk together
sharing a thorny view
of the new aesthetic

their meeting is corporal, bonded
a likeness
their bodies growing close

she welcomes birch into
the smell of bannock frying

to feel a part of something
roots and fingered branches spread
into hands held firm
a circle, a stand

birch is seduced by the centre
shaped into angles and lines
a product that fits, her arborous self
now softened

she finds work sweeping nights
the dust from the process
and spends saturdays
at the farmers market
her thin fingers spreading
jam to the knuckles
the sticky thrum of laughter

in time they rent an apartment
with a pine bookshelf to fill

prudence with a view

reading on a hardwood floor
near an open window
the pages come alive
their small library
of shifting pathways

birch volunteers at the shelter
twice a week, rescues feral cats
from the neighbourhood

takes up skating in the winter
community gardens in the warmer months

growing into this place
even still she struggles
her tight lungs, the sound
of settling in

With the process of metamorphosis now fully underway, the poem begins to identify

one of the many negative health affects that can be linked to resource extraction and processing; poor air quality is a reality in the Cariboo north-central region of BC. Without being overly direct, the poem points to a possible link between the declining health of the forest and birch's respiratory problems. Some authors have suggested that in metamorphic writing, despite the visible transformations that have produced the *other* form, there is most often a lingering likeness to the original form; thus, metamorphosis is never absolute (Warner; Bynum). Situating my own methodology within that credence, I attempted to create a duality of awareness in birch, an intimate knowledge and understanding of the wild intertwined with humanistic sympathies and ego, a balanced pith.

agency/5

birch thinks back to when she was young
a sapling among elders
remembering the air as it was
in the days of selective logging

she coughs and wheezes
in the centre knowing
the result of excess

aware of the impact, birch tries to write it down
feels the weight of the pen in her pliable hand
the paper against her outstretched fingers
her body having shifted slightly with the load

the cause and effect of a northern industry
her lungs ablaze
a product of extraction and recreation

birch, so often short of breath
struggles with the pressure
a narrowing in her chest

she is tested for respiratory illness
a diagnoses of asthma

she administers various fast acting
and long term control medications

she is smooth and close-grained

at school birch reads closely
of history, progress
and the working forest

an unnecessary presence
learned, necessarily
in this place

she digs deeper, finds the origins
of knowing, stories of change
and traditional ecological knowledge

she knows this place
is sapping the life out of her
a drat drastically
a problem in the air

a wind/6

birch walks toward the city's edge
where contras collide
and the constant light
begins to melt away

she finds a footpath heading
towards the mountains

within the breathing boreal
birch becomes conscious of her own
aberrant presence, an unsettling awareness

she meanders past an old cutblock
replanted with monoculture
intentions of reharvesting
a hundred years of uniformity

there is a breeze, faint and level
slipping in among the pine

the trail leads past a stand of birch
she waits a moment, watching
the trees sway, the leaves flutter

peeling off a section of bark
she runs the papery thinness
through her tempered fingers
feels the rush of wind
as it moves through her

knowing this
is where she begins

The story of birch personified through metamorphic changes carries with it environmental sensibilities. The poem intends to inform, and in doing so question, current logging and milling practices in the Cariboo north-central region. Although the story is regional, the tone is, I hope, universal. I tried to avoid being overtly political in the positing of corrective gestures for clearcut logging. Being subtle, although not entirely, was my intent with the underlying message: a plea for change. Excessive resource extraction and processing has adversely transformed the health of both forest and human communities in this region and elsewhere. In *Becoming Birch* I have made use of metamorphosis as a mode to mirror the transforming environment. This type of transformation can serve as a didactic tool in creative writing, as a revealing literary device that goes beyond the page and functions as a form of activism, encouraging real-world change. The approach I used is one of the ways that we as writers, as activists, as scholars and as citizens, can address the damaging effects of human-imposed changes in nature, but there are many other ways.

Figure 13. The Wild: The Persistence of Birch

A Moment of Reflections

There is always more work to be done. The ideas presented here are part of an ongoing body of work – a lifelong poem. I will continue to write from the wild with an environmental consciousness and an ear and eye to the nonhuman. The way humans affect the natural process of cycles and disturbances is a subject of inquiry that I carry with me. Although this particular piece of writing is finished, the work is not complete. There is much to learn and more to practice as I write towards an apprenticeship of the land.

The ideas being presented within my creative and theoretical texts are as much about me as they are about the land. I chose to write about nature and the wild not because it interests me, but because it is so much a part of me that I cannot turn away from it. In many ways, the land chose me. I write because if I didn't, I would not know who or what I would be. I am a writer and I am concerned with the current and future health of the wild. There are many possibilities for dealing with these concerns, but writing is what I have come to. Writing is as much a part of me as the wild is a part of me. The process is healing and the result is meaning.

For me, the poem is an act of resistance. It is a way to question that which begs my attention, to consider that which troubles me. It is a method of exploration. It is activism. It is education. It is a way to be curious about the world. And I have learned to research and reflect on things that I am curious about. It is not about truths or answers; it is about the question. The poem is where I am most comfortable, as is evident in the preceding pages. Each of my creative texts has been written, rewritten, and transformed several times over. In some instances, the poems are a fragment of their former selves. This is the process of

writing for me. I start with an idea on a page and I carve away at it and surround it with possibilities and questions until something meaningful occurs.

This project has gone through multiple transformations before arriving at its current state. My intention for *Of Cycles and Disturbance* has evolved over time and the finished product is nothing like the proposed project. Not only has the project's aim been altered, but the scope of my understanding has changed as well. A metamorphosis of ideas took place. My personal transformation, though, is not yet absolute. Humans, like ecosystems, are always subject to cycles and disturbances. When I began writing about the wild and its cycles I was angry about how humans were treating the land. My views were hardline and my writing was dead set on criticizing and condemning. There was little room in my creative process for self-reflection. The more I wrote my way into the wild, however, the more intensely aware I became of the need for a balanced perspective. Reflecting on this has given my work new depth and positioning. I am as passionate about the issues as I have ever been but I have come to understand that balance is the measure.

Figure 14. The Wild: Reflections

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