

Continental Drift

Also by Nancy Gaffield

Tokaido Road

Nancy Gaffield

*Continental
Drift*

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2014 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-329-4

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Acknowledgements may be found on page 85.

Contents

Proem	9
1. Crossing the Water	11
Music of the Phenomenal World	13
Arbos	13
zu Babel	15
De Profundis	17
Vor Langen Jahren	18
Adam Laments	22
Stabat	24
2 Inclusions	25
Sea in Winter	27
Offshore	29
Flow	30
Inclosures	32
Winterbourne Valley	33
Solid objects	37
‘Things the mind already knows’	38
Mappa mundi	39
Landscaping the High Plains	40
Don’t I know it	41
Dust	42
3 Po-wa-ha	43
4 The Lay of the Land	69
Unconsolidated debris	71
Voler	73
Disharmonic folds	74
Adjacent borrowing	75
Grey zone	76
[Es]cape	78
Notes to the Poems	80
Works cited	83
Acknowledgements	85

For Maurice

*“Past
is past. I salute that various field.”*

—James Schuyler, ‘Salute’

“The notion of a landscape element escapes precise definition. On the one hand, a site may be a physical entity that reveals certain characteristics of the place... On the other, a site may refer to something imperceptible but nonetheless significant (a past event, a local story, or chronology).”

—Christophe Girot

Proem

If only it were possible to arrive
at a condition of knowing
through language. What the rain
knows. That the same number
of planets circle the sun today
as yesterday. That it signals
something. Not exactly Gene Kelly
dancing and singing, but a portent
borrowed from the sea endlessly
rocking and powered by a rage
to meet in time, word to word,
running rings. The surface may appear
fragmented but underneath
a deep and seamless structure. Abides.
This is not about you anymore
but you are in it.

Crossing the water

Music of the Phenomenal World

*"I have discovered that it is enough when a single
note is beautifully played."*

—Arvo Pärt

ARBOS

The years wind back
to an old refrain

—*There isn't a train I wouldn't take
No matter where it's going*

A memory of you
fossilised in amber,
out of time.

Looking
for moss under stones
stumbling
upon you.

Disillusions disappear
trailing sound.

I carry you encased
in resin, an amulet
round my neck.

Time trails.

Sound of keys
jangling means a corn bunting
camouflages in the hedgerows.

Feathered choristers utter
the creed
 aural symphony of plain
 song, few notes, much repetition.

Swell
of a single bell.
 Here before
hear after a tone train streaming
meaning
 unlimited returns.

Swift flight
 of a winter sparrow.

ZU BABEL

Bittern in the reed beds neck the sky and go boom.
Babbling, inhabiting the borders. That place unreason
lives. Coppiced chestnuts, conifer plantations woods
older than Babylon. European oaks tell of eruption—
yellow fog, dim sun, summer frost, famine. Learning
to weapon, maraud. Bronze follows copper follows
bluebell, anemone, dog's mercury, herb paris, columbine,
bird's nest orchid. Mystery flowers, hordes of swords,
spearheads, sickles, chisels.

Released from dendrochronology pentatonic monody
for four voices. Drones. Rare lady orchid fringes the
escarpment outside time.

★

Loosening the bands of syntax
morpheme by morpheme
mother plaiting pain
the name she gave you
all that remains.

A beam of light
wedges a foot in the door
 elongating

fa *fah* *far*

hum and haw,
random acts of kindness.

You go deep to reassemble
thought.

reccheo, reccho, exile
errant, wretch

Words aged in the dark
before us
stammer past future
present.
Time layers.

Find the word for it
and let it
go into the forest,
locate others.
Tuning.

Among them you walk
in moonlight
carrying your shadow.

★

In the boreal forest
memory frays.

Blur of lore,
dream-work and grasping,
finding your name there. Linked
from the start, your life
and mine.

DE PROFUNDIS

What matters is
not the frame but the space
inside. Broken glass. The wind
bellows, curtain billows.

Crows there.

A woman stands in front
of the hearth, drying her hair.
All around her the old world
is crumbling. Swathes of red
dead trees. Must not see, say, so
lost without you. Falling masonry. Fire
glances round the room, licking.
Aspen-glow, tinder-box, wild.
West, we were here.

VOR LANGEN JAHREN

The rings of the tree know
something. Radical
introspection. In here is a world
the tree wishes to speak of,
the shadow of a former

Listen.

Overcome by beauty
of wind in the leaves you are
apt to miss the point.
A year is made of light and dark
rings, principle of Limiting Factors. Spring
wood filled with inner light endarkens
and hardens by summer. They died
of heart sickness.

And so a woman
rich in cognates contemplates
the heavens:

*str,
étoile, aster, stella, star*

Above me sways the fir tree. You are
here not forever
forever not here.
Are you.

★

Berthed in straw
below deck, hemmed in

and the sea roiling. Farewell
to small land and heather village.
Fading. Ruptures,
transatlantic abrasions.
Crossings and starting over.

Scattering
to cheap and fertile
undesired land. Unfamiliar tongue weeds
wed wedes.

Give me your

Pour through numbered,
encumbered

No stopping here.

Stumble into pale light,
Lake of the Woods,
someone else's,
dwellers amongst the leaves.
Taking it.
The fields too,
the cistern. Dipping.
Thick as trees and just as good
at keeping secrets.

Worm in the wood.

Up here on the rim
transubstantiating and wearing
masks, writing the world.

★

Fleeting fall turns to winter sleet.
When they got to the new world
they called each place by the old names.

Never mastered the broad vowels,
learned instead to keep quiet,
tame their speech.

Watching northern geese
baste cloud to earth,
wing dips
pulse in every point,
long and low
herronk of no return.

The heart
repines.

Suppose I were to find
words in my pocket,
loose change. Unlettered.

Blow them over the sea.

What is this spindrift?
asks the cormorant.

Dance of the Spirits
answer the Cree.

★

The bark knows.
Putting on a brave face, it scrutinises
the sky. Day after day, cloud
hangs there. Leaves come and go,
then snow. So much time
spent waiting.

Wave after wave
of lapwings fly
over late-winter fields. Lilacs
in the dooryard
bloom and everything shooting
upwards. A blue orb fractures,
unfamiliar tongue
cleaving, wanting
to sing a song
in a strange land.

Oaks turn
inward.

Click-clack
Click-clack

Shiny refrain of train on the tracks.
Dashing of little ones against stones.
Heart, my heart,
bury my heart.