

# *The Ground Aslant*



# The Ground Aslant

—*An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*—

edited by

**Harriet Tarlo**

Shearsman Books  
Exeter

First published in the United Kingdom in 2011 by  
Shearsman Books Ltd  
58 Velwell Road,  
Exeter EX4 4LD

ISBN 978-1-84861-081-1  
First Edition

Introduction & selection copyright © Harriet Tarlo, 2011.  
Copyright in the poems printed in this volume rests with their authors  
and are copyright © 2011, except where otherwise cited in the acknowledgements  
on pages 177–178, which constitute an extension of this copyright page.

Cover painting, *Poll Salach 1*, copyright © Julia Ball.

The rights of the authors of the introduction and of the poems in this book  
to be identified as the authors thereof have been asserted by them in  
accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.  
All rights reserved.

#### **Editor's Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Julia Ball and Frances Presley for longstanding inspiration;  
Tony Frazer for his belief in the project and long hours of labour; the contributors for their work  
and their patience, and Simon, Laura and Ben for support knowing and unknowing.

## Contents

Harriet Tarlo	<i>Introduction</i>	7
<i>Poems</i>		
Colin Simms		21
Peter Riley		30
Thomas A Clark		39
Wendy Mulford		53
Peter Larkin		63
Frances Presley		73
Tony Baker		84
Ian Davidson		93
Elisabeth Bletsoe		102
Carol Watts		111
Nicholas Johnson		120
Zoë Skoulding		130
Harriet Tarlo		138
Mark Goodwin		148
Helen Macdonald		156
Mark Dickinson		165
Biographical Notes		174
Acknowledgements		177



## Introduction

### anthologising

This anthology is testament to the originality and dynamism of recent landscape poetry, poetry which engages with place, locality and “nature” (or what we have left of it). It is not of course that there has been no previous landscape writing within the modernist tradition. Many of these poets look back to Basil Bunting and to Ian Hamilton Finlay, for instance, and across the water too to poets such as Lorine Niedecker and Charles Olson. Yet, there does seem to be a growing momentum to landscape writing and this perhaps reflects the growing political and ecological importance of our relationship to our environment. In this work, the relationship between human beings, their fellow-creatures and the land we live in is under close and scrupulous examination. The subtitle of *The Ground Aslant*, makes use of a term I have worked with for a decade or more, “radical landscape poetry”. The word “landscape” is a compound, of the land itself and the “scape” which acknowledges interventionist human engagement with land. In common parlance, this may be literal landscaping by gardeners or designers or it may be the representation of land in art. The landscaping between these covers is not unrelated: it takes a view or perspective on land, linguistically or philosophically shaping the specific or generic land with which it engages.

Landscape is wide and broad; even “radical landscape” is still fairly open. It does not dictate, circumscribe or limit the work over-much, either in terms of form or politics, but it does assume a degree of radicalism. This is appropriate, not least because landscape poetry often challenges the divide between experimental or innovative and traditional or mainstream which has haunted British poetry, in all its many guises, since the nineteen-thirties. The challenge emerges from the fact that, however innovative, this work attempts to be, to cite Charles Olson, “Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself”. It clings to its hold on the local and physical world; it is “from here”, to quote from Skoulding’s sequence from which our title comes. “The Ground Aslant” also evokes Emily Dickinson, one of the early innovators of “telling it slant”. Finally, it touches on Peter Larkin’s use of the word “aslant” throughout the vertiginously titled ‘Lean Earth Off Trees Unaslant’, a long poem considering human perspective, returning us again to that taking of a view, to our human “scaping” of the land in art.

It is perhaps surprising, on such a small island, that I should have found it hard to narrow down my selection of innovative landscape poetry to sixteen poets. Tony Frazer, editor of Shearsman Books, made the point early on that we should try to include a reasonable number of pages for each poet. The longer I worked on the anthology, the more I came to agree with this view. I wanted the reader to be able to gain a sense of the richness of the work of the poets included. I felt this even more strongly because many of the most exhilarating landscape poems in recent years have been long poems or sequences which prove difficult to represent. The only complete sequence included here is Thomas A. Clark’s ‘The Grey Fold’. Clark’s poetry is largely sequential, working through incremental small changes in language and perception, page by page. It is therefore fitting to represent him with one work in this way. With other poets, such as

Colin Simms, Peter Riley, Peter Larkin, Wendy Mulford and Zoë Skoulding, I have attempted to select from long works in order to give a feel of those texts and, I hope, to send readers out to seek the originals. For those interested in the landscape sequence or long poem, I would suggest returning to the landmark English modernist poem of landscape, Bunting's *Briggflatts*. More recently, the sequences of two poets who certainly would have been represented here if they had still been with us, Richard Caddel's 'Ground' and Barry MacSweeney's 'Pearl', are very much worth reading.

All the writers included in this anthology are contemporary poets whose contribution to the field is significant. Many poets engage with place and environment in some way or some work, but landscape writing is central to the practice of the poets published here. I do feel some sense of redressing a balance here. There were several decades when the urban was seen as providing more appropriate material for the experimental poet and one still sees hints of that feeling even in the poets themselves. "As I re-read these poems there may be too much landscape", writes Ian Davidson in the afterword to his book, *At a Stretch*. He goes on to justify this with descriptions of his work which are relevant to much of what is published here, for instance the inter-relationship between the local and the global and "how speech and writing might jump from place to place and terminal to terminal" (109). Yet, it is interesting that such justification is felt necessary, that the relevance of landscape writing still has to be argued.

In terms of organisation, poets are presented in chronological order, enabling the reader to trace the development of radical landscape poetries and to see connections and diversifications emerge through time. The work of some younger poets has been encouraged and promoted by older writers here. Readers might like, for instance, to consider Nicholas Johnson as an inheritor of Barry MacSweeney's poetry, Helen Macdonald of Peter Riley's and Mark Dickinson of Peter Larkin's. I have also presented the work of each poet in order of previous publication, with unpublished work appearing at the end of each poet's segment of the book. I wanted, as far as possible within the limitations of space, to convey a sense of each writer's *oeuvre*.

## **form**

I have focused here on poets whose formal techniques are exploratory and experimental enough to be called radical, poets whose ideological pushing of the boundaries is to be found integrated into the forms their poems inhabit. I chose work, in part, to represent the diversity of these forms. Difference is often located in the use of space on the page. In the early Tony Baker, in Elisabeth Bletsoe and in my own work, we see the classic fluid use of open form text. But a closer look soon demonstrates the diversity that open form can take, from Colin Simms' dynamic shift from left to right in 'Snowy Owl' and 'Otter Dead in Water' to Wendy Mulford's and Frances Presley's use of central justification in *The East Anglia Sequence* and 'Alphabet for Alina', to Mark Dickinson's use of the grid in 'The Speed of Clouds'. Looking deeper into one writer's work shows the care



open-form poets bring to the page, as a reading of Presley's thirty-five stone setting and longstone poems shows. Even the four included here demonstrate how each piece is shaped and written in a way which relates to the individual stones and their landscapes.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, there is a relationship between the spatial arrangement of the poem and the landscape, a sense that we feel all around us when entering the dense columns of Larkin's 'Sights Agreeing Trees' and Skoulding's 'Through Trees', or when tracing the fragmented, floating words in Dickinson's poems from 'The Speed of Clouds'.

Several poems, such as Mulford's 'East Anglia Sequence', Larkin's 'Open Woods', my own Workington poems and Bletsoe's 'Cross in Hand' juxtapose differing arrangements of prose blocks, found text and stanzas of poetry, each within their own spaces. These diverse texts speak to each other across the space, allowing readers to enter the poem and speculate over their relationship to each other. We find a similar opportunity to be a creative (or, in Roland Barthes' sense of the word, "writerly") reader in the telling, breathing spaces between phrases in Carol Watts' and Mark Goodwin's poems and the widely separated lines at the end of Mark Dickinson's *Littoral* xxi. All these forms affect the reading, the sounding of the poem in the air, and this is central to the philosophy of the open form poem. The use of space on the page and sound off the page are two of the most important ways in which landscape is explored in this work. This is felt as powerfully as anywhere in Thomas A Clark's short poems existing in wide, deep space on the page. Here the relationship between form and space (place) is symbiotic, just as Clark finds "space for a form" in the play of moss and fern in 'The Grey Fold'.

As we move from considering the spatial to the sonic, the work which inhabits the page more conventionally comes into focus. Any delving into British or American avant-garde poetry soon teaches us that a continuous text does not make for continuity of narrative or discourse. In the poetry of Peter Riley, Ian Davidson and Helen Macdonald, it is the language itself that dances and defies expectation. Seemingly deceptively simple, Riley in particular opens up mental spaces we don't expect. It is in the sonic chiming and spatial proximity of "business" and "bitterness" in Riley's 'Shining Cliff' poem that a wealth of meanings lie, just as they do between the proximity of "politics" and "polite" in Davidson's 'Human Remains and Sudden Movements'. Throughout all these poetries, juxtaposition (often through parataxis) is a fundamental linguistic principle. Here we find different discourses of nature or place, whether it be the use of natural and unnatural terminologies in Skoulding or the meeting of scientific and spiritual language in Dickinson. Similarly, landscape words appear and are interrogated throughout, the "submerged etymologies of such words as 'garden', 'enclosure', 'boundary wall'" (Bletsoe) reverberating through the poems. Perhaps the most paratactic linguistic display is in the funny-profound, fast-moving phrases of Tony Baker's journey through life's places and spaces, 'Quilt', its first stanza leaping from joke-opening to the provokingly unfinished, mulled-over line, "the land escapes because it refuses". Here, once again, the play is linguistic not spatial, as readers leap over boundaries between discourses to construct new meanings for themselves.

Language is a form in which landscape can come alive. Colin Simms inherits through his great mentor, Basil Bunting, the use of alliterative and compound words, forms of kenning which Bunting regarded as derived from a Northern tradition associated with Old Norse and the Gawain poet. Poetry and landscape are images for each other in these lines from *Briggflatts*: “Rime is crisp on the bent,/ ruts stone-hard, frost spangles fleece”.<sup>2</sup> In Bunting and in Simms words are frequently yoked together to convey a sensation which they could not achieve alone, and to invoke and enact energy. This particularly evident in ‘Loch Maree 1970’ where the fluid movement of the otter is enacted through compound words and flowing lines free of punctuation. Nicholas Johnson and Mark Goodwin use similar linguistic techniques. In Johnson’s poetry, influenced perhaps by MacSweeney’s kenning, we find a sound-based lyricism flowing through pieces such as ‘Haul Song’. In Goodwin’s more recent work, such as ‘Passing Through Sea-Thorn’, words begin to split and splinter into their linguistic components or energy compounds.

Ultimately all these poets recognise in their own ways that, particularly when engaging with landscape, “language can only take you so far” (Davidson). In Mulford’s one letter lines and Johnson’s ‘Eel Earth’ the form and sound of each individual phoneme becomes powerful in its own terms. We feel the landscape that is beyond language; so all the complex thought about life, land and politics in Presley’s ‘North Hill’ fades out with the sea, not described or discussed, but sounded:

sur sur sur sur  
sur surring

su su su rus

### terminologies

As I hinted above, several of the contributors to this book write with an additional edge and urgency in the face of the environmental crisis. Peter Larkin acknowledges that one of his concerns is “with matters of landscape and ecology, often focussing on the predicament and analogical patterning of the woods and plantations which residually border our lives”.<sup>3</sup> Before it became common knowledge, Simms, a naturalist as well as a poet, was warning his readers of the threat. ‘The Crag at Crookleth Beacon’ begins with a charmed Wordsworthian picture of the child in nature, but soon turns to humanity’s destructive impulse with the words, “an hour destroys the kestrels’ home”. Similarly uncompromising are Wendy Mulford references to coastal erosion in ‘The East Anglia Sequence’, Frances Presley’s to global warming in ‘Triscombe stone’ and Tony Baker’s “soils/ worn thin for nitrogen . . .” (‘aurals xiv’).

I have argued elsewhere that it is possible that poetry within the experimental tradition could be particularly powerful in its contribution to the necessary mental and emotional adjustments to environment that we need, urgently, to make.<sup>4</sup> However, this is not a book of polemical eco-

poetry or even of eco-poetics, the more innovative tendency espoused in the journal of the same name.<sup>5</sup> Rather, this is a book of radical landscape poetry, some of which may also be motivated by environmentalism. Although some landscape poets may be eco-poets and some eco-poets may be landscape poets, the two are by no means interchangeable. Equally individual poems may be one and not the other. I decided against including in this anthology one of my favourite poems by Tony Baker, 'You Tell Me', because I could not describe it as a landscape poem. In this piece, the natural elements come to the poet rather than the poet going out into the natural world. In this poem, and in eco-poetic work in general, the poet ventures beyond landscape into a wider political and global sphere, just as in landscape poetry the poet's territory can be narrower or broader than the ecopolitical. Indeed some of the writers here, such as Mark Dickinson, are uncomfortable with the eco-poetry label, perhaps because of the emphasis on subject matter over form.

There is another, much older, sub-genre that landscape poetry is sometimes classified within, and often engages self-consciously with, and that is pastoral. As his preface to *Alstonefield*, Peter Riley publishes extracts from two letters to Tony Baker. Here he writes, partly though not entirely self-mockingly: "to work the selfhood through the fairground of its respite, and throw a shadow of truth or at least a critique, back to the rest of the known (Now that *is* a theory of pastoral!)" (7). Often there is an element of critique or parody in the poetry itself. In Ian Davidson's 'Human Remains and Sudden Movements', we find reference to "what England expects/ Fields full of Daffodils", lines which gain greater ironic edge by the use of capitals and the Welsh context for this piece. In 'C' from 'Alphabet for Alina', Frances Presley seems haunted by bygone pastoral images of harvest even as the modern stubbly John Barleycorn emerges. The poem cuts off at a moment of pathos, or perhaps bathos.

Whereas Pastoral often sentimentalises the rural life, radical landscape poetry is more realistic in its view of contemporary landscape, rural people and past and present agricultural and social issues. Indeed, the rural working class poet and great resister of enclosure, John Clare, is a significant ancestor to several of these poets. The harsh realities of rural life past and present were powerfully evoked in Barry MacSweeney's long poem, *Pearl*. Nicholas Johnson, a publisher and advocate of MacSweeney, does the same in 'West Chapple', published here, and in his longer autobiographical works, *Pelt* and *Show*. Carol Watts' poems from the emerging sequence 'Zeta Landscape' are a radical experiment in writing what she describes as "lyric nature poetry put under pressure". She confronts a specific farming environment through calculus and economics, creating a harmonic pattern of poems, each named after a prime number and each having nineteen lines. Through this process, she opens up the world of small scale farming, '7' in particular questioning our notions of value in relation to animal stock. Her internal mathematical logic also works outwards into the topography of a particular place, Rhosybreidden, a hill farm on the banks of the Vyrnwy river.<sup>6</sup> While Watts refuses to romanticise farming, at a linguistic and sonic level, the work is easily as beautiful and full of feeling as a piece of pastoral, a word she herself uses somewhat ironically in the first poem of the sequence. Here, in a fine old modernist tradition, we find ample examples

of work which resists narrative and realist *conventions* in poetry in favour of evolving techniques and structures which aim to create a truer reflection of reality itself.

Ultimately, this contemporary poetry contemplates a world that has moved so far away from the landscapes out of which pastoral was born, that it can no longer be seen to be within the pastoral in an unproblematic way. At the heart of pastoral lies the morally and socially-inflected contrast between the cultural/urban and the natural which has, century by century, decade by decade, become increasingly outdated, especially in a small, crowded island like our own. We can no longer indulge in the simple pleasures of the “retreat and return” approach to nature. In general, if one can generalise about sixteen poets’ work, this poetry does attempt to resist the sentimental attachment to landscape, even as it often acknowledges this as both legacy and temptation. Greg Garrard notes, “At the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies”.<sup>7</sup> This pastoral view of a “stable and harmonious nature” was not only present in literature, but in early ecology, and lingers in both fields today (57). More recent ecological thinking now understands that nature, although it strives for equilibrium, does so through a process characterised more by change than stasis and this contributes to the shift away from any “supposedly authentic or pristine state of nature” (58). This radical landscape poetry works in ways close to this thinking, the poems themselves embodying this sense of constant change. This is a poetry full of questions, uncertainties, self doubts and self-correction.

There is a recognition that this process of shift and adaptation occurs in a world in which natural and cultural, wild and urban or industrial elements exist in all those places where we exist. Peter Larkin’s *Slights Agreeing Trees* explores the interplay between them in a teasing game of compare and contrast between pylon and tree. In the fragment from Peter Riley’s ‘Shining Cliff’ we see and hear the A6 from the Derbyshire peaks. Zoë Skoulding’s ‘From Here’ explores the landscape in and of the city, often employing urban language about the city and “natural” language about the urban. In Tony Baker’s untitled poem beginning “storm clouds” small details evoke the village life of Birchover within the context of the bird-life above the Derbyshire White Peak village. This short unpretentious poem does not claim to contain the place it evokes: “It *won’t* cohere”, says Baker of a flock of pigeons, but surely also of his own human perception. Similarly, the clouds gather “with that persistent/ impulse belongs to other matter”. These words seem echoed in Ian Davidson’s lines from ‘Human Remains and Sudden Movements’: “I wrote specifically as if I could do otherwise/ The totality escapes me the folds that matter makes up”.

Ultimately I feel that the self-reflective and critical nature of this work prevents it from being easily subsumed within the various manifestations of pastoral and ecopoetics. Its territory lies somewhere betwixt and between.<sup>8</sup>

## the Scape

In diverse ways, all the poetry presented here remains concerned with the connections between the poet and the landscape, an age-old poetic relationship often associated with the Romantic age. Here it is again, but this time explored in the context, not only of that history, but also of all the variety, intimacy, complicity and complexity of modernity. Here there is never an easy assumption of the poet's knowledge or power. Close observation, but not over-assumption, is at the heart of this writing: "never mind the economics of the trip/ give me a poetry of observed relationship", to cite Simms' characteristically ironic summative couplet from 'The Craggs at Crookleth Beacon'. Intimate observation of and involvement with a particular place remains at the heart of much landscape poetry, radical or otherwise. This is located writing. Very often, as with Simms, Mulford and Presley, the time and place of the piece is part of the poem. Most commonly, these poets have worked with places they live in or know well: Thomas A Clark with the Scottish Highlands, Presley with Minehead and Exmoor, Davidson with Anglesey and I myself with the Holme Valley. Yet these poets also move out from the local to engage with places further afield. Johnson's *Cleave* begins at home in the Devonshire countryside beset by the horrors of Foot and Mouth. But in the final poem, 'The Stars have broken in pieces' the poet journeys through the "debatable lands" of England in an elegiac poem scattered with a litany of English place names. Further afield yet, Simms and Riley have written American sequences, two of which (Simm's 'Carcajou: A Poem of Encounter' and Riley's 'Western States') are extracted here.

The most fruitful relationship with place seems often to involve a degree of intimacy and of distance. Peter Riley lived near Alstonefield in North Staffordshire for four years, but it was his return as a visitor that prompted him to begin writing his sequence of place, *Alstonefield*. In the preface he writes to Baker, "everyday sights do diminish so, don't you think, and sink to the marginal residue of our upkeep, if we don't have a theology to polish them with".<sup>9</sup> As such, he is then both sometime inhabitant and regular visitor to the place, creating a relationship out of which he can embark on an "interlinear commentary . . . threading questions and trials into the labyrinth, the complex displays of rock and vegetation, sheep-pens and graveyards . . ." (7). It was after she left for a life in London, that Presley began to return to and write regularly about her home area.

Wendy Mulford, in her preface to *The East Anglia Sequence*, talks about the "primary difference of context" between the first part of the sequence, written as a regular "visitor" to Salthouse, North Norfolk, and the second part, written as an "immigrant—or blow-in" to Dunwich, Suffolk.<sup>10</sup> Here is her description of the "visitor" approach:

What I was after in the Salthouse text was an encounter with other, experienced as/ located in the meteorology, archaeology, geology, ornithology, prehistory, the recorded history of place. The quick of it. The knowledge. (np)

I recognise this as similar to my own approach to West Cumbria when invited to write ‘Particles’ about a coast previously unknown to me. This is, in part, an acknowledgement of partial understanding, a degree of humility perhaps.

Mulford talks in more spiritualised terms when she writes about the second part of the sequence where she deepens both research and experience to “another ‘real’”, the “further tracking after what Buddhists call ‘nowhere country’, the place which is, finally, your home . . . retaining its profoundly resistant, unincorporated soul”(np). What is interesting about this description is that it reveals not a greater “knowledge” as one might expect from the sensitive settler, but an acceptance of place as ultimately inassimilable to human understanding. To write about a place where one has settled as an adult, whether it be the expatriate Tony Baker’s France or my own West Yorkshire, is always to be discovering the knowable and unknowable, to be alive to its specificity.

When Riley writes of “The earth endlessly concealed” in the poem ‘Vertigo’, the shadow-word lurking behind “concealed” is surely “revealed”. It is this revealing/concealing relationship between the human and the non-human worlds that radical landscape poetry explores. In Riley’s ‘Western States’, he refers to the “mind beginning something/ out of nothing”—always a tricky companion. There is a tension about the fact that “Everything underfoot has a name”, to cite Mulford’s ‘Goblin Combe’. At one level, it means it “matters like all grasses”, but also that we have limited its specificity within our own meanings and the use it bears to us. This poetry is alive to the exploitative nature of all this history, this naming and ownership: “Nothing sells about this edge but fragrance”, writes Macdonald in her cliff-edge poem, ‘Dale’. Elisabeth Bletsoe’s ‘Pharmacopœia’, her title evoking the history of drug-making from herbs, speculates on our relationship to plants. She refers throughout to the human usage of flowers, questioning the idea that this should be their sole purpose by widening our vision of each plant through reference to its multiple names, its places and conditions and its mythologies. Frances Presley’s researches into stone circles and settings, pagan rites and goddess-worship flicker in and out of her poems. Her knowledge is worn lightly, fragmentarily, but adds to our sense of these places as mysterious in terms of their own existence and their social and religious history. In ‘Human Remains and Sudden Movements’, Davidson alludes repeatedly to the processes of archaeology, of literally getting beneath land, not as a simple act of discovery, but as a part of the palimpsest of humanity’s long history of manipulation of landscape. The poems shifts fluidly between references to the natural features of the Anglesey coastline and the ancient and modern “human remains” that we see about us, from ruined chapels and burial sites to lighthouses and the building of new roads. This poetry is then, both rich in reference to the life of landscape now and full of traces of the past. The past, like the present, is explored both in terms of its greater honour and respect of nature as well as its exploitation and ruination. Often this palimpsesting of past and present sensibilities is literary or textual involving the citation of found text from diverse sources. Elisabeth Bletsoe’s poetry is always in dialogue with historical texts, ranging from ancient herbals (‘Pharmacopœia’) to medieval book-paintings (‘Birds of the Sherborne Missal’) to nineteenth-

century fiction (as in ‘Cross-in-Hand’ which re-visits Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*). So Bletsoe multiplies her imaginative entrances into nature. There also seems to me to be an ecological element to this practice. The poet replaces the great romantic myth of originality, of the poet as a genius, with a more humble image of the poet as a re-user, a recycler of words, images and ideas. I am reminded of the poet Richard Caddel’s chosen title for his selected poems, *Maggie Words* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2002). Contrary to popular belief, the best avant-garde poetries have always reached beyond inclusive self-referentiality. This practice acknowledges an important political and poetical principle, that there is not enough time for each generation to discover anew what words, philosophies and actions really matter.<sup>11</sup> It is not just literary analogy that we find in these texts, but also botanical, zoological and agricultural histories. So, Simms reflecting on the bonecaves of the North Pennines. So Riley’s reference to “the old ridge-and-furrow system/ Striping the gently sloping dark/ green fields” in *Snow Has Settled [...] Bury Me Here*. So Mulford’s historical references to floods and sea defences in the ‘East Anglia Sequence’, a poem in which local research feeds an exploration of an important global, environmental issue even as the lyric passages capture the sensual relationship to place.

### **bodies**

Frances Presley’s account of her emergence into landscape writing through a modernist poetic is a poignant one, echoed by women poets within and without this anthology.<sup>12</sup> Arguably, that journey is still ongoing, yet I was pleasingly surprised by the number of submissions to the special feature of the internet journal *How2* on Women and Eco-poetics I edited in 2007–8. Writing about the body in and of landscape is a particular strength of women poets, who have only relatively recently thrown off an objectified position as part of an idealised landscape in favour of a speaking one. Now we find male poets interested in the same territory. So Ian Davidson describes his own work as an attempt to “link the body to the landscape” and an exploration of “the way in which we read off the scale of our surroundings via the body”.<sup>13</sup> In this anthology, the lure to the erotic in and of human and non-human nature can be read throughout from Johnson’s “feet move: fern seeds/spill, buds across our sandals” to Skoulding’s “The lines of the landscape/ run through me to somewhere else”. Bletsoe’s ‘Pharmacopœia’ is charged with the eroticism which can permeate our relationship to land and which I also explored in an early sequence, *Love/Land*. At the same time, her delicate, intricate poems draw on the traditional association of flowers with love and the sequence can also be read as a love story composed through flowers. Macdonald’s pieces, such as ‘Poem’ and ‘On approaching natural colours’, dramatise the poet/land affair. Both end in emotive shifts in perspective on land. Perhaps the most obvious difference from traditional love poetry in a natural setting or using natural metaphors is that these lines are not humancentric. They are not only concerned with love between humans. Mark Dickinson writes:

One of the ways in which poetry functions within this paradoxical environment is to return to the body and to simply walk out into the world. By being in the world, through an intimacy of a thorough immersion, the poetry can radically re-engage with otherness and begin to propagate alternative ways of seeing and occupying place, or at the very least, remind us of the *intimacy* and *otherness* of our surroundings. Not by relocating the human body as the central process, but as a part of a process of being within and with the world.<sup>14</sup>

Dickinson's reference to walking here is important for many of these poets for whom the "Where, Why and etcetera" of walking is how the writing happens (Macdonald). "[M]otion is the natural mode of human and animal vision: 'We must perceive in order to move but we must also move in order to perceive'", writes Pierre Joris, citing James J. Gibson's, *The Ecological Approach to Vision Perception*.<sup>15</sup> This idea then of (re)-entering the body leads us to consider our mammalian nature. The relationship between the human and the non-human is a major debate within ecological circles and one which contemporary poets, Maggie O'Sullivan and Colin Simms being perhaps the most notable examples, also explore.<sup>16</sup>

In this anthology we find some striking examples of poetry which engages with our fellow-creatures. Simms' 'Carcajou: A Poem of Encounter' is a rich and honest piece, sometimes witty, sometimes frightening, but always challenging. As Simms writes, "it's a fallacy of our time that our 'knowledge' has us understand". He explores other ways of "encounter", raising the question of the degree to which we are or are not animal and the degree to which we can and cannot relate to non-human beings, and they to us. I hope the reader will seek the full poem. Similarly, I am able to include only a few fragments of Simms' *Otters and Martens* poems, selected from his book-length text, the culmination of over thirty years of observation and writing about these creatures. Although, in form and technique, Simms and Macdonald are very different poets, in philosophy and feeling their bird poems confront us with the same radical attempt to enter that shift between sky-view and earth-view, the spun contrasts between "northern-lights" and "catseyes" chimed together in the final "blink" of Simms' 'Snowy Owl, for Laura'.

More recent poems published here, such as Mark Goodwin's 'Dark Bird With Corner' and Helen Macdonald's 'Skipper/copper', continue to attempt animal encounter with cautious integrity. In 'Skipper/copper', Macdonald moves vertiginously between scales: the "living creature" hanging over a marsh one second and leaving a little dust on a human hand the next. She goes on to set the worth of a butterfly's death ("Who cares if it flies again/ flying things/ dumb objects which flinch and fall again") against the metaphorical worth of the fall of the butterfly to the poet. The reader is left feeling complicit in human lack of care or even knowledge of the objectified creature, skipper or copper. We do not even know.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, as I hope I have shown here, it is not just the poet in landscape, but the place of humanity in landscape that is at the heart of this work, what Frances Presley has called a "peopled landscape".<sup>18</sup>



Presley's voices include not just the people in her life at the time of writing ("Kelvin said/ Just the sea Frances"), but a wider collection of found voices. This is echoed throughout this collection. Here, there are many people, members of communities that still cling on in this country and who have value in the eyes of these poets: the casual observers scattered throughout Baker's 'aurals', the farming voices in Watts' 'Zeta Landscape', the scrap-metal collectors in my own 'Particles'. From another ecological viewpoint, of course it is people that are the problem. This is the great, often unspoken, crisis of over-population, and that too is touched on here. Through his probing philosophical work, sometimes gentle, sometimes brutal, Peter Larkin sets the idea of scarcity against the idea of teeming. In 'Open Woods', with reference to human clearing and inhabitation of land, he poses the question: "No one is saying it wrong in human concentrates, but how ubiquitous should be the teem?" In stark contrast, Clark's work, with the use of the vocative case, leads or invites us into a very different response to the rapacity and ubiquity of humanity. He suggests it might be possible to carve out a quiet space for an unobtrusive human presence in nature and traces delicate shifts in experience:

the hill that was dark  
is now bright  
imperceptibly sensation  
glows to emotion  
then fades again

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The pages also relate to Presley's delvings into the archaeological work of the forgotten Exmoor writer, Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, as I discuss the in greater depth in 'Recycles: the Eco-Ethical Poetics of Found Text in Contemporary Poetry' in the *Journal of Ecocriticism* Vol. 1: No.2 (2009) <http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/joe/issue/view/17>
- <sup>2</sup> Bunting, Basil, *Collected Poems*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 54
- <sup>3</sup> This is a somewhat simplified summary of the introductory paragraph of Larkin's 'Fully From, All Scarce To' in Iijima, Brenda. *((Eco(Lang)(uage(Reader))*), Brooklyn, New York: Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs and Callicoon, New York: Nightboat Books, 2010. A useful book, though Larkin is the only British poet featured.
- <sup>4</sup> See Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes: experiment and environment in contemporary poetry' *Jacket* 32 (April 2007), <http://jacketmagazine.com/32/index.shtml> and Tarlo, Harriet 'Women and Eco-poetics: An introduction in Context', special feature on eco-poetics *How2* Vol 3: No 2 (2008) [http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/index.html](http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/index.html)

- <sup>5</sup> Skinner, Jonathan, ed. *ecopoetics* <http://www.factoryschool.org/ecopoetics/>, a valuable resource.
- <sup>6</sup> Watts has written about the process of writing Zeta Landscape in *Poetry Wales* 45.3 (Winter 09/10).
- <sup>7</sup> Garrard, Greg, *Ecocriticism*, London: Routledge, 2004, 56.
- <sup>8</sup> In a preview of this anthology prepared for *English* magazine in 2009 I discuss in greater detail the intricacies of the terms, landscape poetry, pastoral poetry, ecopoetry and ecopoetics. In this introduction I prefer to talk more about the work itself.
- <sup>9</sup> Riley, Peter (1995) Preface, *Alstonefield*, London and Plymouth: Oasis/Shearsman, 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Mulford, Wendy (1998) Preface, *The East Anglia Sequence: Norfolk 1984–Suffolk 1994*, Peterborough, Cambs: Spectacular Diseases.
- <sup>11</sup> This argument is itself recycled from my own essay on ‘Recycles: the Eco-Ethical Poetics of Found Text in Contemporary Poetry’ in the online *Journal of Ecocriticism* Vol. 1: No.2 (2009) <http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/joe/issue/view/17>
- <sup>12</sup> Presley, Frances, ‘Common Pink Metaphor: from The Landscape Room to Somerset Letters’, *How2* Vol 3: No 2 (2008) [http://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/index.html](http://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/index.html)
- <sup>13</sup> ‘Afterword’, *At a Stretch*, Shearsman Books, 2004, 109.
- <sup>14</sup> Mark Dickinson, ‘Peter Larkin’s Knowledge of Place’, *Cordite Poetry Review* [http://www.cordite.org.au/features/mark-dickinson-peter-larkins-knowledge-of-place#\\_ftn2\\_2965](http://www.cordite.org.au/features/mark-dickinson-peter-larkins-knowledge-of-place#_ftn2_2965)
- <sup>15</sup> Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Vision Perception* (1986). Hillsdale, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers; Joris, Pierre. *A Nomad Poetics: Essays* (2003). Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- <sup>16</sup> Sadly, O’Sullivan was the only poet asked who did not want to be included the anthology.
- <sup>17</sup> Macdonald has also written prose texts about birds of prey. Her blog, <http://fretmarks.blogspot.com/2007/06/sprawks-and-thoughts.html>, includes some spectacular writing about flying hawks, an interesting complement to her poetry.
- <sup>18</sup> Presley, Frances, Interview with Edmund Hardy. *Intercapillary Space* (Oct. 2006) at <http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2006/10/interview-with-frances-presley.html>. This tendency is also evident in her collaborative projects, particularly her site specific work with the poet and textual artist, Tilla Brading.

*In memory of three poets of the North East whose work explored land, place and locality,  
and who died too young:*

**Barry MacSweeney (1948–2000)**

. . . my heather-crashing feet, splash happy  
kneefalls along the tumblestones,  
whip-winged plovers shattering the dew

(from 'Pearl')

**Bill Griffiths (1948–2007)**

foot	stamen	finger	coin	beak	vertebra
pistil	penis	mandible	petal	proboscis	ungulate
hair	pollen	cornet	button	sceptre	horn
claw	trumpet	trunk	barbule	operculum	star-point

(from 'Fragments: A History of the Solar System')

**Richard Caddel (1949–2003)**

Lichen days  
light            a  
                  history—

I have seen the hills, and they were just the hills  
I faced into the wind, it blew on me

rest there—

(from 'Little Stringer')

