ATLANTIC CANADA'S POETIC MENAGERIE: ANIMAL PRESENCE IN THE POETRY OF JOHN THOMPSON, DON DOMANSKI, JOHN STEFFLER, AND HARRY THURSTON

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the place of the animal in Atlantic Canadian poetry. Focusing on four poets—John Thompson, Don Domanski, John Steffler, and Harry Thurston—whose careers began in the 1960s, this study analyzes not only various ways these writers live with and use animals, but also how they think with and through animals, both in their experiences and their poetry. The similarities within this group of writers exemplify how animal presence can no longer be read as a marginal consideration in Atlantic Canadian poetry. Each poet in his own way creates a zoopoetics that shows how the act of composition in the poem itself might be read as an animal that the poet struggles to tame, even as the real animal disrupts the poem by its subversive presence in the composition.

In an effort to bridge contemporary efforts to redefine the critical importance of the animal, and to apply those shared concerns to Atlantic Canada, this study draws primarily on three areas of scholarly discussions: the "question of the animal" in continental philosophy; regionalism in Atlantic Canadian studies; and recent critical perspectives in Animal Studies. There is also an interdisciplinary use of ecocriticism, phenomenology, zoosemiotics, and literary studies. The interdisciplinary nature of to this study also exemplifies how relevant critical approaches across the disciplines are to the animal.

Though the focus of this study is on Atlantic Canada, these four poets have been extremely influential in Canadian poetry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly in the ways they link ecopoetics to the animal. John Thompson's

work suggests the possibilities and limitations in moving away from language, the ego, and the domestic space toward the uncontrollable animal realm. Don Domanski expands this idea of zoopoetics by rejecting concepts of the ego. Drawing on spirituality and science in tandem with the metaphoric nature of language, he investigates mysteries imbedded in the physical world. Steffler's landscape imagines itself as animality that defies the poet's observations and definitions. Steffler constructs ideas of modern, masculine selfhood by animalizing the natural world. In equally important ways, Thurston's poetry engages the animal primarily from his personal perspectives of farming, science, and an eco-poetic lens. Thurston's work eventually embraces a feral or animalized script, grounded in present-day realism, ecology, and his extensive understanding of Atlantic Canada. By bringing these poets together through their investigations of the animal encounter, the dissertation argues for a specific need for Animal Studies in Atlantic Canadian poetry.

DEDICATION

For Sheba, Suzie, Cuddles, Mittens, MacCavity, Zen, Petey, Buttercup, Loki, Saint, Loup, Ridley, and Easy.

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List of Abbreviations

AEC: At The Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets

AMK: Animals of My Own Kind

AO: Atlantic Outposts

APBT: A Place Between the Tides

AWU: All Our Wonder Unavenged

CBBD: Cape Breton Book of the Dead

CFBE: Clouds Flying Before the Eye

EP: Earthly Pages

GI: The Grey Islands

IMLE: If Men Lived on Earth

NBLE: New Brunswick Literary Encyclopedia

NWWR: That Night We Were Ravenous

PPM: Parish of the Physic Moon

PS: Poetry and the Sacred

SJ: Stilt Jack

SLH: Stations of the Left Hand

WL: Wolf-ladder

Introduction: "The Golden Bridle"

The first frontier was the water's edge, and there was the first moment, because how could there have not been such a moment, when a living thing came from the ocean, crossed that boundary, and found that it could breathe.

(Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line*)

The first metaphor was animal.

(John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*)

In Greek mythology, the warrior hero Bellerophon longed to capture the winged horse, Pegasus, to help him slay the defiant, fire-breathing Chimera. After many failed attempts at breaking the divine horse, Bellerophon prayed to Athena in hopes of receiving her guidance in how he might capture the elusive horse. That night, as he slept, she instructed him in a dream to slip a golden bridle over Pegasus' head while he kneeled down at the well of Pirene to drink from a spring. When Bellerophon woke from his dream, the golden bridle lay beside him. Following his given instructions, he harnessed Pegasus, as Athena had instructed by slipping the bridle over his bowed head.

Although Bellerophon succeeded in gentling Pegasus with his bridle, his pride and arrogance eventually press him to climb to Mount Olympus. Zeus, displeased with the hero's boldness, sends a gadfly to sting Pegasus, who bucks in pain and knocks Bellerophon off his back. Tumbling back to earth, he becomes a crippled recluse, while Pegasus continues on to Mount Olympus, where he carries lighting bolts for Zeus. This

myth exemplifies how humans with their longings have relied on tools, such as Bellerophon's bridle, to capture animals for millennia. The myth could be extended to include how humans rely on language, the golden ur-tool, to control the animal, so that language in the poet's hands, for instance, becomes the golden bridle that forces the animal to bow down and be spoken for.

In ways that I will address throughout this dissertation, the poem is an animal that the poet struggles to tame, even as the animal disrupts the poem by its subversive presence in the composition. The uncooperative presence of the animal, then, serves as an introduction, but more of an invitation, for a reading of Atlantic Canadian poets from a critical human/animal perspective.[1] Looking at four poets—John Thompson, Don Domanski, John Steffler, and Harry Thurston—whose careers began in the 1960s, this study explores the ways these writers live with, use, and think with and through the animal. While each of the four is a distinctive writer, all venture, in their own ways, toward the ineffable gap between poem and place. They venture into this troublesome gap by articulating, through the medium of language, an experience with animals that cannot be captured entirely in human discourse.[2]

Although somewhat neglected in larger conversations on Canadian poetry, Atlantic Canadian poets are very much at the foreground of a new zoopoetics based on a unique understanding of human/animal relations. *Zoopoetics* is a variegated term, recently identified with Jacques Derrida's brief comment on "Kafka's vast zoopoetics" from *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* (1997), as an aside to his explorations into "the question of the animal" (6). Derrida's intention, in pointing to Kafka's work, reveals Kafka's preoccupation with his well-populated, textual menagerie.

His animals, which include the famous dung beetle, Odradek, the kittenlamb, a burrowing animal, musical dogs, a marmot in the synagogue, and an ape named Red Peter, foreground "language at the border of animal and human," as Michelle Woods suggests in her monograph on Kafka and translations. Kafka does this through displacement and exchange. Woods suggests that Kafka "destabilizes what it is to be human by placing human language and thought processes in the animal body" (270). While compelling reading, Kafka's lending human language to animals does not so much extend the discourse on the question of the animal as it lends human emotions and thoughts to an animal vessel, which extended modernism's explorations with writers feeling estranged from their worlds. Such zoopoetics, however, shares much with folk tales, fables, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* rather than highlighting the animal's presence as a disruptive presence in the human/linguistic system.

Since the advent of post-structuralism, the simple exchange of animal with text has been made problematic. In fact, the breakdown of language in reference to the animal experience has become a central semiotic problem that troubles the poets discussed in this study. As such, academics and critics have adopted the term "zoopoetics" to describe an area of study that deals with the representation of animals in literary production. Some see the key problem of zoopoetics in aspects of a writer's philosophical bestiary in the face of unstable language systems, and through their efforts to define ways in which writers do not deal with the animal as a simple insertion into a text. The idea of the animal points to ways in which the writer engages the textual animal while attempting to represent the physical animal outside the world. Academic Steven Connor offers a good definition of the term on his website: a zoopoetics text "means letting animals in on

meaning, even allowing the animality of meaning" so that "[animals] would exert distinctive forms of pull and pressure on the work of meaning." The animal's potential influence, in this case, makes apparent the limits of language and the poet's crisis in being unable to surpass such limitations. The animal then manifests within the text as a pressure on words and their authority. It insists on agency.

While Christopher White and Aaron Moe have both done intriguing critical work using this idea, they both tend to apply the notion to a rhetorical reciprocity within the text between the animal and the writers.[3] Their works rely heavily on crossing poetics with animal gesture and semiotics. In his 2008 dissertation, "Animals, Technology, and the Zoopoetics of American Modernism," White conflates Derrida's zoopoetics and his own interdisciplinary approaches with *zoosemiotics,* or the study of the semiotic behavior of animals and literature. White's analysis, however, does not offer a definitive version of his use of "zoopoetics," and he rather uses the term to locate a space where animals and their sign-systems overlap with human sign-systems. Aaron Moe has a clearer definition of zoopoetics in his essay, "Zoopoetics: A Look at Cummings, Merwin, and the Expanding Field of Ecocriticism," and yet it is heavily inflected with semiotics and a rather New Age sense of energy transference between animals and poets: "As poetics is, in part, the study of what poetry does—what it accomplishes as a verb—zoopoetics provides a theoretical focus to explore what a poem does—as a verb—to our understanding of and relationship with nonhuman animals" (28). The later definition in his dissertation is less clear: "Zoopoetics is the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through an attentiveness to another species' bodily poiesis" (8). In brief, Moe argues that animal "energy" from gestures and vocalization manifests into

poetic "energy," because the form of the poem is dictated by the animal's presence. Moe's focus is a limited reading of zoopoetics, particularly for the present use, as poetics that deconstruct language to simulate animals and their semiotics are not applicable to contemporary poetry under the present focus.

Zoopoetics, as it will be used throughout this dissertation, considers the animal directly the point of crisis that occurs when the poet realizes his/her language falters in the animal encounter. Zoopoetics, in this way, demarcates the internal struggle and anxiety the four poets of this study grapple with to communicate experience. The heightened sense of this experience occurs when they know that human language systems will always be inadequate to the task at hand, and escaping the human condition is impossible. As semiotician Morton Tonnessen writes, poets cannot step outside their reliance on language as "We tend to think in terms of language . . . and in terms of language, all is language. All is human language—all is human" (377). Because it is impossible to understand the animal by means of its own experience, which will always be mysterious and unknowable, the writers studied here often fail in their pursuits. Philosopher Cora Diamond articulates this problem: "the words fail us, the words don't do what we are trying to get them to do. The words make it look as if I am simply unable to see over a wall which happens to separate me from something I want very much to see" (67). Diamond's observations make clear the zoopoetics discovered through the act of writing among the poets in this dissertation. Often, experiences cannot be conceptualized in language adequately as the animal escapes one's expectations of reality. Diamond's "wall" separates animals from humans and conveys one's frustration at the inability to express this experience.

To compensate for this, the poets seek to locate the animality of language: the wildness inherent, for example, in the creative associations of metaphor. In *Poetics*, Aristotle's definition of metaphor reinforces this idea of animality present in poetry: "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy." Metaphors push against the norm in language and disrupt expectations of meaning and easy reference. Like Aristotle's "species and genus," animals work as metaphors that disrupt the text. In this way, zoopoetics give a name to something that often goes unrecognized. Zoopoetics takes into account a non-referential area of signification between real experience and our desire to express it, both between actual poet and animal, and within the poet's efforts to interpret the animal's world.

The poetry of Thompson, Domanski, Steffler, and Thurston ranges over nearly four decades, often returning to animals in poetic experiments that develop the possibility of extra-linguistic articulation, accessed through dynamic metaphors. For each poet, this inquiry progresses through stages in their work in which they gain insight into how the animal infuses, influences, and refuses to remain within the poetry. Such stages in their work are an essential aspect of an increasingly complex zoopoetics. Through various personal transformations, each poet transitions from an interior or domestic space to an encounter with the animal's outer world. The anthropocentric inner reality the poets have known comes into question in the animal's outer world, and, eventually prompts them to reevaluate how they fit into the world. Early in their careers, the poets each discovers the animal as an unexpected other that shifts and challenges their ways of thinking about the world.

Thompson, at one point, crosses paths with a cow moose in heat. Because their meeting is so visceral, her sheer sexuality and animal stink causes him to doubt his own empirical use of language. He is thrown back on poetry and metaphor to convey the experience with some adequacy, and yet, even then, he discovers that the metaphor may, as a subversive form of language, give him greater access to the outdoors of the cow moose while it pushes him further from the ordered security of home and language. In an inverse way, the mink that Thurston encounters under the barn as a child spurs him to associate it with the otherness and mysteriousness of poetic analogy. The mink's presence startles him, and yet draws him back to the barn with its power to see and expose him. Domanski's encounters, conversely, are often more expected. Ravens and wolves peer into his windows and approach him in the wild. Domanski's inner space is opened up by this kind of outer world intrusion. Steffler's home space, by contrast, is maddeningly cacophonous with cricket whines and winds that seem ursine, as they urge him to see the barrier of inner/outer as his own creation.

In each of these early encounters, there is a moment where the poem and place overlap, in which the poets identify with the animal. Remaining open to the overlap leads each to eventually seek an understanding of the animal, not through their human perspectives but by means of understanding, and writing out, the animal's own poetic presence as part of the living world. The difficulty in such a project is that the poets have nothing to replace language with. In order to achieve a new level of communication or understanding, they eventually acknowledge a necessity of relinquishing control, emptying themselves out to the world, setting down "the golden bridle," which allows the animal *qua* animal to exist in a new sense of freedom.

In the framework of the following chapters, I seek to answer a set of questions raised by the animal in literature. What is distinctive in the animal representations by each of these poets and what relations do these animal representations have to knowledge, thinking, and place? Here, the animal is the focus, rather than plants or other members of the natural world, because animals are so similar to and so different from humans. And humans are animals; this is especially true with our mammalian counterparts, which create an incongruous space in the literature here, as closeness with our own animal natures creates anxiety that humans overcompensate for by relying heavily on language systems as a tool for differentiation. Martin Heidegger proposes that it is nearly impossible for humans to completely escape a dependency on language, because "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man" (*Poetry* 213). In this way, the poets experience the animal at the threshold of these realizations about mastery and the limits of language.

Animals cause problems in literature because they are amorphous: they are familiars in fairytales and children's literature as the cunning wolf and the greedy fox, yet they are often indeterminate in the real world and in contemporary literature as well, as they linger at the edges of the poem, problematizing their own identities within the work. Humans incorporate them "in art and literature," as Randy Malamud suggests in *Poetic Animals and Poetic Souls*, to reinforce the differences between themselves and the natural world, humans "engage animals in a fashion that keeps them distinct from us, as we define ourselves against them" (4). Humanity itself defined itself against the concept of the animal; they are other, nonhuman, nonlinguistic, and non-rational. Of course, this is also a matter of self-identification. What does an animal in the guise of a metaphor, a

kinetic wing beating in a poem, mean? Ted Hughes, a poet who infused many of his poems with animals, saw a correlation between the word *animal*—the fox stinking on the page, the pike swallowing whole a smaller pike on a lakebed—and the elusive animal in the world. "I think of poems as a sort of animal," Hughes writes. "They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them" (15). Hughes suggests that animals exist outside of anthropocentric, ego-fueled systems—they are humanity's bugbear. *Anthropocentric*, here, might be defined specifically as Max Oelschlaeger does in *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*: "Anthropocentrists see the human species as the most significant fact of existence, and accordingly evaluate all else from a human standpoint" (292). The animal comes into the anthropocentric view only as other, as outside the human perspective.

It is no coincidence that the four authors in this study began writing at the cusp of the environmental awareness movement, which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. These earmark an era of shifting masculinity or a period in which a crisis of masculine social changes arose, including, but not limited to, the unfolding of the second-wave women's movement, which affected young men's relations to ideals of masculinity based on heterosexuality, male dominance, male bread-winning, and head of household status.[4] The four contemporary male poets in this study also share and reconfigure Atlantic Canada's regional identity over the years, extrapolating what it means to live at peripheries and ecological edges, while exposing how the animal exists outside human language systems and symbolism.

While there are many Atlantic Canadian poets who could well be included in a similar study, such as M. Travis Lane, Anne Compton, and Anne Simpson, the four male poets here grew up in the same post-war generation in a working-class economy. Focusing on female poets in the animal context would also be an important undertaking, but would make for a different kind of study, as women often write from a position that itself is complicated by a sense of otherness. In other words, women must contend with otherness as women, as well as otherness as a regional sense of displacement. For this reason, the four men in this dissertation all share a perspective not found in the women poets of the same period. However, ecofeminist theory remains part of this study, because the poets here work through Romantic interpretations and the engendering of the natural world and animals.

Writing from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland these poets do not slip into using their particular regions as geographical determinism, but look for innovative ways to redefine the region. This study shows that the animal is a critical site for Atlantic Canadian poets in which they are able to reimagine themselves. Although each poet writes from a different region, there is overlap and compelling juxtaposition in their explorations, making them a good example of diverse and collective thought on how we might imagine ourselves through the animal. Michael Kowalewski suggests that such attention to the word in the world offers a bioregional perspective on place. Bioregional attention deviates from the more common socio-economic focus on the region by rooting human activity in the larger animal world. "Bioregional writers emphasize an awareness of 'place' as a living, interactive force in human identity," Kowalewski writes, "a complex ecology of local environments and how those environments affect the life of

those who live within them" (30). While Kowalewski's focus is American literature, his criticism easily applies to those Atlantic Canadian poets who intentionally foreground the region and its animals as a way of redefining themselves.

As the editors suggest in the introduction to *Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada*, a seminal anthology, poets from Atlantic Canada demonstrate "a dynamic and changing sense of regionalism," which "does not abandon the deep connection to the historical and local," but instead "reinterprets the local in the global context and enables a kinetic relationship with cultures and economies around the planet" (16). In this study, my analysis of such considerations demonstrates how Thompson, Domanski, Steffler, and Thurston transform the lyric subject into a fractured, multivoiced experience in order to ask the central question: what am I subject to? Each of the poets shows both a breadth in style and an inherent interconnectivity with each other in their need to return, through subsequent collections, to the animal other. At times, their encounters leave them speechless, as language falters and fails in the presence of the poet's awe of the experience. By reimaging their region through environmental and imagined landscapes teeming with fellow creatures, they transgress essentialist renderings of the animal and region, and thereby promote homology— that is, an inter-species connectedness—that subverts the anthropocentric struggle for power. It will become clear that through such a reading Atlantic Canadian poets exhibit a close relationship to nature based on an Atlantic maritime regionalism, where ocean and marsh and woodland come together to create a unique natural experience, distinct from other nature poets.

In order to bridge contemporary efforts redefining the critical importance of the animal, this study draws primarily on three areas of scholarly discussions on animals, all

of which have become more familiar in critical circles over the recent years. Firstly, there are the compelling conversations, mentioned in brief above, that have emerged from works by continental philosophers Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and Giorgio Agamben among others, on the place of the animal in human consciousness. Secondly, these approaches combine with the burgeoning field of Atlantic Canadian Studies and the discourse of scholars such as Tony Tremblay, Wanda Campbell, and Herb Wyile, whose push for more critical work on Atlantic Canadian writers has produced interdisciplinary articles and conferences exploring regional definitions and literature. Thirdly, the nascent discipline of Animal Studies, from which the works of scholars such as Randy Malamud and Erica Fudge arise, explores everything from contemporary poetry to zoosemiotics.

It should be mentioned here that Animal Studies now has two main theoretical branches: Critical Animal Studies and Human-Animal Studies. The dissertation will not be dealing with Critical Animal Studies, which is an interdisciplinary approach to the animal rooted in "critical" approaches to animal liberation and ethical questions concerning the status of the animal and the unequal treatment of nonhuman animals, which has implications for the health of the planet. The present study is grounded in Animal Studies, which is also interdisciplinary but looks at cultural conceptions of the animal. It has a scope much more adapted to literature as it considers any topic related to the human and the animal in any guise, contemporary or historical, as relevant for study. Contributions to this broad field of study come from many humanities and social sciences disciplines: anthropology, sociology, history, literature, and philosophy. Topics of interest include examining the animal's place and treatment in art, literature, media, activism, ethics, film, performance, public policy, and wildlife management, to name a

few areas of research. These fields complement each other in ways that open up an understanding of the animal, giving space to Atlantic Canadian poetry. Such an interdisciplinary approach to this dissertation is particularly important to Animal Studies as it provides a means to challenge anthropocentric ideas, and destabilize the human/animal binary by which writers for centuries have limited our experience to the earth's first inhabitants.

A Regional Bias: Atlantic Canada

The poets in this study draw from and identify with the distinct features of the varied Atlantic Canada region. Situated on the eastern edge of the country, Atlantic Canada is a tidally centred environment; it is "of the sea" as its mythopoeic heritage and Maritime history attests.[5] Physically surrounded by water, the four provinces that make up the region—New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland—boast sub-basins such as the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Bay of Fundy, the latter of which claims the highest tides in the world. The Atlantic Ocean also strongly influences the region's climate as the Atlantic Maritime ecozone has more storms and precipitation than anywhere else in Canada. The ocean and bays "mark the limit between here and there, an interval of resonance" that demarks a border both physically and metaphorically suggested through the regional consciousness (New 36). The physical border is geographically and topographically a liminal space between the ocean and the coastal strip of the ocean's rim, or intertidal zone, that Newfoundlanders call the "landwash" and other provinces call the "mud flats." Thurston's observations

speak of the deep interconnectivity between the land and people, which the four poets all here exemplify:

> For those who either live or visit here and are attuned to nature, 'the sea's voice,' as Evelyn Richardson writes, is either 'a low steady roar,' or, if you repair inland to the woods, 'the softest whisper.' Even if you are out of earshot of the sea, in Atlantic Canada it is always exerting its influence on the seasons, the daily weather, and the land itself—and therefore, on all living things. (*APBT* 8)

The etymological roots of "tide" come from the Proto-Germanic *tidiz* meaning a division of time. The intertidal zone, a diurnal occurrence, literally provokes a dynamic and individualistic sense of time and space; it is a place where one can see, during low tide, virtually the bottom of the ocean, so shallow at times that boats wait again for high tides to float them. It is "the physical and biotic forces that give these communities their distinctive structure" (Bertness xi). Domanski reads Atlantic Canada's coastline as both bare and overflowing with energy:

> bare place
> with tyrannical brines
> and salted trees
> in all these
> exterior raindrops
> lost to interior fires
> there is no end of faith
> to watching the ocean

tear its own shadow loose

from those rocks. (*SLH* 71)

Here, Domanski taps into the kinetic energy of the coastline.

But Atlantic Canada is not merely comprised of the ocean and its sub-basins. And poets like Thompson and Thurston find their regional identity more inland. At the southern part of the isthmus of Chignecto meaning "the great marsh district" in Mi'kmaq dialect where the New Brunswick-Nova Scotia borders overlap, extensive, intertidal salt marshes such as the Tantramar marsh stretch out toward the ocean (Thurston, *APBT* 7). Actually comprised of the Chignecto, the Missaguash, the LaPlanche and the Amherst marshes, the Tantramar Marsh is extensive. The liminal nature of this self-contained border zone is a physical realm that sparks the imaginative renderings between earth and water. It separates and, at times, isolates parts of Atlantic Canada from the landlocked interior. Etymologically, Tantramar stems from the French Acadians' naming the area *tintamarre*, which means din or loud noise such as the waterfowl make as they feed and move throughout the marsh. Once an extensive salt marsh, many years of agricultural pursuits by the agrarian Acadians who dyked the marshes to take advantage of the fertile sediment, subsequently destroyed much of the natural landscape.

While Thompson and Thurston have written about these fertile marshes and their estuarine life, their discourses on the region come from very different perspectives. Thompson's marsh is often sparse and cold. Against such an unwelcoming landscape, the leaning marsh barns and other features of humanity take on animal qualities as he moves through the landscape. Thurston's marshes, conversely, are filled with life. His long connection to salt marshlands begins in his childhood in Yarmouth County and continues

into his adulthood when he settles near the Old Marsh on the banks of the Tidnish River in Nova Scotia. His marshes are a coastal ecosystem that he attempts to make sense of, as he learns how these marshes function as primary nesting places for a variety of birds and as nurseries for marine wildlife, such as fish, mammals, and amphipods. Like the tides, the marshes are also transition zones.

On first glance, Steffler's beloved Newfoundland may not appear rich in animal life in a comparable way. It is home, however, to over 160,000 moose, 750,000 caribou, millions of birds, and plentiful populations of black bear. As a primary migratory path for many birds, it claims both North America's largest puffin colony and the world's largest breeding colony of Leach's storm petrel, and in Labrador, the largest colony of razorbills in the world (Thurston, *Guide* 121). Equally copious in wildlife, its marine ecosystem hosts millions of harp seals and cetaceans, such as humpback, pilot, fin, and minke whales. Steffler harvests this wealth of ecosystem inhabitants as the other poets do their terrain, and likewise encounters himself against the backdrop of an emerging animal presence.

Atlantic Canada, then, is not only an emblem for dichotomous topography but also for contentious socio-political discourses, which underscore a chronic sense of pluralism and inequality. The poets in this study engage these conditions as well, working through the animal as a relationship to nature, which predates the later failures of human society. While the Maritimes before Confederation were once profitable, centralization programs that occurred after Confederation are thought to have created an economic slump and subsequently a decline in all major industries; this led to rapid outmigration of the labor force, which still occurs today.[6] If "Regionalism is a marginal discourse," by

definition, "that is always in conflict with the national agenda," then Atlantic Canada epitomizes such a struggle (New 117). As Atlantic Canadian scholar Herb Wylie suggests, the current struggles are not new to the region:

> Not least of all of those challenges is the regard in which Atlantic Canada is held by much, indeed most of the rest of the country, which tends to view the region with a mixture of patronizing acceptance and growing impatience. It is seen alternately as an inconvenient vestige of Confederation, as a fiscal drain on the rest of the country, and as leisure space—Canada's 'ocean playground' (an official motto of the province of Nova Scotia that serves nicely as a metaphor for the region as a whole). (*Anne* 2)

Though the region has been a site for lumber, pulp and paper, boatbuilding, mining, fishing, and canneries, among other industries, the idyllic, postcard sense that the coast is set up for tourists still resonates.

The animals of these regions provide a means for writers to challenge the preconceived notions of Canadian identity. While Atlantic Canada has always boasted talented writers, the 1960s and 1970s were assertive decades for the nation when writers, including those in this study, began to "write back" to the nation's centre. With a strong sense of regional identity and a spirit of place that embraces the topographic and cultural landscapes, these poets focused on the many species that inhabit the land, the economic and industrial stasis, resource mis/management, and the ever enduring elitist perceptions which resonate from Ontario, the country's centre: "Atlantic Canada has long been one of the involuntary margins of the British Empire, the American market economy and the

Canadian nation state," Janice Fiamengo asserts, "but its poets appear to have found a way to embrace rather than mourn the margin" (27)[7]. As the local jokes goes: You know you're from New Brunswick if your economy is based on cows, fish, and ferrying Ontario motorists to Boston. It could be said then that it is a region that has been constructed both from the centre and the periphery, as a place that struggles to keep pace with the rest of the country. It is a region that pivots on anachronisms and is often defined as elemental, hardscrabble, and redolent with what Ian McKay calls "antimodern images of insularity" and superstition (74).

Atlantic Canadian literature extends from that thinking. But is it a circular thought; as Lawrence Buell asks, "Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?" (*The Future* 10). The four poets in this dissertation gravitate back to the land; their textual relationship is inseparable from the region. Because our bodies are the first and most substantial means we have for interacting with the world, and because the world exists beyond human imagination, it is not strange that each of these poets walks, sits, and listens as a prelude to writing. They are, in other words, participants and, subsequently, they transform and are transformed by the landscape that embodies them. Defining his eco-poetics of Canadian literature, D. M. R. Bentley notes the necessity of such a peripatetic relationship with place: "the crucial links between any culture and its environment are the human beings who, on the one hand, shape and construe their surroundings according to their needs and preoccupations, and, on the other hand, alter and create their physical and imaginative constructs in response to their environment and expectations" (15). The animal in these environs, then, becomes the

point of contact for the poet who must listen to its other language and yet, create poetry out of the experience of that exchange.

That their projects do not always succeed points to the complexity of such an undertaking and exposes how the animal inadvertently entangles and resists linguistic systems. Human signs tend to expose and misrepresent it. Entanglements with the resistant animal become a recurrent trope throughout each of these poets' works; it often expresses a nascent humility as each gives voice to a frustration at language's shortcomings in the face of the animal encounter. It is important "to think of this place in another way," John Ralston Saul writes of Canada: "We must step away from the conquest thinking and move toward seeing ourselves as part of the place. All of this is contained in the idea that you are reconciled to the place and thus to *the other* by widening the circle. Each place has a truth about it. Through reconciliation you find out what that is" (103, emphasis in original). While these poets do work toward such reconciliation, they are not without contradictions, exhibiting a frustration with the ego's fallibility and anxiety. By writing about the animal, poets commit to an unavoidable contradiction, and yet, through their works, challenge anthropocentric thinking itself. In very human terms, these poets use animals of Atlantic Canada as a means to regroup themselves when their sense of kinship begins to unravel.

If the sense of regionalism in Thompson, Domanski, Steffler, and Thurston breaks free of the traditional limits of a separate identity via the animal, they nonetheless, at times, fall prey to a regional sense of otherness. Canadian historian Judith Fingard suggests, for this reason, that regional commiseration is integral to the region as a whole:

> The social construct of an Atlantic region, buttressed by shared internal weaknesses and externally imposed paradigms, has inevitably resulted in the identifications of some common characteristics across the four provinces in creative and scholarly writing, art, attitudes, and beliefs. These centre on isolation and insularity, alienation and protest, poverty and escapism. (32-33)

These commonalities locate a compelling project for the regional metaphor through the animal encounter, and they expose problems of representing animals through language. However, the poets also use the animal inhabitants of the region as a means of escaping their own isolation and insularity.

The themes that unite and variegate the poets' explorations of the Atlantic Canadian imagination demonstrate both a breadth of creativity and further shared concerns. The poetry reacts to a lack of understanding by embracing new identities and forms of representation at the cusp of forest and ocean. It participates by means of the animal encounter while locating the region through geological and topographical taxonomy. Subsequently, the poetry recognizes that humans are, in part, constructed by language as a pre-existing semiotic system. Addressing linguistic entrapments challenges anthropocentric perspectives and acknowledges that humans are not the centre of the world. At one extreme, a poet like Thompson seeks to annihilate the individual as a language-centred being, as he is unable to experience reality, because language always collapses the richness of the experience. Steffler's landscape, on the other hand, is itself an animal that defies his observations and definitions. Domanski and Thurston both seek to escape the ego by focusing their attention on the wealth of biological processes that, in

turn, bring about spiritual explorations. Each poet sees that he must abandon humanity, in some way, in order to escape symbolic systems. Consequently, they are loners, for the most part, wandering the Atlantic Canadian landscape. They thrive through the animals and the biotic ecosystems they inhabit, while seeking ways to renew vital relationships with other life forms.

Animal Studies and the Question of the Animal

The "animal turn" in literary studies opens with an approach that seeks to understand the relationship between literature and the perceptions of human and nonhuman animal interactions and relationships. It is a burgeoning multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field. After the publication of two seminal and provocative works on philosophy and animal ethics, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), many academics, animal welfarists, and the public generally found a new interest in the question of the animal. Throughout the 1980s, then, Animal Studies experienced a vitalizing, publishing boom. Books appeared in fields far reaching from the original philosophical impetus. For instance, historian Keith Thomas' *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (1983) explores ways Western ideas of nature were shaped, and the animal's central role in this shaping. Harriet Ritvo's often cited *The Animal Estate* (1987) analyzes the human/animal relationship in Britain, while Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1987) looks at connections between primatology biases and human systems of race, gender, and class. The 1990s brought the first major work that would consider how gender, race, class, and animal oppressions interconnect.

Editors Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan brought together *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (1995) to explore attitudes toward oppression. And yet, it is only in the past few years that comprehensive overviews of key theoretical approaches and issues have begun to appear, which highlight the still developmental nature of the field. Margo DeMello's *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* was published in 2012, and Dawne McCance's *Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction*, were just published in 2013, to name but two recent efforts.

That the study of the animal spans so many fields suggests its wide-reaching presence. Its ability to roam through so many disciplines also reinforces how animal life has begun to intrude on the anthropocentric human world. Many of these approaches deconstruct the traditional separation between "human" and "animal," refusing the classical image of the golden bridle. As philosopher Matthew Calarco makes clear, Animal Studies today is not only an exploration of "a historical and genealogical analysis of the constitution of the human-animal distinction and how this distinction has functioned across a number of institutions, practices, and discourses," it is also "an alternative ontology of animal life, an ontology in which the human-animal distinction is called radically into question" (140-1). Here, we find a vital connection to the poets of this study: they experience that radical shift in ontological status within themselves and their worlds, and question the prioritizing of human experience. Challenging priorities is particularly helpful in exploring Animal Studies, as it makes a radical impact on so many fields. What "makes it not just another flavor of 'fill in the blank' studies," Carey Wolfe argues "is that it fundamentally unsettles and reconfigures the question of the knowing

subject and the disciplinary paradigms and procedures that take for granted its form and reproduce it" (xxix).

Thinking of the animal's position, for Atlantic Canadian poets, allows for a space for poets to reevaluate ways that essentialist thinking has reduced the intrinsic ontology of the nonhuman animal as well as the complexity of the region. Animals play a significant role in how poets imagine themselves engaging with their region. Each poet's perception of the world transforms as he moves closer to the animal. The poetry embeds animals in history, geography, economy, and ecology, at the same time that it celebrates the power of the metaphor to liberate the poet from closely guarded, conventional language systems. The majority of Animal Studies primarily focus on philosophy and theory rather than poetry, but it may be in poetry that a new language, more closely related to animal experience, can be found. Derrida has also addressed the philosophical human/animal limitations by suggesting that philosophy still caters to the human subject rather than the perspective of the animal. For him, "philosophical knowledge" must reach out to "poetic thinking" as a bridge between anthropocentric theories of human existence and a greater openness toward the animal (7). He suggests, in part, that while no final bridge is possible across the human-animal conundrum, there is a liminal experience and the poetic metaphor.

Animals in Canadian Literature

Animal presence is not new to Canadian literature. In Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972), for instance, the protagonist's narcissistic husband, David, highlights how ingrained animals and their exploitation are in our national psyche: "'Do you

realize," David says, "that this country is founded on the bodies of dead animals? Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers" (43). [8] Atwood is pointing to Canada's role in the North American fur trade and fishing industry, which drew so many Europeans to its woods and waters, beginning in the 1500s. If the literature about animals is there, it nonetheless changes through the eyes of the poets discussed in this study by means of their awareness of the inadequacies of our perceptions of the natural world.

Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), a seminal survey of Canadian literature, though now given little critical credence, also explores Canadian literature and animal representation. She suggests that Canadians cannot escape from some form of encounter with nature, because "in a country with such a high ratio of trees, lakes and rocks to people, images from Nature are almost everywhere" (49). In her animal chapter, Atwood explores different archetypal tropes found in animal stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Britain, America, and Canada. The animal in British literature, for instance, is not so much an animal, in Atwood's thinking, as it is "like a white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, Englishmen in furry zippered suits, often with a layer of human clothing added on top" (73). These animals appear straight out of *Masterpiece Theatre* in that they "speak fluent English and are assigned places in a hierarchical social order which is essentially British (or British-colonial, as in the Mowgli stories)" (73). The drama between the conflicting classes moves the plot, while the animal, as a significant species, is overlooked entirely.

American animal stories, conversely, all exhibit "magic symbolic qualities," as they focus on hunting stories and the masculine drive to overcome a worthy opponent as

Moby Dick and Faulkner's *The Bear* attest (Atwood 74). Animals, here, encompass the desire to tame and master all aspects of the land in early America:

> They are Nature, mystery, challenge, otherness, what lies beyond the Frontier: the hunter wishes to match himself against them, conquer them by killing them and assimilate their magic qualities, including their energy, violence and wildness, thus 'winning' over Nature and enhancing his own stature. American animal stories are quest stories—with the Holy Grail being a death—usually successful from the hunter's point of view, though not from the animal's; as such they are a comment on the general imperialism of the American cast of mind. (Atwood 74)

Atwood's reading suggests that animals in American literature function as disposable symbols on the protagonist's path to personal achievement and imperialistic growth.

Atwood and others have attributed development of the Canadian animal story to New Brunswick-born Charles G.D. Roberts and Ontario's (Don Valley) Ernest Thompson Seton: "Those looking for something 'distinctively Canadian' in literature might well start right here," she writes (73). Their so-called "failure stories" portray animals as struggling to survive in the face of a human drive to hunt, trap, and control the animal in any way possible (88). Their genre attempted to give the animals agency rather than rendering them "Englishmen in furry zippered suits" or "assimilate their magical qualities" (73). Although the stories were not without their emotive impetus and maudlin slippages into morality tales, they did reflect the animal's plight in the wilds of Canada. The animal stories of Seton and Roberts are far from being success stories:

> They are almost invariably failure stories, ending with the death of the

> animal; but this death . . .That's the key: English animal stories are about 'social relations', American ones are about people killing animals; Canadian ones are about animals being killed, as felt emotionally from inside the fur and feathers. (74)

Although both American and Canadian animal stories strive to engage with the natural world, as Roberts claims, animal stories are still "a psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science"; American stories foreground success as much as the Canadian stories foreground failure and survival. Atwood insists that the later qualities represents a key symbol of Canadian literature (qtd. in Grady 70).

Survival was published in the 1970s and tends to focus thematically on literature and various branches of "survival." However, much has changed pertaining to the animal story and the representation of animals in Canadian literature since its publication. Animals are still very much in the Canadian collective consciousness, as contemporary works suggest, but new stories often pose questions as to the human's place in the animal's space. It is the question of placement that informs the present study. The poets here all began early in their careers to question the inadequacies of representations of animals in literature. Their legacy might be seen in any number of new attitudes. For instance, Marian Engel's *Bear* (1979) explores a librarian's erotic attraction to a pet bear over a summer sojourn in the country. Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) revisions Noah's saga from various animal points of view, including Mottyl's, a blind cat and victim of many of Dr. Noyes' (Noah's) scientific experiments and the constant companion to Mrs. Noyes, Noah's gin-drinking wife. Thomas King's trickster coyote appears in many of his stories and novels, such as *Green Grass, Running Water*

(1993), as the creature that was present when the world began. And Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) follows the perils of a young boy, Piscine Molitor "Pi" Patel, who spends most of the novel afloat on a life raft in the Pacific Ocean with several wild animals from his father's zoo, including Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger.

While there have been several collections of essays dedicated to the consideration of the animal and the contemporary Canadian imagination, Animal Studies is still a fledging field in Canada with little bioregional literary critique and few theoretical approaches to the animal-other, especially in the criticism of poetry. This dissertation, therefore, brings together many of these ideas for the first time, specifically in connection with Atlantic Canadian poetry. Essay collections that have been published, while focusing on the interdisciplinary nature of the field, tend to give weight to a broader treatment of the animal in both cultural and literary studies, and most focus on fiction. For example, Marian Scholtmeijer's compelling, early contribution, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction* (1993), suggests that animals function as a means to disrupt Canadian narratives and that they remain an uncooperative element within it. Her observations on the fictional animal often parallel ideas here on the poetic animal. "In modern literature, but more crucially in modern fiction," she argues, "animals contend with the conceptual devices that seek to subsume them. Their resistance to enculturation influences the nature and profundity of the difficulties literature addresses" (8). In the poetry discussed here, the animal's "resistance to enculturation" is even more central: the animal presence in the text becomes a moment of intertextual disruption, as both the living experience, and the failed references to such, give rise to a larger understanding of the ontological status of the animal in the human world.

Fiamengo's collection of critical essays, *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Imagination* (2007), surveys Animal Studies in Canada through a cultural lens. Fiamengo takes on a recuperative project, focusing on overlooked Canadian writers such as Marshall Saunders, an early twentieth-century writer of animal stories. The essays were collected after the 2005 symposium, "The Animals in this Country" (a nod to Margaret Atwood's poem with the same title). Fiamengo addresses current concerns in animal representation and asks broad theoretical questions concerning the species-boundary that spurs writers to "explore the questions of representational accuracy," while proposing "broadly political questions, seeking to understand what representations mean in particular contexts and how they function to serve social or ideological ends" (13). It is clear again that this position on the sign's failure to adequately signify is developed in more detail by the approach to poetry here. Of the fifteen essays in the previous work, however, only two discuss poetry. The Canadian journal *Mosaic* published an interdisciplinary two-issue collection of essays (38:4 2005, 39:4 2006) on animals and literature, though many of these pieces, like Fiamengo's project, are neither necessarily Canadian-focused, let alone Atlantic-Canadian-focused.

Other studies continue these themes, with a growing awareness of the new investigative nature of literature dealing with animal lives. Jodey Castricano's *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World* (2008) looks at the human-animal encounter at the beginning of the twenty-first century by grounding cultural studies in an ethical query into the place of the animal. While these diverse essays engage the work of Canadian academics, writers, and philosophers in a Canadian context, her editorial prerogative foregrounds political questions surrounding animal subjectivity that questions

the humanist focus. Contributions to this collection include explorations into animal experimentation, Canadian animal protection laws, Marineland, and humanist biases concerning non-human species cognitive capabilities. Castricano states in her introduction that the selected essays aim "to include the nonhuman animal question as part of the ethical purview of cultural studies" that now explores the suffering and exploitation of animals (15). While Castricano's concern is unquestionably an important subject for Canadian literature (since Seton's and Robert's early animal stories), the literary animal experience, as argued here, is a vital element in an expansive discourse rather than in a more narrowly focused study. In a growing field, Travis V. Mason's *Ornithologies of Desire: Ecocritical Essays, Avian Poetics, and Don McKay* (2013), is one of the first Canadian contributions to Animal Studies with a focus on poetry. Mason develops ecocritical readings of McKay's bird and bird-watching poems, which incorporate scientific and philosophical texts.

From Human to Kinship: Four Atlantic Canadian Poets

While poet Charles G.D. Roberts longed for time to stop on the Tantramar Marsh a century ago, imagining his "darling illusion" as a bucolic past and a nostalgic rendering of place, Thompson's poetic persona haunts and is haunted on the marsh by the animal possibility. Chapter one, "John Thompson: Between the Sky and the Stove," analyzes how Thompson's poetry offers the earliest zoopoetics inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of moving away from language and domestic spaces and toward the uncontrollable animal realm. Thompson's poetry roams New Brunswick's wintery Tantramar Marsh searching for a language that falls somewhere between the animal and

the human. The poet's own sense of alienation in the human world heightens our awareness of his desire for animal communication. Thompson's anxiety often returns to a trope of exposure; as he asks in "Poem of Absence," "the open, where are you in / the open?" (Thompson, "Later Uncollected" 225).

Thompson turns to animals and, particularly, their undomesticated space as an alternative means of articulation. Christopher Levenson rightly notes that Thompson "does not merely evoke a landscape but enters into it, becomes its animals and trees," as he possesses an inherent sense "for the dense fusion of man's life with that of the animals" (718). But Levenson stops short of suggesting the textual disintegration Thompson experiences in his search for the truer encounter. His absorption into the landscape is one way that he avoids being assimilated by the house and the domestication of language. It is liminality—an in-between sense of being that provides him a means, of sorts, to rage at the human condition. It is a rage that often manifests as animal rather than language.

Approaching Thompson through his struggle allows a close reading of many of the poems from *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* (1973) and from his posthumously published *Stilt Jack* (1978). While *At The Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* shows Thompson struggling with the failure of language as a result of his own possible encounters with the animal other, he cannot extricate himself completely from his domestic ties to house, family and language. One of the primary arguments here will be that *Stilt Jack* reveals the depths of Thompson's anxiety, as experimentation with more disjunctive forms leads him to the limits of language, and, eventually, into silence. As Don McKay suggests, "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" (*The Open* 4). It will become apparent, through the animal focus, that Thompson exists in this liminal space by his own choosing, even as it takes him to the limits of his human world. Thompson assumes the risk of loss and expansion of self in encounters with animals and the flaws in relying on language, which animals expose.

Like the others in this study, Thompson moves from indoors to outdoors, seeking something both physically and metaphorically beyond the confines of human habitations. Transitioning, for all, becomes a questioning of both inner and outer habitation. Thompson's explorations commence in the house, which he deems claustrophobic; he alludes to an unhappy marriage in such an indefinable space. He first turns to animals as an alternative to his domestic failures. It is not a clean transition, however. Before he fully embodies the animal within his own nature, Thompson uses various household and farm tools as a means to enter and engage the outdoors. Animals, in these first encounters, are often wounded with fishing hooks and guns, as he struggles to maintain some control over the world. When he finally submits to the world, embodying the animals he sought to control, he becomes the fish on the hook, the bear in the snow. Such a final assumption of identity is a parallel moment in all four poets: they finally enter the animal's world not as intruders, but as ontological shape-shifters. With this final transformation, Thompson becomes a being out-of-doors, one who accepts the unspoken language of the world.

Much of what follows is critically informed by Frederick Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," which forms something of a theoretical basis for

the first chapter. The later philosophies of Heidegger and Derrida build on Nietzsche's thinking and contribute to a deeper understanding of Thompson's progressive zoopoetics. Nietzsche's essay works to distinguish human from animal thinking, concluding that animals are more truthful than humans. Like Thompson, Nietzsche sees truth in stripping down language so that it is no longer a complex system of sign and symbol. Truth, for both, derives from a first-order experience that has not been contorted and polished into a refined language. Thompson's struggle can be seen as a seeking for the truth, and an "openness from closure" that is not founded on a strict reliance on language (Wolfe xxi). He therefore yearns after both an oblivion that will separate him from inarticulate experiences and revolt against life itself, as he refuses the tragic logic of mortality.

Thompson's very perception exposes the interstitial space between human and animal, as he privileges the nonhuman at the cost of silencing himself. Jean-François Lyotard expresses this sort of conflict as "a combat of language with itself in its effort to attain the originary" (275).[9] For Thompson, combat involves exposing zoopoetics' possibilities, which provide him a momentary glimpse beyond linguistic constraints that overlap with the animal Other and New Brunswick's dense forests. In the end, however, the poet confesses, "there is nothing to say," witnessing the moment as finally ineffable (*AEC* 80). The poet finally moves beyond the experience rendered in language, because he cannot voice the difference of his own experience.

If Thompson risks the loss of identity, and his own humanity, at the threshold of the natural world, Domanski is seen to address a similar anxiety, but differently, in "An Old Animal Habit: Domanski's Menagerie," the second chapter of this study. Domanski's collections, published from 1975 to present, show his attempts to rid himself

of the centralizing power of the ego as he seeks to understand the animal on its own terms. While all of his collections pick up the thread of his enquiry into the animal nature, his later collections, *Parish of the Physic Moon* (1998) and *All Our Wonder Unavenged* (2007), develop a more complex relationship with animals, and demonstrate his career-long project most clearly.

As a peripatetic poet, Domanski's personae can often be found sitting, contemplating, hiking and tracing the cliffs and edges of the natural world between the Atlantic Ocean and the forests of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia. His poetry is a participatory process, unlike Thompson's very solitary forays into the unknown. In his encounters with common animals from his everyday life, Domanski's poetry allows for transcendental moments, which are neither anthropocentric nor terror-filled. These often collapse in on themselves to allow us a glimpse of the harder realities of the region, such as the cod fisheries moratorium, deforestation, wild animals in domesticated spaces and the poet in undomesticated spaces. At the heart of these experiences is the concept of the mysterious—a force that transpires when one is outside of his comfortable domestic space, confronted with the unknowable animals.

Such encounters become a kind of syncretic spirituality as he incorporates many ideas from world religions into his poetic composition. Dennis Lee's observations on sublimity suggest that spiritually infused writing speaks to "an experience which the theologians call *mysterium tremendum*—the encounter with holy otherness" (qtd. in Glickman 44). If language becomes a problem again for Domanski, it is because it intrudes on the space between the animal experience and its understanding. His poetry exposes parallels in which animals move between the human and non-human worlds as

psychopomps or carriers of transcendence. He draws on biological processes, expanding his zoopoetics and challenging the empirical epistemology of traditional scientific discourse. He uses science in tandem with the metaphoric nature of language to show both the mystery imbedded in biology and a sense of his being in the world.

Through elements of spirituality and biology, the animal patrols Domanski's Atlantic Canada, troubling the traditional representation of place. In this new context, Jacques Derrida's work on mutable borders is useful for thinking through Domanski (3). Animals are ghostly otherings that point to how humans, as animals, double the problematic sense of knowing and representation. If Derrida can be understood as realizing the problem between humans and animals, then he offers a strategy for interrogating the validity of anthropocentric boundaries that are maintained by language. Domanski too identifies gaps, abysses, and discrepancies by questioning the interstitial space between that which constitutes and that which deviates from normative readings of text.

Domanski's animals contribute to a radical decentering of humankind, a shift of ontological awareness. By pointing out that subjectivity encompasses both a transient memory and a transcendental experience, the poet critiques the human condition and its dependence on language, which keeps us locked into a world limited by signs. Although he does not exhibit Thompson's anxiety, he challenges the rigidness of the human condition, and points to its failure at the limits of wonder and its expression. In other words, he embraces mystery. "There's so little we comprehend," Domanski insists, " yet we keep coming back / to the world (*AWU* 64). At the center of his work, then, is a

realization that not recognizing the ontological validity of the world or the animal is a nagging emptiness that does not disappear.

"John Steffler: A Way to Corner Myself" presents the third position among the four poets. Though Steffler is arguably as peripatetic a poet as Domanski, he travels a different terrain, fusing an extensive knowledge of Newfoundland with memory, physical sensuality, and the animal into a new arrangement of masculine vulnerability. His concerns parallel those of Thompson in his need to separate himself from domestic conditions that limit his experience. In this way, Steffler constructs ideas of modern masculine selfhood by animalizing the world. Dissonance and the animal encounter become primarily a physical convergence of language and body for Steffler. His poetry reflects a sense of largeness and mystery grounded in western Newfoundland, in outposts, deserted communities, and less hospitable, craggy landscapes. Thus, chapter three seeks to discover how the poet participates in "a retrieval of regional bearings" through his encounters with the animal that haunts the land with its synergetic and looming presence (Whalen 33). Steffler is the most problematic poet in this study, as his point of view often appears conflicted and troubled by sexual stereotypes. His animals are, at times, non-animal since they are tropes for landscape, sensuality, and instinct.

As Thompson abandoned home and family in search of a provisionary language of the animal, so too does Steffler's poetry progress from solitary anxiety to a more complete relationship to the natural world. Estranged from domestic spaces, he discovers the dangers of reading the animal from an anthropocentric position. He encounters the animal through ferality, psychosexual encounters that convey the malign power of sexuality, and by means of an environmental aesthetic that attempts to transform him, as

he embodies the animal itself. Positioning himself outside of domestic spaces and aligning himself with animals closely echoes Thompson's earlier struggle to find salvation in the animal's silence**.** Steffler also seeks to escape the domestic/female space of home and language. They differ, however, in that domestic spaces and wilder province overlap much more in Steffler's experience than in Thompson's. The poetry presents us finally with an environment where Steffler must confront his own dominating ways.

Psychologist Alan Bleakley's cultural and ecocritical monograph *The Animalizing Imagination* proves useful in the present reading of Steffler, as Bleakley tracks the intersections rather than the divergences between human systems and the textual, psychological, and the literal animal. For him, the "word-animal—bearing the trace of the animal of the field—also intends us generously, powerfully, again offering an extraordinary otherness" (xi). Steffler's project explores how the biological animal tampers with its intended designation as carrier for the human imagination. While Domanski tends toward believing that the human/animal divide could never be crossed, Steffler appears to have no such reservation. Steffler's animals inscribe and haunt the land, and make Newfoundland an island in constant flux.

The final chapter of the dissertation explores the work of Nova Scotia poet Harry Thurston, in a context that brings these other poets further into perspective. "Harry Thurston: Devil's Purse" explores Thurston's shift in ethical understanding about animals. Thurston, a trained biologist, imbues his poetry with raw observations of Nova Scotia's natural landscape in Yarmouth County and near the Tidnish River and salt marshes, only a few kilometres from Thompson's Tantramar Marsh. Thurston's poetry tackles the animal primarily from the perspectives of farming, science, and an eco-poetic

lenses. Thurston works with a "feral alphabet" much more grounded in realism, ecology, and his extensive understanding of the coastlines of Nova Scotia (*IMLE* 15). As a naturalist, his work expresses and illuminates the sublime in the world. It identifies with the idea that nature is amoral and should be expressed objectively. His work returns, through an oftentimes austere voice, again and again to zoosemiotics, the sign languages of the animal, so that something as singular as an owl's print on the snow becomes the poem.

Thurston realizes that empirical knowledge, the heart of science, is inadequate for capturing the living world; natural science itself does not always provide exactness for expressing phenomenological experience and the abstract encounter. As the philosopher of science and phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Science manipulates things," "as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use" (121). Merleau-Ponty is not dismissing the merits of scientific thinking, but stressing that the disciplines of science lead to objective thinking that cannot express the living truth of phenomena. The language of science, for Thurston, leads to an epistemological inevitability that does not take into consideration "the opaqueness of the world" that provides for the mysteriousness in our encounters with the world as Merleau-Ponty sees it ("Eye and Mind" 159). Domanski and Thurston share an interest in biology, for it imbues the animal encounter with a sense of awe. They explore vulnerability, awe, apotheosis, transcendence, fear, and inarticulation in their separate attempts to understand "the unknowable power of the world" (Glickman 39). In essence, they both reach an understanding of place as defined by Oelschlaeger's sense of the ecocentrist: "Ecocentrists take natural systems as the dominant reality, such that even life itself must

be set in a larger evolutionary frame of reference that contains inorganic components; protection of a species (rather than an individual) and its supporting context is therefore critical to an ecocentrist" (293, parentheses in original). Thurston calls on biological systems as well, but his work suggests that such order and nomenclature distances humans from the experience before them.

The tension in Thurston's work stems from his conflict in finding an adequate rendering of the physical world through poetry. He uses his background in farming and scientific research to foreground the animal encounter while, at the same instant, *living* in the moment. The poet discovers, however, rigidity in scientific language that does not adequately express the fluidity of lived experience, and then an apathetic objectivity that separates humans from animal encounters. David Abram suggests the nature of the problem:

> Since no translation is available (since each scientific investigation builds on previous investigations without translating the results of those prior studies into the language of direct experience), a host of abstract, provisional worlds is gradually built up by our diverse sciences, a multiplicity of arcane dimensions hidden beyond, behind, or beneath the experienced world. (*Becoming* 75)

Natural science and poetics treat process differently and use language differently to serve their ends. While scientific process demands a sense of teleology, poetic process remains an exploration of the metaphor and its ability to illuminate various elements of experience.

Thurston's poetry, from the early 1980s to present, attempts to embody nature while giving up control over it by discovering a new found epistemology. If he candidly explores his own failures and disappointments with trying to capture the animal through farming, laboratory work, fishing, and his juvenile experiments with marsh inhabitants, he parallels in his the struggle for authenticity demonstrated by the other poets here as well. Fishing becomes a trope for the mysteries of what lies below human consciousness in both Thompson's and Thurston's work, while other poems return to the wild and point to an amoral nature in animals that humans are incapable of achieving. Thurston's conflict impels him to reconcile farming and biology by writing, finally, from an ecological perspective, which foregrounds both the animal and the plight of many animals in Atlantic Canada. His eco-poetry draws on his background in such a way that it enriches his understanding of the animal without looking to control it. Though he does not mimic animals or treat them as avatars, he does foreground them, attempting to reconcile what Randy Malamud calls "synthesis of hitherto segregated identities" (13). What Malamud means by this is that the human autonomy is given over to a semblance of kinship with animals.

What this study finally attempts to show is that Atlantic Canadian poetry, and specifically work that forms a new zoopoetics, is a good place to explore the gap between language and the animal. While the poets here may at first attempt to speak for the animals, each in his own way eventually acclimates best to their silences. They witness the unknownable zoosemiotics of the animal world, on some level accepting that they cannot capture the animal nor its meaning. For these reasons, the poets realize through their writing that animals do not hold their otherness in reserve but press their

indifference against the onlooker. Their otherness is *duende,* a struggle that gains strength in its grappling with past/present, animal/human, nature/civilization, and inside/outside. It is, as Frederico Garcia Lorca proposed, a word-centred experience "that needs a trembling of the moment and then a long silence" (qtd. in Maurer viii). As the poets here realize, trembling is the animal encounter. The silence is ineffability that poets continue to struggle against.

Chapter 1: John Thompson: Between the Sky and the Stove

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* 7)

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

(Agha Shahid Ali, "Tonight")

Before his untimely death from a mixture of alcohol and anti-depressants in 1976, John Thompson spent nearly a decade rendering into poetry New Brunswick's Tantramar salt marshes, near Nova Scotia's border. Critics have long seen New Brunswick's importance as "a paysage moralisé"—"a co-ordinating, poetic landscape" that reflects the poet's interior mood (Sanger, *NBLE*)—but have not readily equated Thompson's regionalism with its animal inhabitants. The province's "landscape so imbues Thompson's poems," critic Carey Fagan remarks, "that it's hard to believe he wasn't born to that flat, grey land" (6). What becomes even more apparent, however, is that in both of his collections, *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* (1973) and *Stilt Jack* (1978), the animal populations particular to New Brunswick, in Lawrence Buell's terms, "remythify the natural environment" (*Environmental* 31). They do this by conveying a spectral presence that haunts Thompson through a language system he believes can no longer capture the lived reality of the animal world and his encounters within it. Thompson, therefore, strives to move beyond language. He looks to animals

because with them he shares an extra-linguistic experience: "The word works me like a spike harrow" (*Stilt Jack* 115). He must follow the animals, therefore, from the house into the woods because they do not belong to that space deeply rooted in systems of domestication, such as marriage. Thompson, in the end, can no longer adhere to such a domesticated landscape because it fails to offer him truth.

This chapter reads Thompson's creation of a zoopoetics through a query into language and its relationship to truth using, as its basis, the critical context of Frederick Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," and later thinkers who build on these ideas. Nietzsche might be seen here as the root to Thompson's and others' investigations into language. Later thinkers, like Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, prove useful as contexts for Thompson's developing poetic because he moves from an early dissatisfaction with language to a later awareness of language as difference. Nietzsche distinguishes humans from animals by the human ability to shift images into concepts. Through such shifts, animals expose truths, as they do not elaborate on the metaphor. Humans, conversely, cannot act truthfully as they must rely on a sign system that needs to be abided by universally in order to make sense. Nietzsche finds reciprocity between what he terms intuitive metaphors and animals. An intuitive or "first metaphor" is generated when the "stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image" (144). It is decidedly an unanthropocentric rendering of experience because it attempts to be pre-linguistic. A conceptual or "second metaphor," conversely, is generated when an "image is then imitated by a sound" and so enters language (144). Nietzsche's second metaphor is anthropocentrically rooted. It creates metaphors from human projections, as they are placed onto the world. These conceptualizations cannot lead to "the thing in-itself" or

"pure truth" or the "essence of things," in Nietzsche's words, as they impose their own order onto the world (144, 145).

If, for Thompson, language is, in essence, no longer a viable well to draw from, as it relies on conceptual thinking, it therefore points to dishonesty. Nietzsche uses animal perception to compare conceptual and intuitive ways of thinking and to highlight how linguistic law or conceptual language is structured on "making equivalent that which is non-equivalent" through its rigorous homogenization (145). In Thompson's world, such rigorous homogenization distances him from the "unique, utterly individualized, primary experience" (145). As animals do not function through conceptual or linguistic metaphors, their silence points to a kind of truthfulness. For Nietzsche, the longer a metaphor is allowed to distill from instinctual truth or "an honest and pure drive towards truth," and toward a "drive to form metaphors," the further it gets from the silent truths of animals: this is a silence Thompson eventually embraces (Nietzsche 142, 150). Reaching for "an honest and pure drive towards truth" across New Brunswick's salt and ice is why Thompson wishes in "The Brim of the Well" to "lie with the crow on the dump" and "pass through the wall of his eye" to see "what brightness of flesh he probes, / what shadows" (*AEC* 91). His language here reminds the reader of Ralph Waldo Emerson's mystical approach to the world in his essay "Nature." Emerson suggests that by turning away from society and moving into the world, one may hope to become "a transparent eyeball" or a filter into which "all mean egotism vanishes," so that he may come closer to God/god (6). Similarly, Thompson's desire to escape his all-too-human point of view coincides with the crow's. Both the brim of the well and the crow's eye locate a precariousness where Thompson might topple over into unknown darkness and depth, but

gain insight and unity. In Emersonian terms, he strives for balance: "I am nothing; I see all" ("Nature" 6). To reinforce his desire to see reality as the crow does, Thompson asks, "whose children are we? We have / mistaken home" (91). His zoopoetics points to his confusion concerning the anthropocentric nature of homelessness and his place in the world. His home remains undetermined and unnamed because the domestic space is inadequate.

It becomes evident then that Truth, as Nietzsche would capitalize it, cannot be established on the foundation of language; it is simply another sign system with universal laws. To overcome such determined institutions means discarding the rules of language in order to return to the intuitive thinking of first metaphor, which brings Thompson closer to the animal world that exists outside of the home. Thompson's new language exists at the cusp of the domestic and wilder spaces of New Brunswick's woods, and often relies on sparse poetics and fractured thoughts to foreground such truths as he sees in "Crow's Wing," from his first collection *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*. In this case, a crow's wing nailed to a barn door mirrors his inescapable human condition that always returns him to frustration. It is his particular voice, a voice often housed in desperation, that creates an eerie sense of danger at the edge of the dark woods:

> a crow's wing nailed
> to the barn side dreams
> dark flights,
>
> but the hand keeps, silky,
> to the air,

sure

of its blood-filled quarrels. (66)

These sparse, haiku-like lines resonate with violence and anxiety. Although the crow's wing retains some of its crowness, despite being nailed to the barn, the free human hand cannot escape its blood-filled quarrels and its inherent need for conflict**.** Discord is the core of Thompson's early struggle. While humans appear free, they inherently return again and again to their reliance on language and conflict. Robert Gibbs rightly suggests that "The secret of language is particularly important to a discussion of John Thompson's poems simply because they do, so much of the time, seem to work on a non-verbal level, to activate in the brain sense responses so immediate to consciousness as to be painful" (134). A similar surreptitiousness runs through all of Thompson's poetry. It is why he states in *Stilt Jack*: "I believe in unspoken words, unseen gods: / where will I prove those?" (122).

While both of Thompson's collections seek the animal's truth, his poetics differ between collections. His work speaks to a progressive understanding of fictions beyond human creations that empty our previous understanding of world. *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* is very much written in the narrative tradition. Thompson's forays begin in his failed practice or "quest for domesticity" (Sanger, *NBLE* n. pag). They lead him into the animal's woods and finally return him, albeit changed, in the end, to the house. It is a clear trajectory. His escape from language and home are unsuccessful in this collection because he is still drawn to aspects of the domestic (marriage and family) and its language. *Stilt Jack*, however, does not return Thompson safely to the house in the end.

Stilt Jack's experiments with the ghazal employ a form outside of dominant Canadian poetic traditions in the 1970s. It provides Thompson with a more liberating space to explore animals, language, and their relation to multiple truths. Part of the difficulty in reading *Stilt Jack*, conversely, stems from the ghazal's structure. While Thompson was drawn to the form by literary luminaries and friends who studied with Canadian critic A.J.M. Smith at Michigan State in the late 1960s—such as Adrienne Rich and Jim Harrison—traditionally the ghazal is a twelfth-century Urdu/Persian poetic form that expresses love, loneliness, and separation. Etymologically, the word derives from the death cry of the gazelle. Its cry is something of Thompson's own. It is what he hears or feels, but which he cannot translate into language other than poetry, and even there it fails. It is, as Ken Norris has argued, based on "tone [and] nuance, so that the lyrical unity we've grown accustomed to in the English tradition is rendered irrelevant" (qtd. in Winger 29). Mechanically, its form also fits Thompson's project. Formed by discursive links between disjunctive couplets, it leaves room for interpretative leaps and associations and lends itself well to a wide variety of expression. Ghazals build up a body of sensation rather than establishing cohesive links which result in "not the leaping surrealism in which the couplets are strung together to provide strange imagistic juxtapositionings; rather, the bringing together of disparate materials subject to a common tone or emotionality leads to the creation of feelings that threaten to break open the perceivable, objective world" (Ken Norris qtd. in Winger 29).

The failure of lyrical unity and the threat of exposing an indifferent world attract Thompson, who seeks something beyond the poem's all too human language and its common "imagistic juxtapositionings." Thompson's feelings, which "threaten to break

open" the world, equate to Thompson's desire to destroy that subjective world by entering into it through animal gesture. The ghazal is a secondary step, a means by which Thompson attempts to further his initial experimentation in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*. His own definition of the ghazal in his original foreword to *Stilt Jack* speaks to his attraction to a poetic form that is a more open poetic structure. In this, it echoes Nietzsche's attraction to the intuitive metaphor as it is created *a priori* to linguistic conceptualizations. Thompson qualifies his own use by suggesting:

> The ghazal allows the imagination to move by its own nature: discovering an alien design, illogical and without sense—a chart of the disorderly, against false reason and the tacking together of poor narratives. It is the poem of contrasts, dreams, and astonishing leaps. The ghazal has been called "drunken and amatory" and I think it is. (*SJ* 106)

Thompson's definition could be read, however, as not *disorderly*, but as a deeper *order against false reason*. While the critics have sensed Thompson's need to encounter the natural world beyond the limits of language, it is only with more recent Animal Studies terminology that his work comes into better perspective.

As the analysis in the third section of this chapter will make clear, Thompson's inability to dissociate himself fully from the human condition is still a prevalent poetic exploration in *Stilt Jack*, compounded by the urgent realization that he is running out of time. *Stilt Jack* heightens Thompson's anxiety as it is an intensely intertextual collection, full of allusions to the *Bible* and to poets such as William Butler Yeats and Theodore Roethke. As an echo-chamber of other writers and writings, Thompson's extensive allusiveness attempts to achieve a condition beyond language, just as he uses the animals

as a means to also distant himself from language. As he recognizes himself as vulnerable and fallible, he tries to move beyond the limits of language by rendering the world around him through non-linguistic expressions. "I don't hear your words," he writes, "I hear the wind, / my dreams, disasters, my own strange name" (*SJ* 129). Though Thompson becomes a stranger to himself at times, he cannot escape the human condition. The human imagination still generates all that he sees, but by the end of his writing he is able to see at least to the edge of and beyond his initial perceptions.

The following analysis, then, describes a progression toward silence. In part, what Thompson discovers over the course of these two collections is the essential nature of *différance*, as Derrida coined the term, or the play of differences in language and its relation to the world. Even earlier, Ferdinand de Saussure, in *Course on General Linguistics*, had asserted that "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*," expressing a sense of the inability of language to bridge that gap between word and meaning (121, emphasis in original). Both of these thinkers seem to begin with Nietzsche's idea that language is suspect; it transforms the world's lived reality into something it is not. Thompson, therefore, draws on this progress of ideas from Nietzsche to the present, and contributes through his own personal struggle with poetic language to the ongoing investigation of language.

The House of Language

If language is alienating, then Thompson discovers the full effect of its displacing ability through his early domestic struggles. The early poetry sets the stage for the later escape back to a natural setting, as well as his turn to animals as an alternative to

domestic failure. In his essay "Deer Slayer with a Degree," John Tallmadge suggests, "Marriage and household are key metaphors in the vision of a sustainable, personal ecology" (26). Thompson's claustrophobic understanding of marriage, home, and language align with his unsustainable personal ecology, his unstable psychology, and his need to engage with winter and encounter the animal. It is no accident that many of these poems occur during winter's short days and long nights. A wintery landscape distorts Thompson's vision, as it confuses clear lines of sight with strange refractions and fragmented shadows, and compounds his sense of claustrophobia in the house. "Wife," an early poem in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, for instance, alludes to a fractured domesticity as he watches his wife bake bread. Bread in this poem and others is analogous to the "moon," which here "gleams and fattens," while his wife is a "shadow / huge on the wall" (51). Her ominous and formless presence overwhelms the house. Later, bread baking becomes cacophonous and interrupts his thoughts, reminding him that the house is not a propitious place for him: "this morning the bread hot from the oven / sounds with voices: terrible blows" (97). In a later poem from the same collection, the domestic kitchen reappears, but he no longer sees has a relationship to it; there is no food, as he exclaims, "god damn this winter when the air / and women get thin / and cold" (72). While "sluffing through the cold rows, pulling young onions" he equates the action to his futile struggles at home. These onions may be "a cure for disaster" he states, "white morning / in this kitchen of dead moons" (74). The house defines and isolates him: "the house / rises: we fight; this is love" (*SJ* 108). It is one of the boundaries between himself and the nonhuman, and himself and provisional language.

In “Apple Tree,” another poem from *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, Thompson celebrates an early sense of what later will entice him toward homelessness as he watches “where a crow drifts / toward no home” (55). In this pivotal moment, he realizes that “to be possessed or / abandoned by a god / is not in the language” (55). The crow’s interstitial state ruptures Thompson’s own sense of conceptual order. Now he can get beyond language and systems to a sort of homelessness and an oblivion that offers something beyond faith. James Polk suggests “anti-pastoral images,” such as those found in “Apple Tree,” “set up a nervous reverie on homelessness” (“Yeats” 66). Thompson further reinforces his discontentedness in later lines when he claims that the woman he reaches “for in desire” reflects “only the impure, the broken / green, the half- / formed fruit” (55). Such descriptions convey that human relationships, for him, are marred and inadequate. It is only in a homeless state, such as that of the crow, that he may be free of bondages. While Thompson’s explorations fail to provide definitive solutions to a reliance on a language that blocks our immediate experiences, he does provide an ideology that stresses the equivocality of human subjectivity and an epistemology that makes for an illusionary system that disregards the importance of the animal other.

His pace deteriorates to the point that he can no longer read domestic signs in Ghazal XXIV:

> Always the light: a strange moon,
> and the green I don’t understand;
>
> knives set in order; somewhere else,

eyes looking back across a terrible space:

a meeting in a garden, hands, knees, feet
in the dirt: animals, the feeding. (130)

In the first lines the "strange moon" highlights his sense of confusion as he confesses, "I don't understand." His confusion is compounded in the next line by his pointing out that the "knives" are "set in order" but in a "terrible space": the house. Finally, he turns his full attention to the other, unordered sense of being in the world and "in the dirt," which provides the animals and flies with a modicum of freedom he cannot manage in the cultivated garden.

Initially, Thompson's animals do not expose a new sense of truth to him so much as reinforce the wildly disordered nature of the world. He does not engage the animal world, but glimpses its profundity around the edges of his own domesticity. Its profundity alludes to the possibility of a more truthful assertion as zoosemiotician Dario Martinelli observes: "Language [has] added a series of communicative and cognitive elements on top of the existing ones, not in place of them," (64). Such a sentiment echoes Thompson's own struggle to strip off language's overlay, while acknowledging that he has no alternative to replace it. Because this impasse haunts him, he anxiously works harder to decode and expose language's failed authority through the animal, as he admits in *Stilt Jack*: "I feel you rocking in the dark, dreaming also / of branches, birds, fire, and green wood" (111). He dreams about this other world because such birds and fire illuminate a new way of thinking, even while a conceptual "Heaven goes on without us" (111).

Similarly, the philosopher Agamben's observations in *The Open*: *Man and Animal* echo Thompson's troubled state of mind trapped in domestic space. Agamben suggests that humans are creative or world-building because they have the capacity to grow bored, presumably with their ordered worlds. He writes that existence or "*Dasein* is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation. The awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human" (70, emphasis in original). In awakening *to* his captivation, Thompson strives to replace his unsustainable personal ecology with animal imagery at the edge of the woods where "deer break from a mesh of dreams / and two bears burn with the dawn" (*AEC* 97). These animals incite within him the urge to seek out a provisional language for his new relationship with the outdoors. "I feel as words I do not know," he writes, "of immense weight, / that I would carry with me, burdens" (97). These words, in the immediacy of the intuitive metaphor, hold great weight and truth while "the gods of this place, / this household" are "words so light, so still" they cannot capture what lies beyond the house's threshold. It is as though the animal must carry some of the "immense weight" for him (97).

Stilt Jack goes further, and explores what *home* means to Thompson, but his interpretation is much more critical and less lyrical than the language he uses in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets.* In Ghazal I, his erratic thoughts shift from literature to trout to domesticity and finally to the erasure of everything. He writes in the first couplet, "Now you have burned your books: you'll go / with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart" (107). Physically destroying his books releases him from cultural idioms and language-based reasoning. The second stanza introduces the first of Thompson's

many references to fishing in the collection: "On the hook, big trout lie like stone: / terror, and they fiercely whip their heads, unmoved" (107).[10] Thompson's zoopoetics is a trout that echoes his own state of captivity in the house. It manifests within the text as a pressure on words and their authority. It is a fierce creation of imagination like Derrida's "an unheard-of grammar" that is "neither human, nor divine, nor animal" (64). As the fish oftentimes eclipse Thompson's own identity, he is partially subsumed and therefore free to stretch the metaphor. It allows for a metaphorical "interspecies convergence" between himself and the trout (Moe, "Zoopoetics: A Look" 37).

The first Ghazal's trajectory undergoes a complete breakdown by the fourth couplet, however, when his language falters and fragments into a blur of unfinished, breathless thoughts. He writes, "Think of your house: as you speak, it falls / fond, foolish man. And your wife" (107). Still dependent on language, he cannot escape from his domestic space and his deteriorating marriage. He asks, "Kitchens, women and fire: can you / do without these, your blood in your mouth?" (107). Here, the bloody mouth echoes the hooked fish's plight of the earlier stanza. The couplet's ending with a question mark also typographically underscores the inverted hook—the human hooked on land, in language. At the end of the poem, a "great northern snowy owl; whiteness" appears as a possible curative. Thompson surmises that the owl is "the thing of things, essence / of essences" and it eliminates the tension in the earlier couplets by perpetuating blankness and the absence of humans in its all-encompassing animal guise (107).

Birds, in fact, often lead him from the house. Early in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, Thompson encounters echoes of avian life. He writes, "from the woods where your shadow / glides, the cry / of old blood" (76). His shadow, in

this case, takes on bird-like proportions as it "glides" through the air like a soul crying out in an old language. As the Greek name for soul is *psyche*, which is also the etymological root of "breath," this soul/breath connection reinforces Thompson's search for a new way to survive with the animal-other. Thompson wants to locate this old blood unhampered by space and not return to the false "peace, security, and consistency" of home (Nietzsche 148). Thompson's shadow cries and glides as a bird through the dense woods beyond his home. Its call not only reminds him that there are other ways of reading the world but actually impels him, as he states, "It is time that you set out" (*AEC* 76). His abandonment of an unhappy marriage and the confines of his house represent the failure of the domestic, symbolic-centred world that he can no longer control. Drawn into the non-linguistic world through his own zoopoetics wanderings, he begins to listen to the shadows and cries.

"Partridge," a much-anthologized poem from *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, burns away Thompson's previous domestic entrapments, leading him toward a "realm of those sensuous first impressions" that dismantles "pyramidal order based on castes and degrees" (Nietzsche 146). As the partridge crosses in front of him, Thompson's boundaries grow less clearly marked. The meeting, heady with anticipation, suggests a quasi-somnolent state through its heightened yet muddled perceptions:

> Stopping dead still
> on the road,
> a trace of it
> sleeps in the air. (53)

Later in the poem, the partridge's presence allows Thompson to rapidly stack intuitive metaphors so that his mind forms non-conceptual ideas. Stacking renders the state of his marriage and his domestic mind defunct:

> an odour:
> buck heat or
> the juice of fear;
> loving a woman, I know
> death's thicket,
>
> the must of rotting
> crab apples
> in an abandoned orchard,
>
> this partridge
> strutting
> through the dying fruit. (53)

The partridge exposes the "must" and "death thicket" of Thompson's frustration with the human condition. Thompson's sense of dwelling is, subsequently, terminated as the orchard is abandoned and he finds a place with the partridge—a harbinger of change as it brazenly struts through the ruins of domestication.

Birds become a special kind of catalyst for his transitions between controlled and uncontrollable place. "Household," the second poem in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, exemplifies how the metaphorical transformations of elemental

ingredients reveal the schism between Thompson's urge to order his home and his need to be rooted in creativity and "[t]he place of invention," which "is a space of transformational encounter, a dynamic in-between" (Massumi 106). As Thompson imagines basic food staples transformed into birds, his world opens up into a new way of seeing beyond the constraints of the house. Wine becomes a green-winged teal, encompassing the Maritime landscape of "mist," "canals," "snow," and "tide" (*AEC* 52). The teal's brightness eclipses New Brunswick's grey winter light. Humbled, Thompson confesses, "I go down on my knees before your rich bitterness" (52). Salt also becomes an element of awakening. Thompson's language here underscores the immediacy and surprise found in such a humble ingredient as it transforms into a red-hooded bird. In the red-hooded bird's power, black shriveled apples "suddenly discover themselves," thus reflecting Thompson's state prior to this revelatory moment of seeing how life diverges along a myriad of crossings beyond New Brunswick's dreary winter landscape (52). It is the bird's soundings that eventually charm him to move outside and into one of the first encounters with a renewed sense of discovery. "[Y]our sharp cry pulls me up into the light," he states (52). The light is the turn or border from the house toward the animals outside. It is an engagement with thought, in particular poetic thought, that strips down language, as language often complicates and hides being in the world.

By setting out the dilemma between the conceptual world in the house and the intuitive world of the animal, Thompson's inability to read truth becomes more critical in *Stilt Jack,* where his conceptual metaphors break down as domestic irrelevance influences a new animal reality. "The barn roof bangs a tin wing in the wind," he writes, "I'm quite mad: never see the sun" (*SJ* 122). His suggestion of insanity points to the anxiety he feels

as he tries to read the world through animal metaphor. When the barn rewilds, metaphorically transforming into a wing, his understanding of the world pitches him into thoughts of insanity.

Thompson's final attempts to make something beautiful out of his own conceptual thinking despite his fears of insanity, inform Ghazal XIII. Here, he claims to disbelieve in Yeats' poetic "rook-delighting heaven," as he has only "seen one crow" (119). His sentiment suggests that poetically heightened language in a "regulatory and imperative" (Nietzsche 146) world does not dovetail, but splinter. There are no points of convergence. Thompson rejects the Romantics' nature-focused movement, however, which turned to imagination and images of sublime nature, because his world is rife with anxiety: "The nature worship of the Romantics has a suspiciously self-serving quality," Marian Scholtmeijer observes, "and that quality seems to disbar, for the most part, regard for the inherent value of animals" (25). Thompson's quest foregrounds the animal and its inexpressibility.

Thompson's real crows have a counterpoint in Georges Bataille's arguments about language being distant from reality. Bataille argues that animals point to the gap between lived experience and the untenable distance that language creates. "The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me," he writes: "In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is furthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me*. But this too is poetry" (22, italics in original). The "unfathomable" becomes evident in the third couplet of the ghazal. Here, a steer has been shot and the farmers have "dragged him home behind the tractor: / fat beef; the dark wound in the loam" (*SJ* 119). The steer,

macabre in its state, is no longer animal. It is physically a scar or a gaping wound on the earth in death and metaphorically a reminder that language too easily shifts the animal into object.

In the fourth stanza, Thompson repeats his need to escape the house. He writes, "I think we should step out the door: / they're calling: men, women and dead voles" (119). While it is unclear here if the men, women, and dead voles are calling or being called**,** his inclusion of the voles as a significant element establishes his foregrounding animals as guides toward an unfathomable but poetic reality. He must step outside the door, toward the vole, in order to experience Bataille's uncanny depths. Thompson restructures domestic space by removing himself from the home. The final couplet reinforces his unraveling language and, subsequently, his own sense of being: "I'm in touch with the gods I've invented: / Lord, save me from them" (119). His proximity now to the gods is a hindrance as he prepares to align himself with animal mortals, dead cows, and dead voles.

Thompson's turning toward animals is a critique of the Cartesian idea that humans are closer to the gods because they possess rationality. As Descartes argues, humans would not have the capacity for creating ideas on God if they were not originally created by God the "engineer": "Just as the objective intricacy belonging to the idea must have some cause, namely the scientific knowledge of the engineer, or of someone else who passed the idea on to him, so the idea of God which is in us must have God himself as its cause" (qtd. in Carriero 186-7) The human cogito then mirrors God's greatness in a way that other animals cannot. As Scholtmeijer retorts, "Descartes' theory seems, indeed, like a last desperate effort to hold back humankind against the slide from divine status

into kinship with the rest of nature" (17). Nietzsche's observations also reinforce how Cartesian conceptual thinking raises the gods and humans above nature and relies on unstable foundations:

> the human being is an architectural genius who is far superior to the bee; the latter builds with wax which she gathers from nature, whereas the human being builds with the far more delicate material of concepts which he must first manufacture from himself. In this he is to be much admired—but just not for his impulse to truth, to the pure cognition of things. (147)

The humans' system, constructed on a sign system, becomes a truth "of limited value" (147). Thompson's recognition that conceptual thinking and the gods are inescapable points to his recognition that the human condition may be inescapable except through an animal truth at the boundaries of his sanity. By turning to animals, godless in a sense, he locates a means to escape conceptual metaphors and the bindings of domestication.

To supplant such divine assertions, New Brunswick's woods and animals must claim Thompson and to unite him "with the rest of nature" (Scholtmeijer 17). Allan Cooper locates this enfolded literary/geographical space in his elegiac essay for Thompson. He writes of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*: "One reason these poems are deceptive has to do with the careful melding of the outer world and the inner, private world of the poet; it is sometimes difficult to distinguish where one leaves off and the other begins" ("Way Back" 38). One such poem is "Winter." Its deception lies in its positioning Thompson as liminally bound between such "careful melding." As

he is not quite ready to leave the house to embark on his search into intuitive metaphors, the animals swarm the house and make it strange:

> With dark comes a fear of horses
>
> and the smell of something moving
>
> in back, always in cover, quick
>
> between the shadows. (77)

Like "[s]nouts" that "nuzzle the door / night hungry," the impeding darkness may release Thompson from his domesticated state (78). Thompson claims, however, that during this transformation "deep below the ice the trout / are perfect" (78). Though the fish are also in a static state, they are outdoors. He deems them perfect because they are unreachable and indefinable, a state that he strives to achieve for himself.

He finally allows his thoughts to roam full of animal and full of the unifying quality of falling snow when his conceptual house is overrun in "The Narrow Road:"

> I like the snow blowing on the floor, things
>
> that enter, rooms where
>
> birds home and sing
>
> as the wind rises, wings lamping the branches of sleep. (*AEC* 81)

To emphasize his solitary state, he admits: "no goddess whitens my bed; I am content / to reach into the still cold" (81). Much like his earlier use of birds, the birdcalls and wing gestures here create an undomesticated, goddess-free or wife-free space. The calls and wings also point him "outward, toward the infinitely less limited referential reality of nature" (Scigaj 38, italics in original). Later in the poem and far from the snow-filled house, Thompson embraces animal embodiment, as he claims to be both

a black fly stilled

by the quiet, the clean

light, sealed

in a bead of resin

and "a deer's eye resting on white stone" (80). Each of these identities plays with optics, refraction, and sensory interplay to reinforce his new ways of seeing.

The transition from house to outdoors is an extensive process, teased out over several poems. "Moving Out, Moving In" teeters between human language and interstitial space as the title implies, but it now favours "moving out." In this case, the house is finally given over to the animal's world. In the first stanza, Thompson praises the quiet found in animals: "The beauty of dumb animals / long silence" seems to grow "on the walls of our house," while "our water surrounds us with cold voices / of fish and mud" and "the woods and / flies, coons, rats draw / our heat into their dark" (82). He juxtaposes this celebrated animal enveloping with how words falter, as he leaves his thoughts unfinished: "the world is full of . . ." (82). Now only silence and animals return to him:

We throw words at the dark

and the dark comes

back to us; a bird

is still for a moment

in our garden. (*AEC* 82)

The words only return as a deeper sense of darkness. The bird's silence is not dialogic, but a kinship with the world that foregrounds its presence. Thompson slips further still

from voiced language when he admits that he and an unnamed companion "don't care for voices" and that "the poet names, almost / without speech" (82). Breaking the line at "almost" leaves the thought ambiguous and unfinished. His hesitancy to complete the sentence suggests that there may be something viable in the silence, in the ineffable or in his refusal to name.

Derrida's suggestion that our refusal to name empowers the animal reinforces Thompson's own sense of the unnamed in animal relations, and his search for some kind of pre-linguistic truth. Derrida surmises, "It would not be a matter of 'giving speech back' to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation" (48). Does Thompson then *almost* name the world or does he name through an alternative language system? How we answer that question points to how broad or narrow the gap has become between animals and himself.

By the end of the poem, the house is finally given over to the outside world in order to reconcile the problem inherent in conflicting systems. His relationship with the house is no longer hierarchical, but a lateral or intertwining encounter. The poem succeeds by evicting Thompson from his insular space. Wendell Berry asserts that "the connection between inward and outward" cannot be broken or "the language fails" makes the same point (*The Art* 31). Thompson writes, "You have opened the windows, the doors / let in our animals, our sea, our woods" (*AEC* 82). His openness to the gaps between human conceptualizations of world and the possibilities for new configurations redefines the walls. The possessive pronoun is important as it underscores Thompson's connection

to the world outside of the house while also underscoring his inherent need to name as he is still a poet.

As the claustrophobic winter deepens and the temperature plunges, Thompson's animal encounters grow more intense. The domestic space becomes more threatening as well. "Zero," another winter poem in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, already suggests such intensity; its title alludes to both imminent freezing temperatures and the number. Zero also symbolizes nothing. Even when it is added with another number, it does not change the former number. Similarly, Thompson's efforts to control and domesticate his world do not change how animals intrude into his reality. In this case, Thompson tries to dig a hole in the frozen ground with a crowbar or iron rod. "Cold, cold: iron," he states. "I strain / underground, breaking / through frozen earth" (69). While his terrestrial entrapment and frustration occur by ending the lines with "strain" and "breaking," his human/nonhuman convergence begins with "earth." In struggling to break up the frozen ground, he bangs his head in rage "against the great barn doors, until / fires / crackle in every shingle" (69). As his anger escalates, flames engulf the barn, metamorphosing it into "a terrified bird, which "crashes into the frozen hackmatack" (69). The phoenix-like bird, analogous to Thompson's violent manifestations of anger and frustration at his domestic task, points to his inability to articulate or escape. His non-linguistic capacity conjures the bird and offers emancipation from the human condition.

The reading of these lines reveals the bird's vulnerability as it "beats painfully" and "crashes" at the end of the poem, a reflection of Thompson's own vulnerability, as well. In this zoopoetics, the bird's ungainliness alludes to fledglings new to flight; such is Thompson as he extracts himself from linguistic expression (69). The bird's violent entry

into the poem, like the trout on the hook earlier, mirrors Thompson's anxiety as he strives toward a "co-essentiality," which tries to use "a metaphor that doesn't exploit or manipulate the animal subject" (Malamud 149). Thompson's inability to control the animal reveals how a negotiated nature will not co-operate, but will instead place Thompson at the limits of understanding.

Released from the constructs of home and conceptual thinking, he is "free of the warmth" because "outside" is where "something / happens" (*AEC* 92). It is also where a bird's "wings / beating, / refusing" to fit properly into Thompson's poetic project leads him to admit, "I lie you / lie" (92, 93). The house, then, becomes a useless construct. "The vast assembly of beams and boards to which needy man clings, thereby saving himself on his journey through life," Nietzsche surmises, "is used by the liberated intellect as a mere climbing frame and plaything on which to perform its most reckless tricks" (152). Thompson's liberated space becomes more crucial to his seeking a truth in S*tilt Jack,* as he viscerally conveys that he has become unmoored. In Ghazal XXVI, for instance, "Surrounded by dirty glasses," he is "caught by bad music, strange meat, / the smell of old tin" (132). The detailed shabbiness incites his looking beyond the house for a tenable truth in the intuitive metaphor:

> there are ways, and signs: the woods
> point one way.
>
> the words: there is a word:
> there are words, lie about us. (132)

The words, which "lie about us," point to Thompson's conceptual thinking while the woods and signs function as intuitive metaphor. Thompson's belief in what philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas calls "a return to essential language" lead the poet away from the home and toward the woods (131). The "world is full of . . ." Thompson claims at the end of the ghazal (*SJ* 82). The ellipsis suggests, however, that words are not adequate for the thought. Thompson abandons seeking out words in favour of foregrounding "dogs and the night and children / poured out in looseness" as language-limited but kinetic elements to carry his thoughts (132).

In the final moments of this early transitional stage, he moves beyond the "lamp-glow" and "coppery spire" and deeper into the woods where his anxiety escalates (*AEC* 60). Lawrence Buell suggests that moving into unknown territory, as Thompson now does, exacerbates anxiety. "Place consciousness and bonding," Buell writes, "might be imaged as concentric circles of diminishingly strong emotional identification (and increasing anxiety and fear of the unknown) fanning out from the home base or home range close to which most of one's life is led" (*Future* 72, parentheses in original). Thompson reiterates this anxiety when he asks, "Why should not young men be mad?" (*SJ* 126). He advises the reader to "eat salt and tell the truth," returning him to his initial quest for elemental truth (126).

Tools in a Transitional Space: Inside to Out

The transition from house to nature is not accomplished all at once, or in even, studied fashion. Rather, Thompson struggles, at times, to both sustain and reject his need for human contact. One of the key elements that identify this later transitional state,

however, is his reference to tools in much of the poetry. Tools become a way of working outdoors, of entering nature, while retaining a physical connection to cultural and domestic space.

But it soon becomes apparent that Thompson's transition from domestic space to that of wilderness cannot occur without violence because he wants "to join blood" (*SJ* 126). He turns to physical tools—avatars for domesticity and violence—to escape his "wife's sledgehammer" and to control the animal, as we have already seen in the image of the crow's wing nailed to the door (137). The tool becomes both a reminder of society, and the instrument of its violence against him. Anxious, he lives like "a tried blade" as he insists on "my wounds, my death: clean axe / in new wood" (*AEC* 91, 93). Again, through his references to tools, his transition into the worldless animal world holds residuals from his previous life. In Ghazal XXV, for example, Thompson aligns divinity with technology, as he still cannot extract himself from the gods he has created: "Divinity sounds in machines" (131). It also, however, "shines darkly from the pleasure of birds" (131). Here, he sees that there is something beyond his human-made world. He has stripped his mind further of conceptual metaphor and moves toward reading the world through another set of truths. His doubled position is a "not only-but also." His poetry turns on this split. If, as Agamben suggests, language is the "most ancient of apparatuses" used "to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings," poetry such as Thompson's is the abyss that words cannot express ("What is an Apparatus?" 13). Curiously, Agamben's adjectives for language touch on functionality and on the "tool-like" nature of the word. Poetry, therefore, frees language, even as it threatens to silence itself by becoming

unintelligible. “This is one of the ways in which poetry—any poetry—is always political and subversive,” suggests Don McKay; “it uses our foremost technological tool, the ur-tool that is language, against itself, against its tendency to be the supreme analytic and organizing instrument” (*The Shell* 18). Thompson takes such an ur-tool and turns it back into the animal reality in “On the Tolar Canal,” a poem about bird hunting near Sackville, New Brunswick.

In this poem, when Thompson sets out to hunt brant or barnacle geese, both his gun and his language grow increasingly unreliable as “the primal power of human imagination” stops imposing order on the experience and his tools fail (Nietzsche 148). “I know the brant are wheeling in great flocks in the black rain / over the Jolicure Lakes,” he writes, “and on the High Marsh Road an old barn, almost the last / is burning” (*AEC* 88). A surreal moment like this holds deeper meaning as the burning barn is, in essence, a cypher for his rejecting his previous life and the collapsing farming economy of the Tantramar region made iconic by Charles G.D. Roberts’ past pastoral thinking of the area. That the barn is burning, as it earlier transformed into a bird, speaks to the ephemerality and provisional reality of human concepts and constructs. It is the brant above the burning barn that convey permanence and a promise of new systems, as they migrate each spring from southern climes. In trying to make sense of this scene, he claims that he has “been watching for hours by the canal, wrists / cold as shotgun shells” while the barn burns. His experience finally culminates into a synesthetic moment where bird and barn become one: “in the last light a new tin barn roof lifts and / cuts like a goose wing: I shoot / and the roof shouts and sinks” (88). In this instance, the gun,

shotgun shells, and the tin roof all dissipate into the brant's wing. Connections to human tools are erased. The bird tries to rejoin the flock.

Thompson does not so much shoot the goose as aim to destroy his own conceptual world, driven by tools, that crumbles to ash around him. He underscores his breakdown later in the poem when he confesses that as he walks across the dyke "a man is talking to me in a strange language, or is it / the thin blade of his dyking spade, newly oiled, that speaks?" (88). Both language and tools no longer make sense in themselves to Thompson. He sees only meaning in the brant "wheeling in great flocks," which will not settle down into language.

As he strays further from home and closer to the ineffable nature of animals, the stink of animal and strange fear assault him and make these encounters all the more visceral even as they disarm him. Such energy occurs in "The Change" from *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*. The premise behind this poem is that Thompson loses his axe-blade "in the chopping." As with the burning barn earlier in "On the Tolar Canal," the lost blade symbolizes a rupture with his domestic, ordered world; at the same time, it returns us to the title of the collection that suggests where the chopping occurs or where intuitive metaphors are created. There is openness. Everything may be disclosed, despite his initial darkness and incomprehension. The poem, however, differs from "On the Tolar Canal" in that the animal presence here undermines Thompson's truth, exposing sophism. The first line states, "It's in the darkness we approach / our energies" (89). "[E]nergy," extracted from the unknown, echoes Gibbs' earlier suggestion that Thompson's poetry functions on a non-verbal level of energy and instinct. Thompson's search for the blade later that night becomes his point of exit from the human world:

a cow moose blind, stinking

with heat, moaning, and

hooving the black peat with

such blood, such fury,

the woods broke open, the earth

recovered her children,

her silences, her poems. (89)

The moose's heightened sexuality as it violently tears open the earth in its rage conveys Thompson's own release from a world that both constrains him and makes no sense. The cow moose's power comes from her sexuality and her maternity. She is real and not romanticized nature. She exposes a particular zoopoetics—an underside to language—as she is the stink of estrus and nature: she is the beginning of truth, as she is unrepressed sexuality and fertility.

When poetry slips the hook and loses the blade, Thompson relies more on tools, because he initially feels he must maintain control over that failing language. Because he has nothing to replace language to articulate his lived experiences, existence grows tenuous. "The human mind is nervous without its writing" and "feels emptiness without writing," Vicky Hearne argues, "[s]o when we imagine the inner or outer life of a creature without that bustle, we imagine what we would be like without it—that is, we imagine ourselves emptied of understanding" (171). Subsequently, physical tools such as fishhooks have to work harder as epistemological instruments, which suppress and

control the wildness. "[T]ools exceed the fact of their construction and exemplify an otherness beyond human design," McKay writes. "It is the function of art to provide safe defamiliarizing moments, when the mask of utility gets lifted and we waken to that residual wilderness" (*Vis* 57-8). Riddled with fishhooks, themselves shaped like question marks, with shotgun shells, knives, pole axes, and axe blades, both collections reveal how Thompson's language slips the hook, leading him to question his relationship to the tools and metaphors he relies on.

Both the tools of fishing and the caught animal are central to Thompson's poetics and represent a frenzied ownership with things outside of humanity, which it refuses to allow, as Don McKay has suggested, the capacity of wildness. Humans are "ambivalent predators," James Barilla argues, as "we find ourselves searching for alternative narratives that will nurture and heal, and lead to faith in a different authenticity than death" (156). Robert Harrison Pogue also suggests that language buffers our acceptance of death: "because finitude is given over to us in language, we lose the instinctive knowledge of dying. . . . Because we alone inhabit the logos, we alone must learn the lesson of dying time and time again" (172). This is conceptual thinking. By distancing ourselves from logos, we may move closer to truths. The non-human animal's ability to meet the poet at thresholds, therefore, encourages Thompson's transformations and strange death allusions while underscoring linguistic limitations.

In both collections, a plethora of edges indicating the limits and barriers represented by tools point to Thompson's understanding of "the very finitude of life" and his anguish at this condition of being. In *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, "Colville's Crow," a poem written for Nova Scotia painter Alex Colville,

Thompson likens a dead crow preserved in Colville's refrigerator for future "life" study to "a weird machine" whose purpose is "to piece out / the mechanics of the dark" (64). The virtuosity of this metaphor suggests complete erasure of the bird as sentient being. Encrypted in an appliance, far from its natural habitat, technology has replaced ontology. Locked into the domestic space, language and the bird can be controlled.

Derrida considers such moments of anxiety, as the crow's liminal existence instills in Thompson an opportunity to deconstruct anthropocentric hierarchies and disclose insufficient definitions of selfhood. They are a means to bend closer to the world. As Thompson's crow reinforces this anxiety, it also presents an opportunity to explore his own sense of vulnerability. "At the heart of power," Derrida says, "resides" mortality:

> as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this non-power, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish. (28)

Compassion and vulnerability move Thompson closer to the truths that animals, harmed by tools, incite. In "Ewe's Skull on the Aboideau at Carter's Brook," for instance, he discovers a decomposing ewe on the aboideau, a part of the Acadian dyking system.[11] He observes that the ewe "seems to rock, gently, in / a satisfying, crushed sleep, nourishing / the iron blow across the nose" (*AEC* 90). Using words such as "rock," "gently," "satisfying," "sleep," and "nourishing" ironically juxtaposes the brutality done to the ewe. Thompson goes on to ask the unseen slaughterer, "I wonder why you aren't pure:

your pole-axe each time / in marriage with the bone" (90). Again, he connects the violence to marriage, as he is conscious of distancing himself from his wife, which points to deception and makes the metaphor all the more powerful as it foregrounds the macabre scene in the brook. In this way, his poetry participates in Don McKay's explorations of the phenomenology of using. McKay's reflections on using are built on first- and second-order appropriation. Tools, such as the pole-axe, conscripted for utility and for their functions are first-order appropriation. Second-order appropriation occurs when an organism, such as the ewe, is colonized and exploited to become part of an individual statement on power. Thompson's ewe is analogous to McKay's appropriation. It has not only been killed, but left abject and therefore a cypher for "the colonization of its death" and a manifestation of our own rage against our mortality (20).

McKay and Bataille would agree here that the animal is complete in itself, until we render it as object. Bataille writes, "The animal has lost its status as man's fellow creature, and man, perceiving the animality in himself, regards it as a defect. There is undoubtedly a measure of falsity in the fact of regarding the animal as a thing. An animal exists for itself and in order to be a thing it must be dead or domesticated" (39). Where the ewe's body decomposes "between these two waters: the salt scummed / with ice, thick with sea-mud, the fresh, / clear with the iron of the woods," Thompson's ambivalence manifests as he tries to separate the animal's vulnerability from his own (*AEC* 90). While he associates fresh water with clarity and tools in his repetition of "iron," the opaque salt water metaphorically represents his own unclear and muddied position outside of domesticating language and tools. The ewe straddles both waters because Thompson is still transitioning how he perceives the animal other.

At a crucial juncture, the poet comes closest to his own identification with the animal, outside language, through his representations of fish and fishing. Thompson's fish are often a substitution for both the poem and poet. It is a projective repetition that highlights both the mundane and the metaphysical moments within *Stilt Jack*. Akira Mizuta Lippit writes that animals such as Thompson's trout, offer a means to recognize otherness: "[t]he animal is magnetic because it draws the world-building subject toward an impossible convergence with the limits of world, toward a metaphysics of metaphor. The magnetic animal erases the limits of the metaphor, effecting an economy of the figure that is metamorphic rather than metaphoric" ("Magnetic Animal" 1118). In "Fish," for instance, a trout exposes Thompson's loss of control, while also highlighting his underlying sense that tools "exceed the fact of their construction and exemplify an otherness beyond human design" (McKay, *Vis* 57):

> a hammer perfectly steel, perfectly
> struck
>
> releases it, sweetly, to
> rise
>
> live through light water to
> strike. (*AEC* 57)

The hammer, in this case, refers to both a fishing fly and a striking tool. With its use of long line/short line to visually echo the hammer striking, the poem interchanges hammer with fish with fly so that it is ambiguous if it is animal or tool that is released "sweetly."

The tools and animal refuse to be neat and orderly, despite Thompson's forcing them into classification. The poem turns in the middle, negating the potential for anything to rise from the water. Thompson writes, "what might have been, wings and sure / release from, / but brings lost taste to metal / blood" (57). These lines change the trajectory of the poem. The undeveloped wings or fly falter and hook the poem and poet. His sense of openness and emptiness to the water's depths reflect Agamben's observation that posthumanist interrogations can "show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this [reveals] emptiness" (*The Open* 92). The poem, then, speaks to Thompson's failure to control the wildness by use of tools. To underscore the failed attempts to transcend the water's depths, Thompson ends the poem with one word—stone—thus weighing the poem at the bottom of the water, preventing release.

Thompson's superimposing human apprehension onto the fish's very real struggle for life is solipsism. The fish, forced to function as part of Thompson's struggle for power, exposes the poet's faltering faith in epistemology. At the same time, Thompson's cosmology allows that the human and the animal have a sort of shared experience, which brings into question species' hierarchy and ontological boundaries. "The encounter," James Farrell writes of the masculine drive to hunt and fish, "involves shooting nature or hooking it, mastering nature or just surviving it. It involves conquests of nature, and companionship in nature" (257). Such a search for an external truth, ironically, often leads Thompson to hunt the animal.

Later, in Thompson's work this crucial relationship with fish becomes a central encounter for his changing zoopoetics. Fishing is a major trope in *Stilt Jack*. The fishing

trope functions as a shifting existential pursuit for spiritual answers, as Thompson plumbs the depths of the poem and the river for enlightenment. Peter Sanger suggests that the ghazals bring about epiphanic moments by reading the world through intuitive metaphors which are continuously *"penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end*" (*Sea Run* 47, emphasis in original). Thompson's sparse couplets emphasize the intensity of his quest at the limits of expression and disrupt conventional lyrical systems. While he still relies on language, even as the zoopoetics he has created cannot abandon its own representation, he has moved beyond the lyric toward a more bare-boned approach to articulation.

In later ghazals, Thompson's sense of being hooked becomes even more critical to his need to escape conceptual thinking. In Ghazal XIX, he writes, "I drive into a strange heart, and lift / out of all this beauty something / myself, a fish hook tinged with blood" (*SJ* 125). Thompson's differentiation between human and animal grows more difficult to separate, as it is unclear if he speaks of the beauty of the hook or if he is a fish hook and therefore beautiful. If the human "is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity" as Agamben suggests, and in us is housed "ceaseless divisions and caesurae," Thompson points to an interstitial position where he is an external hook embedded in the fish as a hook is embedded within him (*The Open*, 12, 16). His position narrows the distance between himself and the fish. It is a convergence through the tool between himself and the fish. His willingness exposes his sense of vulnerability. Cora Diamond suggests that our understanding of mortality makes our vulnerability an anxiety we cannot alleviate:

> The awareness we each have of being a living body . . . carries with it exposure of the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding: but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking one but also of isolating one. (74)

Such vulnerability and anxiety culminate in Thomspon's creating a fish that eclipses the act of writing poetry. In this instance, the ghazal begins and ends with the diminutive poem: "I know how small a poem can be: / the point on a fish hook," he writes (*SJ* 127). These lines point to Thompson's distancing himself from language and tools, as he no longer fully controls either. The lines highlight the importance and difficulty he discovers in escaping a linguistic-centred perception. In the next couplet, he moves from fishing to women, the human element that represents for him the more difficult transition away from the human. He writes misogynistically, "women have one word or too many," which returns him to his domestic problems (127). Towards the end of the ghazal, Thompson's reliance on tools raises him above his human status as he moves closer to the fish: "Let it be: the honed barb drowsing in iron water / will raise the great fish I'll ride" (127). The fish, however, can only lift him so far before he must return to the human condition and "to that heaven (absurd) sharp fish hook, / small poem, small offering" (127). He turns away from small poems because he can no longer be on an equal plane with the fish in Ghazal XXII. The fish maintains a higher position while he free-falls. As he begins to see that a non-linguistic relationship with the world may be a

superior position he admits, “I love to watch the trout rising / as I fall, fall” (128). Though fishing is harmful to the animal, Thompson still maintains that it is a means to re-connect to a submerged consciousness and a primordial link. “The dream that love never ends,” James Barilla observes, “and the fantasy that through fishing we can enter the life of lively water without causing harm, both come true frequently enough to remain poignant, and yet in each there remains the threat of endings, of some revelation in which cruelty and mortality figure prominently” (149).

Outside and the Gestures of Silence

What Thompson finally discovers at the heart of his conflict with the poem and through his attempts to represent an animal nature that cannot be adequately represented is a new power in silence. The poet has recognized this silence before, but the later poems now move toward an acceptance of animal gesture, the unspoken language of the other world, as a fundamental relationship that he desires to somehow re-enter. Thompson, therefore, often identifies where language becomes a hindrance to communication or, as Martinelli writes, where it has “added a series of communicative and cognitive elements *on top* of the existing ones, not *in place* of them” (84, emphasis in original). Nietzsche echoes this sentiment when he argues that such layering discloses new lexical and syntactical possibilities for the human speaker: “No regular way leads from these intuitions into the land of the ghostly schemata and abstractions,” he states “words are not made for them; man is struck dumb when he sees them, or he will speak only in forbidden metaphors and unheard-of combinations of concepts so that, by at least demolishing and deriding the old conceptual barriers, he may do creative justice to the

impression made on him by the mighty, present intuition" (152). Thompson's recognition that he does not have an epistemological advantage through language leads him to consider that language is a grand illusion.

As Thompson's own restrictive linguistic system is exposed as inadequate, he releases himself from the imperative demands of language. "Black Smith Shop" is a good example of the poems that represent this transition. While Thompson watches a blacksmith shoe a horse in his dark shop, he discovers a relationship through a series of sign exchanges between the man and horse. He covets their potential to release him from his own dependence on language. The blacksmith "has no words but his laughter," which "breaks against the sun" and can "break / chunks out of the light" (*AEC* 61). Thompson's own words, subsequently, shatter in the blacksmith's world as they represent a brittle and fragile system. He writes, "[t]he sun lights blue fires in the black stubble / on his face— / a shapeless rock / my words break" (61). The blacksmith's "language" is only for the horse. His sounds are "marrowy," and use a "rhythm of grunts" on the horse that emerges from "the intense / anthracite light" (61). As he "sinks into his labour" and calms the horse, the blacksmith's "moaning speech" is pre-linguisic (61). The ritual compels Thompson to experiment in his quest to meet the animal outside of language systems. It is a liberating experience, rejoining him with something outside socially constructed parameters:

> Outside again, I break open and shout,
>
> shout,
>
> and my sound comes back to me

furry, alien, shining,

from the horn of the new moon,

out of this new dark. (61)

His "alien" shout breaks free from the conceptual constraints he felt earlier in the house and with his unreliable tools. Now, in the stifling darkness of the blacksmith's shop and, subsequently, in his own realm of linguistic fluidity, he is distant from language. The "new moon" rises into new darkness through a revelatory pre-linguistic connection. Interestingly, in a brief review of the collection, Maureen Bradbury singles out this poem as "an anachronism with no hint of any feeling of displacement." It is his linguistic displacement, however, that creates the tension in the poem.

Thompson's prescriptive action to embrace the animal's truth and power occurs after he relinquishes his struggle to maintain control through language and tools. His world shifts from season to season and the animal encounter earmarks his marginal transgressions and the ontological gap. "Most of the words we use to talk about language," Robert Bringhurst writes, "including the word language itself—seem to rest on the assumption that language comes out of the mouth. Words like speech, and words like linguist and phonology and phonetics are all part of this conspiracy" (128). Thompson's sensitivity to *logocentricism*, favouring speech over other forms of semiosis, become evident through his use of "linguistic metaphors" that use "tongues," "language" and "word." These metaphors expand the animals' agency in the poem. It is provisional language that finds semblance in animal communication.

Early in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* he claims to live where "salt comes in with the wind / off the bay" and "some days / the air / is thick with

the roots of the tongue" (62). Only the resilient can survive the winter in "Cold Winter," as "the wind kills / with swift birds / like bronze javelins" (70). Harsh weather is only favourable for those who can "learn the beat of its cold wings" and survive by "beating their tongues like oak leaves / against its fierce metal" (70). Surviving, in this case, means using a transformative language that reconnects humans to the land and to animals. As the survivors no longer speak but "beat their tongues like oak leaves," they use a new sign exchange (70).

Such interspecies boundaries are almost erased, as Thompson writes in "Down Below": "I am a trout, fat, come out / from under the bank, to lie / in the sun's mouth" (80). In Nietszchean terms, the trout's emerging from under the bank ruptures Thompson's sense of truth. By breaking the line at "lie," he reinforces the understanding that this "lie" possesses more than one lexical meaning. Thompson does not differentiate which meaning he implies, so the word creates tension: he becomes the trout, a tongue-like appendage in the sun's mouth and he "lies" by stating that he is a trout and that he has the power to speak as the sun.

The difficult search for a silent truth grows, and near the end of *Stilt Jack*, in Ghazal XXXIII, he must admit the project's failure. His seeking out an interspecies convergence with animals reveals his own sense of limits. The tone is frantic, which partially comes from his use of punctuation. Short, incomplete sentences underscore his frame of mind. He writes, "The want. The hunting harrier / bound to earth. The fox denned" (139). Beginning the couplet with "The want," as a sentence fragment, attends to questions of desire. Desire highlights language's restrictiveness and the ungraspable longing for the poem, as harrier, which no longer is able to fly. These lines suggest that

the wildness in both language and animal is exhausted. Thompson reinforces this sentiment in the second line of the couplet, as the fox is denned and silenced in the snow and earth. He further complicates this limited position by including himself with the fox and harrier in the next stanza. "I go clothed like a bear," he writes, as he moves toward "the snow sleep" (139). He is still human, however, hidden in bear form. His want to escape the human condition is reinforced in his search for "snow sleep" because snow has been an analogy throughout both collections for erasure, silence, and emptiness in life and on the page. It has, for Thompson, an equalizing quality.

Bataille's observation that subjectivity's erasure brings humans closer to the animal echoes Thompson's project. "What is intimate, in the strong sense, is what has the passion of an absence of individuality, the imperceptible sonority of a river, the empty limpidity of the sky," Bataille writes (50-1). Thompson's zoopoetics metaphor highlights his connection with the fox, harrier, and landscape: an intimacy without individuality. As he renews his relationship with the animal Other, signaling the potential for a meaningful convergence, the poem moves beyond the authority of language.

The truth Thompson seeks in silence is neither the soundless world nor simply emptiness, but rather a heightened awareness of the contrast between speech and silence, the contrast that is composed of human and animal. "Silence comprehends the Abyss as incomprehensible," Agamben argues (*The Open* 63). While Thompson sees all experience mediated through language, it is still language that maintains the abyss and prevents him from attaining new ways of expressing lived experience. His need for a provisional language that allows him the privileged position of being closer to animals and adequately articulating this perception fails, despite his breaking down rules and

grammatical constructs. In the end, there is no provisional language. There is silence. In the Nietzschean sense of silence, Thompson has, however, extended himself to meet the animal through intuitive metaphors that do not distill experience into words and concepts.

As Heidegger's observation on Nietzsche makes clear in "The Nature of Language," "when the poet listens to the world silence can occur, which can reveal the poet's attainment of 'the most intimate kinship' with the world" (78). Throughout *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* Thompson maintains an acute awareness of these silences. He writes: "words so light, so still" (97), "still cold" (81), "voices fading / on the narrow road" (81), "knots / of light and silence" (99), "a white stillness"(100), and "silences, / asking everything" (79). The quiet is the best opportunity for Thompson to confront his own ontological inquiries while he struggles to find truth in the animal silence and contentment in himself.

Thompson's pre-reflective *cogito* comes about *a priori* to the experience of the phenomenal world meeting the poet's silence. Heidegger designates these silences a means to tap into a more complex reading of the world. "Language withdraws from man its simple and high speech," he writes. "But its primal cell does not thereby become incapable of speech; it merely falls silent. Man, though, fails to heed this silence" (*Poetry* 148). When Thompson returns to his home and family at the end of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* he does so with his language heady with the ineffable wildness, as we see in "Coming Back," a poem that marks his return to the house from the woods:

> [I] stand before the window
>
> my eyes rimy

with frost, glittering

with owl's flights, my mouth

full of dead ferns. (94)

He has just returned from "an immense journey" and can no longer use the domestic language, "those terrible iron tongues," that he had struggled with earlier as his mouth is "full of dead fern" (94). His time outside of the house has left him physically affected and he is kinetic with wild growth and "owl's flight." Thompson's acceptance of *via negativa* or the unknowable and the animal Other echoes animal critic Peter Steeves' argument that by admitting to the mystery embedded in the animal, we "return to the thing," which "is a return to the world, and thus a return *to the animal himself*—and the accompanying insecurity of not-knowing" (*Animal Others* 12, italics in original). The solution to the problem originates with the problem itself: to admit to *via negativa* is to relinquish the anthropocentric insistence on control and "the hubris of the intellect" (12).

Perhaps, by the end of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, he is not ready to fully embrace the mystery as he returns to his wife and "that deep / speech of your hands which always / defeats me," suggesting that his wanting to come back to "being" and his efforts to find a provisional language fails in being a complete experience (*AEC* 100). Or perhaps he realizes silence only works in contrast to the world of speech and poetry. Despite his failure to capture the animal world through a new, provisional language and his return to his wife's "deep / speech," Thompson still gains insight into the nature of language itself.

Stilt Jack, conversely, does attempt to extract him from language in the end. From a zoopoetics perspective, Thompson's struggle with the fish exposes his own initial

cavalier hubris and final failure. In Ghazal XXIII, he turns away from his reliance on the poem. As a last attempt to maintain control, he claims to be all consuming: "I'm a great fish, swallowing everything: / drunk on my own seas" (129). In Ghazal XXXV, however, his power weakens: "love look at my wounds, the shame I've drunk" (141). Finally, by Ghazal XXXVI, he admits defeat: he has returned from "The scorch of letters written / from the poem's isolate place," and he has stripped down language to find truth at the edge of Agamben's dark abyss: "I feel all the weight," Thompson confesses "have I dared the dark centre?" (142). His anxiety occurs in Ghazal VIII as well: "I forget: why are there broken birds / behind me; words, goddammit, words" (114). The end rhymes underscore the anxiety that he feels in the space between the animal world and linguistic entrapments. His inability to separate "words" and "birds" also obscures the lines' intention to compartmentalize nature and domesticity. In Ghazal XVII, the animals become a counter-balance to this conflict. He writes, "One fish, one bird, / one woman, one word," suggesting in this equation that animals are all the same animal and that women have little to say (123). He simplifies language, here, so that it echoes a child's counting game, as his skill for articulation has broken down.

In the end, *Stilt Jack* leaves Thompson between "the sky / and the stove" where he swings "a silver cross and a bear's tooth / in the wind" (144). His project inevitably fails because such a search for a meta-language or a transcendental language to crack open the phenomenological experience with animals fails. He leaves off with "these words for you," as a passing of the torch to the next generation of poets to seek out a path for themselves. In the end, he is silenced, "knowing nothing" (143-4).

Subsequently, *Stilt Jack* concludes inconsolably as Thompson does not return home safely. The collection " invites us into an unredemptive natural world and a civilization in chaos," James Polk insists, "with the poet no longer in control, but crying out" ("Yeats" 19). Though Thompson claims that the ghazal "has no palpable intention upon us," I would argue, however, that he does know something in the end (105). In Ghazal I, he begins by stating "Now you have burned your books: you'll go / with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart" (*SJ* 107). In the second to last ghazal (XXXVII), however, he repeats this with an important omission. He writes, "Now you have burned your books, you'll go with nothing. / A heart" (143). Thompson's sense of a "blind, stupefied heart" is no longer apparent.

Although "[t]he limit of language is one of Thompson's main themes throughout *Stilt Jack*," Sanger concedes, "[b]y the end. . . Thompson's rage for a pure language, *poesie pure*, has changed into resignation, or defeat" (*Sea Run* 16). But, in another sense, that defeat is a kind of victory, as the poet has reached beyond his own isolation momentarily to enter the animal world. Thompson answers his own question as to what replaces language in Ghazal XXV as he slips below the surface like the trout does:

> Where are all our books and stories?
>
> I look into dark water:
>
> We have been there: our eyes
>
> join deep below the surface. (SJ 131)

In the final ghazal, XXXVIII, he resigns himself to remain between language and the animal, in particular, the bear. He writes, "I swing a silver cross and a bear's tooth" (144). Thompson is essentially wedged between the symbolic "word" of God and the

word of the bear. His final thoughts become linked, as he is unable in the end to reconcile a separation**.** Thompson acknowledges multiple worlds through his cross and tooth. The image suggests that he is still locked into a dichotomous relationship between conceptual and instinctive modes of thinking.

Silence is not the end result of Thompson's quest for a new language, but it is part of a growing awareness of the distance language creates between humans and the animal world. Thompson's moving closer to animal metaphors eventually uproots him and leads him far from domesticity and into silence. As shown in this progression, he challenges the domestic space of the house through its failure to communicate his feelings in language: a challenge that then becomes more critical as he uses tools and struggles to regain a sense of self through their domestic interplay. Finally, in his move out into the wilderness, he abandons the domestic completely and discovers, in the final failure of human language, a gestural truth in the animal world. His wanderings echo Julia Kristeva's observations that one who wanders, as Thompson does in both these collections, must continue to do so in order to attain a sense of closure. She writes that the wanderer's or deject's sort of seeking leaves one displaced as ideas on autonomy and dependency have lost their relevancy: "A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*," she writes. "He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. . . . the more he strays, the more he is saved" (*Powers* 8, emphasis in original). As the end keeps receding, Thompson's animals continuously rupture this distance through their emergence within his developing zoopoetics.

Chapter 2: Don Domanski: An Old Animal Habit

Could you have said the bluejay suddenly

Would swoop to earth? It is a wheel, the rays

Around the sun. The wheel survives the myths.

The fire eye in the clouds survives the gods.

(Wallace Stevens, "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man")

O Mother, it's the word *shark* that butchers *man* even on the page.

(Don Domanski, "Mare Serenitatis")

While John Thompson's existential anxiety occurs at domestic and undomestic thresholds where animals haunt his struggle to seek out truths beyond language's entangled systems, Nova Scotian poet Don Domanski attempts to empty his poetry of self in order to remain open to the otherness of the natural world, and in particular to animals. Domanski's world allows for "a transport of spirit" (Glickman 42) in the face of the animal, which is neither anthropocentric nor terror-filled but interrupts itself, troubling mystical moments with the reality of the area: the cod fisheries moratorium, the rapid progress that sees the forests cut and milled, and the outpost communities that seem trapped in time. This chapter explores how Domanski sees the animal as inhabiting that strange zone that Derrida calls limitrophy, where humans and animals retain complex and entangled differences, yet where humans and animals are almost the same, or where no clear or definitive line between the human and the animal can be drawn (29). For

Domanski, animals are not *merely* symbolic or emblematic, though they take on many guises. Instead, they are almost always from the world he knows and encounters daily, derived from the biome of Atlantic Canada. There is neither a rigid definition of Atlantic Canada, nor a rigid definition for the animals' intangibility, that indefinable quality of their being that inhabits all systems and defies simple taxonomy. For Domanski, animals embody a syncretic spirituality, for which he draws from many of the world's religions to create a metaphysic of the natural world beyond human language, which nonetheless can be gestured toward by metaphor. His "omnivorous sympathy with many spiritual traditions" allows animals and birds to function in his poetry as spiritual flux (Bartlett xiii). These animals also embody new biological conceptions, which make room for metaphoric expressions that allow him an *open* area of engagement that challenges the traditional scientific and rationalistic understandings of human/animal relations. These metaphors within materialist understandings of the world also create a space for the animal that is not primarily human, and not purely linguistic, but one that becomes available only through poetry. "In the Dream of Yellow Birches" from his most recent collection *All Our Wonder Unavenged* (2007), highlights such a need for pushing aside the complexities of the human condition so that the poet may see the animal as both a familiar and individual:

> spider-optics checking me at the backdoor black into black
>
> . . . . . .
>
> eight eyes on its face two turned inward watching the silence
>
> of the self the self we share shadow-crossed in the same
>
> shadow. (116)

In this example, the spider's multiple eyes emphasize its plurality. With so many eyes it is capable of looking within itself and outward toward the poet simultaneously. It is a feat that humans are incapable of mirroring. Domanski also emphasizes the strange space that both species occupy in different ways through the crossed shadows. In this dim space human and arachnid similarities are foregrounded, as shadows do not differentiate forms. Through poetry, the spider distinguishes its own space and interrogates the poet's understanding of otherness.

Such metaphors are the absence of rules and systems for articulating epistemological experience through poetic expression that allows for a new animal/human relation not determined by but challenging human perspective. As the philosopher Mark Johnson argues, "we can begin to explain the elusive irreducibility of metaphorical insight by arguing that the imaginative leap occurring in the metaphor is not rule-governed, and therefore not reducible to a set of rules, or a systematic procedure of understanding" (39). Domanski seeks out a spiritual "imaginative leap" with the world through poetry by the underlying gesture, which may include songs, calls, flights, and movements as encoded messages to which he remains attentive through his engagement with animals from the specific place of Atlantic Canada, where his inspiration is housed.

Domanski is a peripatetic philosopher/poet who walks "in a drift of leaves / in a shaking of rain" (*SLH* 99). The region's animals substantiate his epistemology; they are primary players in his new out of doors realm. Domanski actively investigates the outdoors in his poetry by sitting on rocks, hiking along the coast, and waiting beneath trees for the animal world to unfold before him. Place is not abstract for him as he formulates a larger vision of spiritual and biological encounters from his rambles.

As a gestural dimension, Domanski's reading of place through biological processes generates first-order experience or a pre-linguistic encounter with the animal Other by acknowledging the complexity of the biological human/animal divide. Domanski's interests range from interrogating cycles such as overgrowth and decomposition to microbes and the various levels of interconnectivity among organisms. To rediscover the connection in natural phenomena through poetic and scientific thought, Domanski reaches for a more unified sense of being in the world, a mystical world that nonetheless science has the ability to shape. As an eco-poet, he makes use of science in shaping his metaphors and his epistemology of perception. The "fact that this planet is alive," Domanski writes, "that it's teeming with life and not an empty sphere is astonishing in itself, but also to be aware of that reality, no matter how limited our awareness might be, is also astonishing" (qtd. in Cunningham). Where others have lost the mystery imbedded in biological processes for the neatly demarcated world of human consciousness, Domanski celebrates an anarchic world overwrought with fecundity that cannot be controlled or categorized in any complete or final way.

His metaphors participate, then, in sensory experience, rather than being limited to the language of terminology and definition. Ecologist David Abram describes this experience best when he writes, "If language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant, then it can never be definitively separated from the evident expressiveness of birdsong, or the vocative howl of a wolf late at night" (*Becoming* 80). Because hominids are animals, the human encounter with animals is "physically and sensorially" compounded: it is sameness and otherness, kinship and distance. Our own

duality complicates our relationship to other animals. This is *limitrophe*: we are and we are not animals.

Domanski's Atlantic Canada

By focusing on Atlantic Canada's biome and its fauna, the unsustainable fishing practices of the past, and the attempts at sustainable practices of the present, Domanski's poetry recovers syncretic connections to the region. His mythos consists of metaphors that transgress the boundary of truly pastoral landscapes that efface the region's industrial past by perpetuating folkloric images of quaint fishing villages with yellow and red lobster boats rocking in the harbor, traps stacked on the dock awaiting the morning drop, unimposing saltbox houses with colourful quilts hung out to dry on lines, and the tiny churches to earmark conventional spiritual practices.

In *Quest of the Folk* Ian McKay rallies Atlantic-Canadian writers and creative workers like Domanski to take "this moment of opportunity for creative cultural opposition and write from the old subjects in new ways, arriving at new mythologies, fresh indicators of human transience, and a complex understanding of the role of memory in averting ecological catastrophe" (153). McKay's monograph has been an influential force in Atlantic-Canadian studies, exploring the region's mainly forgotten nineteenth-century industrial past when it was a "significant factor in world shipping and in the fishing industry," as well as playing on the world's stage in the coal industry and secondary manufacturing (57). Atlantic-Canadian history complicates rather than simplifies an interpretation of the region, as this auspicious past has been replaced by the

"Arcadian quality of the Atlantic landscape" dictated by the tourism sector, which depicts Atlantic Canada as an anachronistic appendage to the rest of Canada (Conrad vi).

Domanski's sense of a new zoopoetics reinforces Atlantic Canada's plurality. His animal encounters with the common white-tailed deer and salmon de-familiarize the region, as he engages McKay's suggestion that writers need to make the region new. His conflict also rests solidly in his attempts to seek out a language to express what Derrida has termed "chimerical discourse" (23). Such discourse engages the region's potential for plurality by shifting the shapes of genres and rhetorical patterns, shifts that might seem to define Domanski's efforts. By asking, "Is it an animal, this chimera, an animal that can be defined as one, and only one? Is it more than or other than an animal?" Derrida presupposes Domaski's struggle by troubling the boundaries between our concepts of humans and animals, such as those imposed by the naming of the animal (23). Such a fabulous creature takes the shape of the "animal" only because humans have reduced it to this finality. In challenging this, regional references take on mythic meanings for Domanski, which, in turn, suggest the illusory sense of the inhabitants of the Maritimes.

These mythical meanings appear early in Domanski's work. "On a Winter's Night," from *Wolf-ladder* (1991), for example, finds him in "a bar on Hollis Street" in Halifax, imagining that a hunter has killed a bear somewhere out in the night's forest. He imagines that the hunter "carries a bear's head under his arm" as he returns "home in the dark" (76). Domanski conveys the bear's death as a "knocking among the trees" out in the forest where we find "God running among dogs / on a winter's night" (76). The surreal imagery destabilizes the environments of the bar on Hollis Street, the bear, and God through his complex metaphors by way of intertwining them into one metaphorical

experience. A ravine in Cape Breton also becomes a space for discursive elements to come together through metaphor in "Naos," from *Parish of the Physic Moon* (1998). Merging the real and imagined emphasizes the poet's refusal to compartmentalize ideologies, philosophies, or animals. The ravine, "where every fear came from," possesses an unknown power that disturbs the poet's six-year-old self. But later, it transforms into "naos," a sacred inner temple, for the older poet:

> many layers leading up through time
>
> along with devils God bogeymen
>
> goldfinches dead cars stars
>
> and now the murmur of power. (18)

Domanski's list underscores his sense of there being no definitive taxonomy of experience, though spirituality, decomposition, and animals are represented. Domanski takes his encounter with sublimity one step further in "A Trace of Finches," from *All Our Wonder Unavenged*, where he equates coastal finches with small gods. The poem takes place on an overlook near Minas Basin, the eastern part of the Bay of Fundy, known for its dramatic tides. In their collective flight the birds evoke an even more dramatic space "like all the holy places / pulling away at once from the earth," thereby attesting to his own sense of regional wonder and the transformative nature of animal metaphors (110).

Domanksi's desire to dissolve the ego by foregrounding the natural world echoes critic David Creelman's argument that Maritime writers may have an advantage over the national ego's influence, as "they inhabit the margin," Creelman writes. Thus, "these poets possess a unique duality of vision and opposing worldview from which we can all learn" (308). Domanski's duality of vision, however, is more of a plurality, as he makes

use of the animal as seer, conduit for spiritual enrichment, and guardian at the biological margins. His vision challenges the telos/scientific turn by the extended use of a lyric explanation, even while the poet attempts to grasp at a language that continually evades him. Animal metaphors re-wild Domanski's world by complementing his salient struggle against language's authority, our lack of humility, our inability to appreciate mystery, and our difficulty in experiencing the vital connection to animals themselves without mastery. Morton Tønnessen's zoosemiotic analysis, that is the study of animal messages given and received, suggests that nature is resilient to language's intrusiveness. Nature retains its own set of semiotic features, and communicates with itself. Tønnessen's argument reflects Domanski's sense of a pre-linguistic world, where the poet searches for a first-order experience despite having to rely on language and its second-order expression of experience. Tønnessen sees nature's resistance as always "actively working against the use of symbols as a means to represent the physical world" (381). He proposes that "this brute fact" of nature's first-order experience "should trigger feelings of humbleness in us, and a desire for scrutiny, rather than a sense of smugness (381). Such a "brute fact" is addressed in "Leaning on Silk," from *All Our Wonder Unavenged*, which points to how "the low thrum of the ego / that eerie enchantment with naming the self" obscures any sincere exchange between humans and the world (16). The ego's demand for prominence does a disservice to language's metaphorical capabilities to draw attention to the wonder within this interaction.

Domanski's preoccupation with removing himself from the ego is prevalent in his other collections as well. In *Stations of the Left Hand* (1994), Domanski sees memory shaped by the sublime animal encounter; it is "the singing of a few crickets / at night in a

burning field" (18). Cricket song gives shape to memory while releasing any egocentric focus. It is, rather, a "nostalgia of gnosis"—a sacred moment, which induces insight. He confesses in the next lines that this moment is epiphanic:

> it was while watching that fire
> I realized I was in a world
> that there were spaces
> between the voices
> that I heard. (18)

Domanski's experience here, through the cricket song, cracks open the world to give him access to a new perception—one that supports a suspension of our reliance on language. The cricket chirp incites ineffable but sublime experience. The new perception is pre-linguistic, as language is mainly an instrument of human communication.

An inherent wildness beneath the ego's and language's control of nature underscores Domanski's sense that human systems are frail, and always in danger of returning to a wild state, as Tønnessen suggested. In a similar way, Don McKay argues that this wildness is also the wildness of the metaphor, which overturns language's authority and opens up new possibilities for expressing experience. "Let's also take in the pure pizzazz of the metaphorical act," he encourages, "releasing another micro-quantum of wild figuration into the body of language—that tiny, shocking, necessary invasion; that saving of language from itself" (*Vis* 106). The energy in this description of the metaphor's ability to re-invest the world with wonder reflects Domanski's project to seek out this energy through his startling animal metaphors, even in the face of language's

insistence on systematic order. He juxtaposes these same conflicting states in *Wolf-ladder* (1991):

> if I drew you a map
>
> it would have to be drawn
>
> on the back of a dog
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I would have to draw it
>
> with the leg of a beetle. (24)

Though the region cannot be separated from its representation, as he admits, rendering "place" through the animal site makes it just as troublesome.[12] It forces the reader to ask an important question: if a place cannot be mapped does it even exist? Similarly, as language cannot be removed from the human realm, the mapping system cannot be removed from the physical landscape or its animals. Situating the map's creation with the dog's and beetle's corporeality underscores this interdependency of human-made systems and the world.

Domanski does not always identify the parts of the region that he writes of. He does include "infrequent reminders of the physical territory of the Maritimes, in which most of his poems are written" (Bartlett xi). His regional mythopoesis troubles the reader's expectations of traditional regional identities, the sort of Maritimes that critics have identified as homogenous. One way that he grounds his animal encounters in place is through his references to the coastline. While a great deal of Atlantic-Canadian literature explores the ocean as a theme, Domanski's rendering of the sea and coastline tends to foreground animal metaphors as a new way to read this regional, interstitial edge.

Wanda Campbell observes that a "radical vision" of the region troubles traditional identities tied to fishing, sailing, etc. She argues that "Contemporary representations of the ocean become not antimodern but postmodern, occupied not with authentic essence but with liminal uncertainty, an uncertainty that undermines human notions of dominance and control" (160). That "liminal uncertainty" informs Domanski's greater sense of shifting margins, expanding spheres of animality and pre-human influence. It reflects again the liminal aspects of the idea of *limitrophy*. Maritime poets generally, Campbell suggests, write from a "mysterious margin between mythology and the mundane, past and present" (159). But Domanski's use of animals does not simply explore these margins; it challenges the interchange of the unknown animal experience with human language. It creates an ideal place to engage the Derridean idea of *limitrophy* where animals pre-exist in a space never wholly controlled by human language. *Limitrophy* stems from the French word *limitrophe*, meaning *to border upon*. Derrida's use, in connection with his writing on animals, differs from the usual connotation in that it represents a non-place, or an interstitial place, that frees it from taxonomy and language restrictions. *Limitrophy* exists because zoopoetics can use metaphorical language to engage animals.

Domanski's sea animals, like his land creatures, are representations of spiritual forces, or the questioning of such, and therefore point to that unstable sense of being-in-the-world that humans often feel. In "Catamount" from *Stations of the Left Hand* his experience on the Atlantic coast cannot be extricated from his sense of the animal as a dominant influence in awakening his phenomenological experience. He writes, "we stopped having noticed the fragrance of the sea / that great cat-breath of milk and fish"

(91). The ocean and the animal merge to complicate his experience and assert his sense of regional plurality. Renewing the regional sense of self thwarts a sense of disempowerment that has come about from years of playing into an identity that no longer sustains the region. Critic Anne Mutton observes:

> It is a compounded form of Atlantic colonialism, a learned sense that all life takes place outside 'its own borders' somewhere else (anywhere else), is nonetheless a mentality which is rapidly disappearing from the region in the present. Its disappearance is partly the result of a retrieval of regional bearings. (14)

Regional bearings, then, do not mean "Atlantic colonialism," or simple, parochial renderings of experience. Instead, the more complex ideas about language and the animal, as Domanski explores them, destabilize any singular definition of a particular kind of region, and continuously expand the defining process for "Maritimes." Through this new awareness of the animal, he opens up the idea of regionalism itself to include an array of spiritual beliefs and biological cycles. His mythological re-visions and the cross-hatching of different perspectives demand new ways of understanding the Atlantic area; they call for what others have realized is a "radical vision that incorporates . . . the spiritual [and biological] . . . within a sustained environmental attentiveness" (Campbell 168).

This sentiment occurs in "Osprey and Salmon":

> the salmon is astonished to find
> that its fins will concede to the spirit of other things
> that its gill openings hold all the names of God

deity and being. (*PPM* 45)

The salmon itself evokes language of a divine encounter. Its gills become portals to deistic enlightenment. The astonishment is not the salmon's but the poet's that such an encounter between the fish and God is possible. Domanski's language cannot reach deep enough to name that spiritual presence, but he experiences the threshold.

Animal/Divine Dualities

The same chimerical quality of metaphoric renderings of animal and region underlines the mix of sacred and profane forces in Domanski's poetry. The sacred for him does not "necessarily mean religious or spiritual in the New Age sense of that word"; it is, instead, "the fundamental experience one has with time and space, with the seemingly endless corporeality that flows into our consciousness" (*PS* 7). Domanski's very definition of "sacred" points out that the physical, and I would argue, the animal, embodies his sense of spirituality or supernaturalism. Animal metaphors allow him a greater sense of first-order experience; they reveal "how each thing holds a mystery, simply because it exists, because existence itself is sacred" (7). His sense of the sacred, then, does not adhere to any God/god dogma, but dwells within existence and its counterparts "amazement" and "pre-verbal reality," which may be another way of pointing to first-order experience. It is one way that he extricates himself from a language-based God/god and reinstalls himself in the animal's liminality. While Domanski remains open to the Derridean idea of mutable borders, he foregrounds his interest in animals and pantheism by linking metaphoric power and spirituality through typography and place. He readily sees examples like "coyotes wandering the hills" with

"God in their legs" as the spiritual manifestations through animal awareness (*AWU* 39). By using "God/god," however, he cannot fully escape overtones of traditional spiritual belief.

His attempts at incorporating syncretic spiritual practices works against the region's dominant identity as primarily Anglo-Saxon and Christian. Critic Tony Tremblay argues that Canadians who may have little first-hand knowledge of the Maritimes have constructed a closed regional identity that leaves little room for spiritual diversity:

> In Canada, a cultural program of nostalgia, literally *homesickness*, polices and reinforces an east-coast Celtic ethnicity that is Old World, racially white and homogeneous, near-pathological in its demands for thematic integration in all the arts, from literature to music, and architecturally resistant to interrogation. (37; emphasis in original)[13]

Such homogenized cultural efforts work against the openly metaphoric nature of general experience, as Domanski tries to capture it. His spiritual/animal encounters, for instance, often take place in the forest and by the sea, which form a new *loci* for exploring unique ways of expressing the region, and thus troubling "the cultural and political hegemony asserted by the centre" (Kulyk-Keefer 28). By realizing that "listening is the language of the soil," he reinvests the region with a classic "Latin of the hawkweed" (*AWU* 86). As we see in this study, Atlantic Canadian poets such as those discussed here, who strive to reveal the limits of language, or to reinvent it, break down the hegemonic idea of identity both in the regional traditions and in the human/animal hierarchy of natural environments.

In the same way, by aligning his bestiary with the divine, Domanski's poetics challenge the anthropocentric hierarchy, as it is classically represented by Martin Heidegger and others, who place "the animal below man" (Derrida 156). As the dependence on logos prevents humans from experiencing a sublime encounter, benevolence toward nature and a return to spirituality provides, within Domanski's work, a second chance to experience these interacting worlds anew.

In Derridean terms, this encounter represents a unique "divinanimality"— a "quasi-transcendental" experience where animals and divine forces overlap (132). Derrida's term "divinanimality" returns to animals a long lost sense of respect and awe. We should not read this term to mean that the animal itself is divine, however, as that would simply re-inscribe the animal within human interpretation. The term may suggest, instead, that our encounter with animals provides a hint of "divinanimality," or a moment when we experience God or spirituality through the animal's (Other's) primal relations with the world. In other words, the animal allows humans to see outside their self-orientation to a sense of spirituality that eclipses the human even as it is inclusive of all animals, and therefore challenges anthropocentric thinking.

Through "eros" or an intimate engagement with the animal other, humans can transform human limitations and gain ontological and epistemological relationships with animals, which we recognize, in some capacity, as already part of us. Domanski explores this by seeking otherness with microbes and other non-mammalian animals, which are very different from us. Derrida states that it "is so difficult to utter a discourse of mastery or of transcendence with regard to the animal and simultaneously to claim to do it in the name of God, in the name of the name of the Father, or in the name of the Law" (132).

Derrida suggests here that the animal itself is the spiritual experience and cannot be called an experience in the name of a divinity. The animal encounter, therefore, allows us a more fundamentally spiritual experience, but one that cannot be called spiritual in the name of any humanly defined divinity. The experience is a desire to transform the shell of our human consciousness. Some animals can act as a mirror to human consciousness, though most often these animals are like us in activity and expression and those most easily domesticated. When we say "animal," it is only in specialized circumstances that we are thinking of zooplankton or even of jellyfish in the ocean.

Because of the nature of his experiment, Domanski's metaphors are often startling and surreal. In his address for The Ralph Gustafson Lecture Series, *Poetry and the Sacred*, he argues that "Metaphor is one way to re-establish our relationship with the textual possibilities; it sidesteps many of the pitfalls that lock language in a low, weak orbit around the individual" (10). His attentiveness of the egocentric nature of "self" in the world, that "low thrum of the ego" earlier addressed in "Leaning on Silk," resurfaces here. We fail to see ourselves in equal terms with animal Others, but the poet insists on this primary relationship as a fundamental experience of the sacred. As he writes in *Parish of the Physic Moon*, "by 2.00 a.m. turtles remove their shells / and are just like us only better at praying / making their gods out of storms and salt" (9). While words must express the similarity, he obviously attempts to free this new language through open associations of metaphor. His pantheistic treatment of the ocean reconnects turtles to the divine sense of God, as well as to the divinity's own origin in the ocean of "storms and salt" that are so representative of the Atlantic region. Such overlaps point to the near-Blakean power of his imagination to reshape the world.

In "The Fixing of Hearts," from *Wolf-ladder*, Domanski, the poet, instructs a cat to tell her mistress that the moon "is her savior, and God's wild savior" in order to underscore the cat's primary relationship to natural cycles and to a sense of *divinanimality* between the cat and spirituality (70). The poet encourages the cat to use a language older than human words, to relay to its godly mistress the truth of our fundamental relationship to the world:

> tell her in your own tongue
> in a language older than this
> the tying of words
> around a final mind
> cat-words / cat-string
> that holds the earth
> and the moon in place. (71)

A fundamental relationship derives from the reinterpreted cat's language, which points to both order and chaos that the cat possesses agency to speak of a divine presence in its own language—a language "older" than that of the humans gives weight to the cat's own natural language of gesture, a semiotic system predating all language systems. Though its language arises from a pre-human system "in a language older than" poetry, its essence is embedded in the dichotomous "cat-words / cat-string" metaphor. The line not only reminds us that we are always entrenched in our own metaphor, that of poetry, but also speaks to the unstable quality of the metaphoric string that makes up the human game. It becomes a linguistic cat's cradle that may be easily ordered or disordered. Cat's cradle, as a string game, reinforces how a human game and human words are rendered through cat

language. It also alludes to other teguments holding the universe together, such as catgut, a string made from animal intestines, often used for stringing musical instruments and rackets. The cat-string may also refer to the cat's ability to disorder human concepts, as cats enjoy unraveling and knotting string. In other places in the same collection, God is "turtle-faced / newt-legged / red-backed like a salamander" and "an angel's face is half-way / between a goldfish and a young girl" (34, 52). Such images portray the deity in animal terms, as a manifestation of the world before humans, a world human language has somehow corrupted.

In one of his most recent collections, Domanski expands his understanding of spirituality and animal agency to foreground the animal-divine connection in a way that suggests animals themselves are divine, and participate in sublime experiences. By being so, they become a means for opening a new sense of wonder in the world:

> my mother believed God moved the sparrows around day after day
> as a teenager I believed the sparrows moved God around
> . . . . . .
> now the only god I believe in are the sparrows themselves
> unaltered by my belief. (*AWU* 81)

He seeks a space where his own involvement will not corrupt the divine nature of animal life. Domanski's animal-divine associations here parallel ecologist David Attenborough's observations on the sacredness once thought to inhabit all aspects of the world, not just the human. He contends that many years ago "the spirit of a god was not restricted to one animal, but that all individuals of that species contained a fragment of divinity and were to some degree sacred" (80). Animistic elements return in Domanski's poetry, as animal

metaphors reveal the numinousness of experience, reminding the reader of the deep etymological connection between "animal" and "animus": one who breathes, and breath and soul. To problematize this metaphor further, we may also turn our attention to the fact that many members of the animal kingdom do not have lungs to oxygenate the blood, but we relate best to those who do. Thus, our hierarchical thinking suggests that animals that breathe have souls.

Because its mysterious essence and cacophony expose language's inability to protect us from mortality, a key animal and *anima* cypher for Domanski is often the crow. While language may extend the ego, we cannot hide from death. The closer we move toward an insular reliance on language, the more it degenerates. Mortality is, in the end, our constant condition and Domanski's crows nudge us toward this recognition. Often his crows function as *psychopomps*, or escorts for souls moving on to the afterlife, as in "Tonic's Dark Shoulder" from *Parish of the Physic Moon*. For Domanski, the experience begins "at daybreak" when "the crows pour like medicine out of the trees / a tonic's black shoulder / nudging all those who know they'll leave no trace behind" (47). In this early stanza, the crows' presence appears cathartic. Later in the poem, however, Domanski equates them with intrusions into the human world: "they roost in more than branches / in the room's deepest corner their feathers stubble / such passageways that nature allows between worlds" (47). In these lines, then, the crows are ubiquitous via *limitrophy*. They are a positive force for the speaker, but exist in an undefined space. They have gained an expressive power through the poet's own encounter with them. Finally, their breath and spirit gives voice to the forest and they become "a shawled breath that has been breathed upon by quotations / from the forest small hours

around the base of pines" (47). The crows in this poem possess a language that Domanski cannot quite name. Their urgency to "begin the unlearned day / again and again" expresses a pre-language state, one that occurs at the limits of human language in the "quotations from the forest" that cannot be adequately transcribed (47). In the end, he can only experience the crows' medicinal presence.

In later collections sublime experiences are complicated by an equally overwhelming physical response to the encounter. In "High Bear in the Body," from *Parish of the Physic Moon* (1998), the poet transforms into new configurations:

> in these woods the bear inside the chest grows large
> high bear in the body castling soul for flesh
> essential snout so near to what the mind would like to be
> toothed and ripest mouth against skin warmed
> by the motion of organs repeating all the names of spirits
> that existed once as every human need. (56)

In this section of the poem, aptly titled "High Bear in the Body," the bear metaphorically overpowers and extricates itself from Domanski's body before it turns back and devours him.[14] The image also alludes to an *Ouroboros*, the mythological tail-eating snake that represents a perpetual sense of re-creation and a primordial wholeness that resonates from the genesis of the world into the present. Domanski's use of physical language, such as "chest," body," "flesh," "snout," "skin," "toothed," and "organs" juxtaposes the more metaphorical aspects of "soul," "mind," "spirits," and "need." It sets up the binary opposition between body and mind, the classic Cartesian debate used to differentiate animals from humans. The chess metaphor "castling" reinforces this binary, but also

enhances a primordial human/ bear convergence and a domestic, or at least, an architecturally defined space. While the chess metaphor reminds us of an ordered human world where rules apply, the bear's voraciousness overpowers order and the mind and soul are transposed for snout and flesh.

No longer passive, the bear overtakes Domanski's body, reinforcing a human/animal and spirit/body convergence in flux. In this sense, Domanski "move[s] from the 'ends of man,'" as Jacques Derrida would say, to the "'crossing of borders' between man and animal" (3). In other words, humans have reached so far toward their own ends that they have lost their central animality and their connection with nature. "Castling" becomes a species interchange between animals and humans, which may point to a predatorial or primeval spirit that we have forgotten to act upon as we have forgotten our roles as predators within a realm of animal/human continuity. Domanski's sense of plurality encourages new imaginings and opens a space where new interactions of human and animal can occur.

The spiritual energy captured in *limitrophy* reflects Domanski's greater awareness of a pre-existent, gestural language, the zoosemiotic connection as it were, where animals, through call and motion, convey a new sense of meaning to him. His melancholic version of a fourteenth-century Scottish ballad "Twa Corbies," meaning *two crows*, draws the carrion crows closer to the spiritual through an awareness that the crows share a pre-linguistic system of gesture as they did in "Tonic's Dark Shoulder," one that the poet cannot easily access. In the original ballad, a narrator recalls overhearing the two crows debating about how to eat a fallen knight. Domanski's poem, in contrast, begins in a winter forest where he finds "two dead crows lying in the snow / each body a trunk full

of God's dark clothes / to be worn on the Day of Judgment" (*AWU* 36). That their bodies are likened to religious vestments derives from the eschatological belief that there will be a final day for humans on earth and on that day God will send humans to heaven, purgatory, or hell, depending on the lives they have lived. That the crows' bodies are full of God's darkness suggests that they will be present, on God's side, during the Final Judgment and are therefore strongly aligned with divinity.

As the day draws to an end, Domanski contemplates the forest and the dead crows. He notices "a murder of crows just now scrolling along / the branches of an oak" (36). That the crows are "scrolling," or articulating older languages reinforces the idea that a symbolic order of language is broken by metaphor into semiotics and gesture and call. The crows lead Domanski beyond the limits of his symbolic language, which is fundamental to epistemological knowledge. The crows' semiotics echo Derrida's earlier understanding of *divinanimality*, as both writers suggest that the animal has the capacity to illuminate sacred elements in nature, which might move the poet beyond his own limits of language. The movement becomes clearer when Domanski suggests that this murder of crows performs death rites for the two dead ones with intentional semiotics:

> reading aloud from
> their Books of Hours
> inlay of black words gleaming up black pages
> into black books that snap their covers shut
> and fly away. (36)

The crows carry with them a black book with black pages and black words, which suggests an opaque syntax and script unreadable to humans. In this manner, Domanski

wonders how the crows mourn the physical loss of one of their own, and how they attempt to articulate this through their "reading aloud," with "their screed," and "their vows / rabbiting" (36-7). The parallel to human and sacred actions becomes parody and parable simultaneously, for the poet's interpretation of the crows' actions makes sense only through a rendering of them in human context. The crows, in fact, become the book itself, finally snapping "their covers shut" (36). Though he is willing to encounter the crows' unknown language, he must remain an outsider to their gestures and calls as the book is closed to him. In a parallel sense, Lippit contends

> [T]he economy of human subjectivity and speech is restricted: only human beings are capable of speech, which, in turn, founds the human subject. Animals enter that tautology as a phantasmatic counterpoint to human language. The animal voice establishes an imaginary place of being beyond the threshold of human discourse. (*Electric Animal* 15)

Human subjectivity and speech, Lippit suggests here, are restricted as they are housed in the referential abilities of language. The discrepancy echoes in many ways what feminist theorist Julia Kristeva refers to as the interaction between semiotic and symbolic elements. Kristeva's theory as developed in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984/1974) and *Desire in Language* (1980) argues that there is both a semiotic and a symbolic element present in the speaking subject. For her, the semiotic is often associated with pre-cultural and gestural movement, "distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign" and the doubling of language by women in order to manoeuver the patriarchal system where we are always reaching for something unnamable (*Revolution* 93). The symbolic, associated with patriarchal, codified grammar and structure makes reference possible. In terms of

animal studies, this reading lends itself well to Domanski's animal encounters, as his work also suggests that the symbolic order of language is broken by metaphor into semiotics or animal gesture that destabilizes human/animal hierarchy. It is why sharks can become "grey thumbs / torn from invisible hands," and a love poem can liken a woman to a cricket "sealed in the flesh" (*SLH* 71, *WL* 88). While we cannot fully escape from language, Domanski is the poet between systems. He must take the semiotic and work with it through the symbolic. "Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic," Kristeva admits, "no signifying system he produces can be either, 'exclusively' semiotic or, 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtness to both" (*Revolution* 93). Domanski's work foregrounds animals; they are strange presences that trouble the organized appearance of language. Such semiotic/symbolic flux also echoes Derrida's earlier understanding of *divinanimality.* Kristeva's and Derrida's observations offer both a means to read how the semiotic can become a site for resistance, and a means to foreground that animals have the capacity to illuminate sacred elements in nature which might then move the poet beyond the limits of his personal language.

Returning to "Twa Corbies" we can now see how Domanski locates himself in a space where he can observe, rather than participate in, natural occurrences. Much in the way that zoopoetics "revisits, examines, perplexes, provokes, and explores the agency of the nonhuman animal," this poem enlarges the crows' presence by granting them transformative powers (Moe, "Zoopoetics: A Look" 30). At the end of this particular poem, Domanski senses an inherently new zoopoetics, one that empowers his direct experience of the animal/void in the semiotic over his use of words or the symbolic:

easy to believe our lips whiten the edges of darkness

when we speak of darkness easy to fool ourselves. (37)

The extra space visually conveys a space of unknowing, that he experiences and yet cannot name. Again, such caesurae emphasize the limits of language by giving pause before turning the line back onto itself and admitting defeat. To underscore the fact that the crow's language becomes the dominant system in the poem, Domanski carefully begins and ends the poem with bird imagery. In the final moments, he states that he will stay by the river as the day grows dark, even as there are "behind my back *twa corbies* rolling / up their wounds calling it quits flying home once more" (37). The birds can fly into the darkening day specifically because they do not fool themselves with a dependence on language as a guide to experience. The mourning that Domanski witnesses, while transfigured by their semiotics, does not prevent the crows from moving on toward another day. They experience death directly, without explanation.

Domanski's mourning through the animal/spiritual configuration takes a very complex ecological turn in "Leviathan" from *All Our Wonder Unavenged*, where he explores the concept of Leviathan in terms of the Atlantic Canadian cod stock depletions of the 1990s. Depicted as an aquatic monster with chaotic forces, Leviathan is often identified with the whale or a dragonish creature. Domanski's Leviathan consumes greed. As a Biblical "dragon in the water," Leviathan symbolizes human avarice in its drive to harness and harvest the creatures of the oceans. In the Book of Job, we are asked: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? Or his tongue with a cord which though lettest down? . . . Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? Or his head with fish spears?" (*King James Version*, Job 41.1-7). Herman Melville later streamlines the concept of Leviathan

in his classic novel *Moby Dick*, which re-visions the creature in the guise of a sperm whale. Domanski's "Leviathan," subsequently, explores how unsustainable fishing practices deplete the oceans and metaphorically bankrupt the humans who live in close proximity to the ocean they drain of life. These practices rouse the sea monster as a creature of reckoning. Domanski's poem, however, goes beyond a simple literary revision by addressing the underlying marginality suffered by Maritime fishing communities in their current socio-economic plight, and their inability to extricate themselves from present ecological and environmental disasters. As the sub-title of the poem, "New Victoria, Cape Breton," suggests, Domanski makes specific note of place, which is a very small community on the east coast of Cape Breton.

Domanski's project echoes literary critic Wolfgang Hochbruck's observation that such communities become entangled in frustration that stems from the region's traditional sense of neglect. The untended condition, however, has empowering potential as it also provides a place from which Maritime poets can establish a new sense of identification with the region while tackling some very complex issues in the region:

> Atlantic Canada has long been "one of the involuntary margins of the British Empire, the American market economy and the Canadian nation state," but its poets appear to have found ways to embrace rather than mourn the margin. For them, the sea is no longer a resource that they may exploit for their living but a dynamic site of reflection on mythology, mortality, and memory. (19)

Through his own range of animal metaphors, Domanski's poem merges the interlocking forces of "mythology, mortality, and memory" (19). Beginning with villagers who fish to

survive, the poem points to those who have lost the sense of the sublime that the idea of the Leviathan once ignited in those close to the sea. Resource depletion and poverty have left the population spiritually bankrupt as they move towards the impending ground stock moratorium. For Domanski, however, it is not a matter of returning to Romantic notions of a replenishable sea, for he still struggles with a language inadequate for capturing the Leviathan and its ocean. By the end of the poem, the sea silences him, and any earlier folkish depictions of such a hardscrabble life are readily discarded.

Cultural critic Herb Wyile also addresses the problem of folkish depictions of the region that need to be replaced with very real questions concerning sustainability and an appreciation for our representations of the Atlantic world. In his most recent monograph, *Anne of Tim Hortons*, Wyile points to a critical change in Atlantic Canada's sense of regionalism:

> Underpinning essentialist Folk representations of the fishing life is the implicit presumption of the unlimited bounty of the sea. That is, if the Folk are engaged in a timeless relationship with the sea, the sea (however perilous and capricious) perforce will forever provide. A central aspect of the Atlantic provinces' current economic and cultural plight, however, is the demolition of that belief by the exhaustion of ground fish and other stocks and the consequent dilemma of what to do in the wake of recognizing this reality. (34)

The miscomprehension of the "unlimited bounty of the sea" is thoroughly explored in "Leviathan" where the very extraction of ground fish grows into a nightmarish experience for Domanski as the poem progresses. Beginning with his recollections at

twelve-years-old, visiting his cod-fishing family, we quickly sense that he wishes to distant himself from his relatives: "I spent a summer on that boat / almost anonymous among relatives / men I hardly knew" (20). As the poem proceeds, the language turns violent, emphasizing how the poet, even as a young boy, saw the fishing industry erasing the sublimity of the seascape. He recalls himself

> watching them drag
> each grey complexion day after day
> out of the sea's glistening face. (20)

We come to realize through Domanski's eyes that the extraction of cod from the ocean is not only physical but also spectral. By breaking the surface of the sea's "face," that humanizing quality forced onto nature, they distort a previous understanding of the ocean. Domanski conveys his relatives' loss of connection with the ocean and its life forms, as they live "between perdition and the thistle's root" (21). The reference here to perdition and the thistle may come from Matthew 7:16, which forewarns Christians to beware of false prophets as "ye shall know them by their fruits" (*King James Version*). St. Matthew cautions that false prophets offer not fruit, but thistle. The imagery is also part of Adam's curse after the Fall in Genesis where he must grow food among "thorns also and thistles" (*King James Version*, 3:18). Domanski's reference cautions against the overfishing practices of the region, practices which led to the cod moratorium in 1992. Being too focused on economic gain—the false prophets—his relatives overlook the spiritual connection with Leviathan and the ocean.

In section two of "Leviathan," Domanski explores his people's manner of cleaning fish. He sees the fish innards in terms of augury, and sets himself up as a seer, as

a mediator between the fish caught and killed, and the fish as natural resource. The fishes' power as vessels for collective history evokes the *mysterium* of the past, while new visions lead Domanski back, through language, to a time when the fish were still associated with divinity:

> My cousin would gut them one by one
> the offal being all the loose knots
> that held each soul in place
> a fishy soul full of inwardness
> the star's blindness
> the sea's trace of silence
>
> that bucket of offal was the most
> ancient of fables
> in there the witch ate her children
> the ogre returned home to find the intruder
> the worm found an eye alone in the grass. (21)

Through the gutted fish's unraveling, he traces a childhood understanding of fear as it might be distilled from Bavarian fairy tales.

He then moves further back into a collective history in which the dead fish carry "the trooper's ghost dawn / with a few strokes of blood in the air" and "the seven cities of Troy / whispering among themselves / inventing the hero" (22). The cod carry history, war, fallen civilizations, and fear: all uncontrollable and atrocious aspects of humanity.

But more than that, they gather into themselves the violence of men. By section three, the central figure troubles the sleep of those who fish:

> Leviathan
>
> would come each night to swallow us
>
> because slumber is the judgment of the sea
>
> because unconsciousness is the severity
>
> of that judgment unknowingness
>
> its penalty its retribution and sting. (22)

In what might be a philosophical parallel, Derrida writes that the role of the fictionalized animal, such as Domanski's Leviathan, is a means to control the animal through language. Like the poet, Derrida suggests, "We know the history of fabulization and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man" (37, emphasis in original). Domanski's Leviathan is threatening because it tampers with the nature of discourse. It swallows the humans, thus silencing them. Subsequently, Domanski sees that the depleted fish stocks take on a mythological context in their erasure: "all the fish in the ocean were still / and the stillness stretched itself / over something that had been empty forever" (*AWU* 22). "Stillness" suggests the dissociated relationship humans have with encountering the animal world, mismanaging resources, and finally emptying the oceans of life.

As the Leviathan swallows Domanski's human relatives, it transforms them into the very fish they had earlier extracted from the water: "while being swallowed we would each mouth / our name like hake trying to breathe on dry land" (22). The metaphor

suggests that the humans mouthing their names as they die like fish on land are as mortal, and as subject to erasure, as the fish they have decimated. Of the same biological order as cod, the hake returns the poem to the idea of the cod moratorium of the early 1990s. Without an ability to see the sublime or sacred nature of the fish, all of us are destined, in Domanski's thinking, to destroy ourselves.

Hybridity and the Animal in Domestic Spaces

Animals, in their fundamental embodiment of divinities, allow Domanski a means to move closer to a sense of the sublime. Such god figures are anti-allegorical. As gods and animals appear side-by-side, or even in hybrid form in his poems, they exhibit similitude through their shape-shifting dexterity. In such encounters, a god may appear as an animal while taking on a non-human/non-animal shape. His emerging sense of animal/divine hybridity illuminates the sublime while demonstrating the benefits of plurality. This interconnectivity—exposing the sense that animals are deeply entrenched in anthropocentric systems—echoes Derrida's earlier idea of a "chimerical discourse," in which he argues that all discourse surrounding the "animal" is elusive, double-natured (23). But this discourse also suggests that the animal is present in human nature, even if restrained. Derrida acknowledges that this quality is a contingency:

> 'crossing of borders' between man and animal. Passing across borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal, to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself. (3)

Domanski experiences this same "crossing" in a number of works. *Wolf-ladder*'s title poem, for instance, successfully underscores a "discourse" through its exploration of the relationship between humans and wolves. The interrelationship, as both move toward a combined spiritual experience, emphasizes wolves meddling and haunting human space and vice versa, until the wolf/human divide begins to blur. On each of the twelve "Rungs" of the wolf ladder or sections of the poem, a man and a woman recollect anecdotes and memories of wolf encounters while a metaphorical wolf weaves its way through the stories. The narrative shifts by ladder "Rungs." Each rung reveals another aspect of the developing relationship. The various points on the ladder demonstrate the lateral relationships that can occur only when humans relinquish control, and permit themselves to cross the language threshold.

In "Rung I," the wolf exists as a "howl / under the belted sky," which an unnamed woman equates to "petals falling on the grass" in hell (27). The rung is subtitled "Wolfache," a hybrid term underscoring the wolf's contemporary ecological plight. At "Rung II," the wolf moves closer to the house, as its "swampy breath, presses against the door. It's song drifting / through the house" (27). The etymological roots of the word animal—*animus*, meaning breath and spirit—again underscore a sense of the animal as spirit. An idea that further points to the wolf's all-encompassing presence inside and outside the poem. The wolf's integral song acknowledges the species divide which underscores the failure of the human project to control the outside world. As the wolf's song moves closer, the peripheral becomes the centre; humans are forced to adapt or suffer their own erasure. The house and the outside merge into an ambiguous space, which reveal the interconnectedness of environments.

On “Rung III,” wolves inform the woman’s childhood understanding of the world. The threat of the wolves is not physical so much as emotional. It sharpens the woman’s perceptions of the forest and her being in it. “I remember it,” she states, “the pigment of wolves blown violently through the / trees. I remember it, the fear across mended snow” (27). Though she refers to the snow as “mended,” the wolf’s pigment, or presence, resonates or taints throughout her memories. Even more than a menacing presence, it becomes a devourer of children on the next rung and “eats the pretty mouth pressed / against the mirror and lives on that, and that alone” (28). The wolf here becomes a vanity eater, reminding children not to admire themselves too long or remain solely in the human realm. However, with “Rung V,” the woman sees the wolf differently, as now “‘man and wolf / are one.’” The “naked” human/animal hybrids, emphasized by the single line “are one,” collectively lust after women, such as herself: “That they each desire the / same woman, long for the same full lips, / the same running hair” (28). Ironically, their nakedness becomes a disguise, which constitutes the actual threat to women. Domanski reinforces their disguise on “Rung VI,” as the man states that the wolf’s “hair is / our own darkest thought, its tail a braid / of three fears” (28). Their fears manifest as “one fear of the dark and / two fears of meeting a ragged stranger in the street” (28). The wolf then encompasses otherness of an unknown quality that emerges from darkness and a fear of the familiar and unfamiliar human, “the ragged stranger” that may disorder one’s sense of being.

On “Rung VII, “The House by the Rainy Shore,” the wolves become even more personal. Here, the woman recollects her grandmother calling forth her husband’s apparition, which returns to her in wolf form. Her inability to differentiate the human

from the animal suggests an inability of language to fully colonize the subject. The wolf, the woman says, "is what remained of my Grandfather / after everything else had fallen into the abyss." It is unclear if this grandfather has experienced a feral regression or merely a haunting by his own animality, as "a wolf is / simply a lover who has stumbled over the edge of the world" (29).[15]

By "Rung VIII," the wolf's howl has become its prayer, and Domanski's poem grows into a study of something akin again to a Derridian *divinanimality*. The man and wolf fuse through their common god, so that "the god of wolves must be the god of men" (29). Their change is important, as in "Rung IX" the wolf call gathers new significance after such a convergence. Here, the woman hears in the wolf's howl its plight and lament. She understands this as "a sister of the painful vow, / a nun quietly tearing at her beads," a uniquely Domanskian crosshatch of faith and animal, underscoring a collective sense of empathy.

Finally, by "Rung XI," the poem leads the reader to a feral space, itself a threshold, where the human and animal worlds have undergone a complete transition. The new space becomes "wereland" in the poem, where "The wolf-eared / corner where two worlds meet" (30). Even the page, the word represented, becomes a dual sign here. Strategically, the wolf opens the world for the humans at this forest threshold, the same forest where some see "a vague and indefinite fear" that can "verge on existential anxiety" (Pogue Harrison 82). Here, finally, Domanski's wolf/human hybrid plays on what Jean-François Lyotard has questioned about the "inhuman" part of human nature—a condition akin to dementia:

> What if what is "proper" to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman? . . . [This] system rather has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it. But the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think. (2)

The inhuman wolf inhabits human nature as its shadow, or ghost, as both Lyotard and Derrida suggest, "causing the forgetting of what escapes it." The point is not to return to an animal nature in Domanski's wolf-rich environment, but rather to recognize both the animal's difference and its centrality to what it is to be human.

Poetic Technique: Spacing, Gesture, Measure, Breath

Domanski tries to get beyond the restrictive nature of language on the page as another means to come closer to a Nietzschean first-order experience. Typography becomes integral to the experience as "The spiritual dimensionality comes from the openness you must have to all the possibilities of an empty page," Domanski insists. "This openness can present the poet with the *noumena* of existence" (*EP* 56). As with the structure of metaphor itself, he tries to illuminate the spiritual interpretive possibilities of the page through his line spacing and lengths, to draw the reader's attention to the sublime experience and spiritual experiences that overlap in a poem.

Spacing, such as the *medial caesura* or middle space, is essential for discovering the hiatus between awareness and the spiritual embodiment within his poetry. "The poet," as he writes of the divine, "can only point to it with what exists between the words he or she writes" (*PS* 12).

Spacing then, functions as visual markers to indicate the invisibility, or as markers for the invisible presence of the divine. Such a deliberate use of spacing, first explored in *Wolf-ladder* and further developed in *Stations of the Left Hand*, attempts to separate concrete images from their abstract counterparts, which can, at times, appear heavy-handed. It does not become a fully integrated characteristic of his work until *Parish of the Physic Moon*, and then is further developed in *All Our Wonder Unavenged*. In the later collections, the spacing gives the reader a moment to pause over a missing element, or an element of the experience too startling or sublime to be said. For example, in "Melencolia," from *Parish of the Physic Moon*, the spacing changes the initial reading of the couplet:

> for crickets an absence of goodbyes
>
> is all they have such divinations. (44)

Rather than pointing out the crickets' lack of language, the space locates the sacredness in the crickets' sense of a perpetual present, a living without departures. It makes their inability to say goodbye numinous. The title poem from this same collection offers further evidence of Domanski's diverse use of spacing:

> the turning of a page the white beneath the words
>
> words that didn't exist except as scales along the back. (32)

Such spaces emphasize that the white openness of the empty page is counter-linguistic to the printed word. There are huge ambiguities if the words do not exist. The spacing forces Domanski to re-think language's place on the blank page. As the letters transform into reptile or fish scales, they reinforce the idea that there are words that are no longer there or words that exist in a new form: as scales. While the reptilian animal could refer

to contemporary animals with scales, it also returns us to reptiles in evolutionary terms. The primordial moment when sea creatures left the waters and climbed onto land, bringing the potential for words as scales with them, closes the species gap (as the spacing suggests) between humans and animals. The evolutionary allusion returns all breathing creatures to that first moment of stepping onto land and breathing air.

In the title poem from *All Our Wonder Unavenged*, Domanski uses such a typological gap to emphasize a sense of liminality, a space that exists between spiritual practices and animal encounter:

> the oncoming twilight
> is the perfect time to find our way so the Celts believed
> that sacred in-between time between worlds betwixt night and day
> when all crossings are possible freeing us from duality
> Dharma Path the Buddhists call it
> Pollen Path of Beauty to quote the wisdom of the Navaho
> and the bees would agree returning once more from the banks of the river. (85)

The line spacing here points to a tenuous equilibrium between what initially appears as varying belief systems. A sense of spiritualism or sacredness exists in each separate line through the specific belief explored, which the spacing complements. This frees "us from duality" by emphasizing similarities in how various spiritual practices tackle the "in-between," that liminal space where the bees, first and most naturally, become part of the experience.

In an interview, Domanski emphasizes that the use of the longer line, as in *All Our Wonder Unavenged* and *The Stations of the Left Hand*, aids in informing content. The long line, he says, "helps to encompass more of that sense of being in the world" (qtd. in Cunningham). We are more attentive because the long line lends itself to a more charitable rendering of the world by not placing special emphasis on the first person subject, the Romantic poet's "I," which here becomes "simply another aspect of nature" (Cunningham). In attempting to move beyond the subjective stance through the long line, Domanski does not, however, lose "the prime importance, the sacredness of what's surrounding" him, which the spiritual experience expresses through the accompanying animal metaphors (Cunningham).

Domanski's reinscribing nature as the centre of an experience evokes Keats' notion of a Wordsworthian or "egotistical sublime," which points to an excessively self-interested position in Romantic poetry (1, 387). While Wordsworth suggested that poetry was "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling," his forays into the natural world do not reflect this world, but his own emotions and contemplative thoughts (*Lyrical Ballads* 8). As he mediates on his experiences in the natural world through his own personality, his forays foreground the ego. Domanski, conversely, wants to empty poetry of self and ego. He wants to re-inscribe nature as the centre of an experience, thus leaning closer to Keat's "negative capability": a phenomenological turn for those who seek the ability to rest in uncertainty. Wordsworth's reading treats Nature as a replenishable source of inspiration and a reflective surface that reveals only himself. For Domanski, waiting for the animal encounter and the world to gesture, in spite of his presence, rewards his patience and his lack of articulation.

Jed Rasula's understanding of the line further clarifies the problem: "The poetics of open field/open form poetry is much engaged with the old lore as a legacy affording access to the remote past" (49). "A Petition of Clouds" from *All Our Wonder Unavenged* exemplifies Domanski's desire to go beyond this type of "legacy" and subjectivity that these writers address. Here, he contemplates the futility of seeking the "self," and humanity's inescapable need to point to it, especially through naming and writing. He recognizes instead

> the memory of who we are a namelessness soaked through
> with transcendence which preserves us despite everything
> which is our dread which is our consolation. (69)

His intentional use of the *medial caesura* and the long line underscores the paradoxical nature of humanity, that desire for and avoidance of transcendence.

Conversely, Domanski does not want to experience "hearing through himself" so much as hearing the outside world directly, in order to understand. He conveys this want in "Bay of Fundy," from *Parish of the Physic Moon*, a poem that celebrates the world's highest tides, as they exist between the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. His attentiveness to a region, as he struggles against the stereotypical sense of it, inspires him to listen and learn. He writes, "I come here so that this place will ask things of me / ask me to be mute" (7). In effect, this voice expresses an exhaustion of the Romantic self, which Charles Olson, a major theorist and practioner of open field poetry, praises in his 1950s essay, "Projective Verse." Olson calls for a more sustainable verse—projective or OPEN verse—as he saw the traditional line and stanza hindering the poem in its blocking of "energy transferred" between the poet and the natural world (25). Much in the way

Domanski insists on remaining mute and allowing the natural world to meet him in his immobile state, Olson argues that for the poet to remain a grounded "participant in the larger force" of nature, "he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share" (25). Domanski's interest is not so much in the secrets of objects, but in the secrets of the animals around him.

Biology and Metaphor

While Domanski's understanding of the animal as a transitional figure allows him poetic contemplation or a meditation on divine immanence in nature, it also allows him poetic meditation on scientific experiment and explorations in relation to nature. Domanski's early interest in biological and animal metaphors appears in his first poetry collection, *The Cape Breton Book of the Dead* (1975). Although critic Stephen Scobie found the "animal poems" in this collection "not entirely successful," they set into motion Domanski's career-long exploration for the nature of the animal encounter (88). Even this early, we find his search to "hear / the dog call everything / by its proper name" (89). The new taxonomy already hints at the fact that the "proper name" means something different to the dog than to the poet. In one of the poems, aptly titled "Edge," he confesses:

> I've come to the edge of the forest
> that is capable of anything
> wolves will not enter
> but become ground beetles. (*CBBD* 41)

The forest's edge, a liminal space, becomes a threshold where decomposition takes place. As the wolves cannot enter, the space takes on a menacing quality that further propagates

a *res nullius*, a space belonging to no one, where the lower order of creatures oversee the natural order. The biological re-ordering of existence here coincides with Domanski's early doubts about human advocacy of the natural world.

In "Walking Down to Acheron," he finds the world a Thompsonian litmus test for verity. Domanski does not fear the unknown, but studies it through the physical sciences as a means to reach an experience of awe:

> I'll console myself with the flowering-rush growing
> along the shoreline with its rhizomes in deep nativity
> with speckled trout steadying themselves in the current
> each fin a hunch that the world is still there
> each move of their tails a doubt a push of suspicion. (*AWU* 41)

That he will "console" himself with rhizomes and speckled trout, which offer no answers, emphasizes the stanza's physical and metaphysical transgressions. In this way, the poem offers a new way of reading discordant fields. Of equal worth, in this context, is ecofeminist Carol Merchant's criticism that "the transition from the organism to the machine as the dominant metaphor binding together the cosmos, society, and the self into a singular cultural reality—a world view" has been one of the most damaging perspectives that yet resonate today (xxii). The poem "Fata Morgana" returns to the animal's presence, re-centreing the individual's world, despite the machine. In this poem, Domanski's return to the animal encounter and his realization that he does not need to be caught up in technology lifts him out of disillusionment with office drudgery:

> you're not lost
> this is the earth

you’re not human

but a fox or a rabbit

your life behind a desk

was an illusion

the shining city a madness

brought on by fatigue

there aren’t any cars or telephones

there never were. (*SLH* 66)

He returns to confront the enclosure of man-made space in “Writing” as well:

in vacant office towers across town

elevators are stables where horses and hay

are lowered slowly to the Underworld

cables surrounded by a pause in this poem

allow for their descent. (*PPM* 3)

In both of these examples, the metaphors defamiliarize the dour office buildings. The imagery takes on mythological proportions and illuminates the magic of the organism, be it fox, rabbit or horse. Domanski’s early poetry demonstrates that the natural sciences carry their own cultural biases, and he would agree with Merchant that “norms and social ideologies, along with religious and philosophical assumptions, form an important component of the conceptual framework brought to the study of a scientific problem”

(xxii). In exploring this influence, the poetry allows him to take on animal shapes in his efforts to escape the limits of that imposing world.

Initially, Domanski turns his attention to the natural sciences in an effort to show how the animal's presence meanders through cultural systems and destabilizes binaries. His explorations reposition the animal at a point that allows a viable awakening of language in the reader, even while discrediting simple Cartesian dualities. He makes this difference clear in "An Old Amphibious God," from *Wolf-ladder*: "I pick up the wolf by its tooth / the amoeba by its tail / and the man by his word" (36). Here, the animals' physical characteristics stand in opposition to the human's abstract characteristics against which Merchant cautioned earlier. Separate characteristics are dominant in each species of being. Domanski's poetics reside in an ongoing exploration of this difference. As poet Brian Bartlett has pointed out, Domanski's aesthetic is not so much one of "social, economic, or nationalistic struggles as one of geological and biological change, mythic resonances, and religious, philosophical, and scientific thought" (x). The odd mix of seemingly incongruous points of view opens up many of the poems to an exchange of animal/human values where "one barking dog" gives "us a distraction from the zodiac" (*AWU* 115).

The biological tropes and vocabulary that thread through the work here, particularly in his later collections, *Parish of the Physic Moon* and *All Our Wonder Unavenged*, underscore his concern for how scientific objectivity often attempts to overshadow first person subjective experience. Two ways that he confronts this dilemma, in his work are by questioning rigid empirical authority and by exposing culturally sanctioned taboos pertaining to the biological processes such as decay, rot, and

decomposition. “In the Field of Orison” from *Parish of the Physic Moon* foregrounds such “sweet decay” and the “compaction of birth and death” (75). Though “Orison” is a prayer asking for divine guidance, Domanski’s pantheistic explorations begin in the soil and the biological cycles around him. He fuses his invocations to the biological, the literal soil of the earth, so that they become a “sacred haem numinous dunghill” (74). Haem, an iron ion characterized by its red organic pigment, links the iron oxide found in red soil and the hemoglobin found in vertebrates and in some fungi and plants. The parallelism creates a dialectic in which blood and dunghill become inseparable. Dunghill, as digested matter, is as essential as haem to biological cycles. Similarly, Domanski’s interest in the decomposition trope occurs in the title poem, “All our Wonder Unavenged,” where he is “listening to the language of the soil” by sitting “quietly without moving” (86). In this attentive state of listening he comes to understand how the quiet possesses an animated existence:

> buried all around me
>
> seeds lie on their side longing upwards to visible air
>
> while dusk is fall honeymooning the shadows
>
> darkening the medicine the metaphysics of grass
>
> while microbes repeat their silent mantras to themselves
>
> soundless and drifting all woebegone and woken. (86)

Domanski’s attentiveness to the surrounding growth and decomposition cycles points to his early interest in fusing scientific thinking with subjectivity. The elegiac tone of this stanza exposes his sense of loss for the exhausted growth. Because the line containing the

microbes does not contain a *medial caesura,* it reinforces his sense of continuity. The microbes and mantras, in harmony, continue to decompose the living world around him.

Paradoxically, however, Domanski's experiences are still limited to the language he must use to express them. "[S]cience cannot do without the metaphor," Mark Johnson posits, because "all theories are elaborations of basic metaphors or systems of metaphors" (42). It is possible, however, that animal metaphors which include biology expand the poet's range of expressions while making the natural sciences a more fluid field of possibilities. Domanski's poetry celebrates a certain marginality, found in many poets of the region, which "can be geographical, epistemological, cultural, and aesthetic, and all of these terms provide a context for examining contemporary Maritime poetry of sea and shore" (Campbell 152).

Again, in "What the Bestiary Said" from *Parish of the Physic Moon*, Domanski attempts to enter this liminal space at the forest's edge in an effort to extricate himself from the hardships of human existence. Here, the poet intentionally allows forest animals to strip him of human characteristics:

> I remembered what the bestiary said
> and allowed the deer of the slender sadness
> to take my voice and my hearing
> the wolf of the impenetrable eyes
> to remove my flesh and bone
> the salmon to take my spirit
> and I lay on lichens worn clean
> by whispers close to the ground

so that I was the nothingness there

with only the beetle's breath to carry me till morning. (35)

The finality in the line, "I was nothingness there," reflects a poetic act of self-effacement, an early move that sets the stage for later explorations of animal agency and a non-human naturalism. Subsequently, "slender sadness" is an apt term to use in conjunction with the deer. It may reflect a Japanese aesthetic, a spiritual concept that has biological significance. Derived from *mono no aware*, meaning "the pathos of life," slender sadness is the notion that life is transient and full of sadness (De Mente 125). The Japanese allusion reflects Domanski's own sense of impermanence, manifest through his continued allusions to decomposition, where "worms are moments / of a former earth" (*SLH* 62). It also reinforces his understanding that humans desire permanence, even if we only live through change. Impermanence is the crux of the pathos of the human dilemma, as "our voices" are "swallowed / by passing birds" (*WL* 25). To celebrate the cycle of life and death, Domanski uses a new rhetorical energy, based on non-human experience, which complements the dissolution of his identity at the moment when he becomes "a few feathers and a clock face" (*PPM* 37). Consequently, this language also conflates the animals' spectral quality, and the poem gains a new understanding of life even as Domanski's rhetorical subjectivity breaks down. Finally, he appreciates an egoless epiphany:

no self as luminous

as this white moth

which falls like an absence of awareness

an awareness falls to the ground. (*SLH* 81)

The crescendo toward his own "nothingness" returns the poem to the etymological root of animals: *animus*. Such a spirit breathes the poem into its own bestiary, even as "the beetle's breath" carries him away.

Each of the animals used in the poem engage with *animus* to bring him closer to the earth and to the animal encounter. Through the bestiary, the deer's voice, the lichen's whisper, and the beetle's breath he returns to the earth by means of the animals' semiotic associations, as if they were signs opening into a new experiential relationship. He then moves closer to the earth and to the multiplicity of organisms that inhabit the soil as the decomposition begins.

In *All Our Wonder Unavenged*, Domanski writes of a starling whose mercurial nature sets it apart. And the metaphors in "A Petition to Clouds" exemplify again the Derridean notion of *limitrophy* as a state-of-being falling between experience and the strict categories of language. At the same time, the poet emphasizes how a dependence on language does not lead away from an awareness of liminality. The starling, as a biological metaphor, points to how unreliable both language and science can be along the borders of names and descriptions:

> a starling flies through her own network of nerves
> with no means of escape threading being
> to nonbeing as we all do. (68)

Though the starling skirts the pitfalls of Domanski's world of language, its existence parallels that of humans in that no living creature can escape from its own sense of mortality. The starling reveals this vulnerability by being open to mystery. In defining the difference of the animal in zoosemiotics, Thomas A. Sebeok criticizes a tradition where

"the animal easily becomes a cultural object, a kind of information that—as a result of a given system of socio-cultural values—determines a gap, if not a straight reconfiguration, between signifier and signified" (qtd. in Martinelli 125). Space, represented by the animal metaphor, constitutes the actual connection for Domanski to the earlier idea of *limitrophy*—the animal, as a living presence, exists in a space not wholly defined by language. Domanski does not judge the starling's "threading" the air, as it is only a difference in degree to comparable human activity, for humans too live in the gap between known and unknown.

"Ars Poetica" is one of the most complete examples in *All Our Wonder Unavenged* of Domanski's preoccupation with these shared biological processes and the unknown. The first section makes no mention of the poet, thus emphasizing a return of the natural world at the terminus of land and ocean where the waves are a

> flash of time against land the water striking
> a continuance a revelation inside itself. (90)

The first lines of the poem set up the biological metaphor for death that conveys the mood: "a day slow and uneven like a dead rabbit / breathing from the other side" (90). The space between "continuance" and "revelation" reinforces Domanski's project of highlighting absence and presence through the *medial caesura*, as "Poetry carries us, not just on the backs of words, but also on the spaces between the words" (*PS* 8). Breaking the line at "dead rabbit" invokes the naturalistic verisimilitude of the decomposition process, which is then challenged in the second line as the rabbit is resurrected "from the other side." Resurrection troubles the more straightforward understanding of the rabbit's

death and organic decay. The rabbit in its organic decomposition cannot be separated from its failure to remain in a language of taxonomy.

Juxtaposing biological cycles and spiritual states where "gospels" and "revelations" occur emphasizes Domanski's syncretic understanding of the rabbit's death. Because of his heterogeneous belief system, he refuses to commit to an orthodox scientific understanding of the natural world. In other words, Domanski's interpretations of the cycles of life and death are much more tenuous and uncertain than simple renderings of a biological mandate. His project questions the fundamental idea that living things must cycle through life and death in only one way.

The liminal thinking here reinforces his desire to ground the spiritual through the material, as the material is more accessible through perception. Domanski creates a world with the rabbit, which allows for the unknown, as it acknowledges that systems like biology and language do not always achieve a complete understanding. Nothing simply lives and dies, as separate acts, because life and death are part of the same cycle. The process, for the poet, is always life. Subsequently, this liminal space metaphor goes further by exposing the limits of language generally, and specifically the failure of words to accurately connect expression to experience. In part 2 of "Ars Poetica," he suggests that the materiality of the mind houses the spiritual experience:

> no shadows inside the body that's what the mind's for
> shadows and ghosts wandering about in neurohormones. (91)

Here, the poet associates chemical activity in the brain with spectral or shadowy thoughts in order to scrutinize how the mind functions. While he acknowledges that "neurohormones" are determiners of the brain activity, as they are the switchboards of the

nervous system, there is another facet to the mind: the inexplicable spectrum of cogitation and imagining that we experience. This facet complicates, for Domanski, what experience means. How does one reconcile the synaptic processes with creation, as thoughts are not experiences themselves, even though they are conveyed through the nervous system? Domanski's thinking here may point to his syncretic spirituality as a means to explain the physical, as the dead rabbit breathes from the other side. For him, this is the nexus of poetic creation, as he writes in *Earthly Pages*:

> Lacking a cogent theory of how neural activity gives rise to intuition we are often left with the idea that intuition is created *ex nihilo*, which brings with it the notion of the supernatural somehow lending a hand. (*EP* 57)

If intuition is supernaturally inspired, it is only because we do not understand the connection of the mind to the material world. For Domanski, seeking out an understanding of the world that takes into consideration the nature of the unknown can lead to interconnectivity and creativity, forces which a purely empirical epistemology overlooks. "The absolute," as the poem says, appears "blackened by the half-dark of language," because language is not the source of knowledge (*AWU* 91). His insistence on exploring the processes of decomposition in this collection reflects his belief that "[a]mazement also demands that we see the darkness inherent in everything, that we see the destructiveness implicit in creation and its attending grief" (*PS* 7). Decompositions, therefore, become a counterbalance to the orientations toward overzealous growth of human populations. And it reflects the very nature of language as a volatile element. Thus, the rabbit in this poem remains suspended between polarities. What Domanski calls

the "pre-verbal reality" can only be returned to through metaphor, as metaphor "pushes us beyond language" (7).

Later in "Ars Poetica," he recognizes that living metaphors actually exist in the margins of scientific language. In some ways, this allows him to restore a sense of cohesion between biology and the animal. We can see this in the next section of the poem:

> each word biting the tail of the next
>
> bestiary of the thin anthem. (*AWU* 91)

The exaggerated line breaks and spacing here evoke the physical mouth/tail connection of the words, a traditional *Ouroboros* image. The bestiary fuses with language, allowing an ontological shift through the poem's syntax. Words themselves, in this case, are the "thin anthem." Yet they represent an inadequate anthem, in the same sense that *bestiary* is an inadequate word for explaining animals. Domanski's animals are, therefore, always escaping the "bestiary" of the poem. His collection of animals, constrained at the edges of language, signifies the artificial connection between language and natural world. He further develops this usage of "anthem" in the lines

> the one the self sings when no one is watching
>
> a melody worded through with time remembering
>
> the storyline dark beginning dark end. (91)

The change here makes this new anthem his own, one that moves from the shadows the mind creates to the uncertainty that his poetry witnesses.

In the third section, Domanski returns to the ephemeral nature of language. The brief existence of the words of the poem relates to the animal's own elusive nature, and its inexpressibility through the poetry:

> given time we might learn to read but never scribble
> a single sentence that will be weightless and endure
>
> behind our backs words sign-off return to the unwritten
> the unspoken to the stone's breath to the steady absence
> of what keeps us here our lexicons fading across tips
> of ragweed and groundsel. (92)

Though he claims that poetry must remain fluid in order to support the dynamics of the metaphor, he likewise realizes that he is not in control of even his own language because of its ephemeral quality. The failure of poetry, as with all language, is inevitable. In the "Afterword" to *Earthly Pages*, he confesses:

> I can't write without knowing that each thing I define will be erased in time. There are no safe and secure places for language. The death of meaning is like the extinction of a species. But other meanings come forth to fill each ecological niche. The poet routinely wipes out entire taxonomic groups in order to make room for new forms of life. This culling is necessary; the poet who doesn't do this is in peril. You must join with the fragility of sentience, recognize the elementary or undifferentiated consciousness where language originates. (54)

Recognition of the "fragility of sentience" in the face of any semiotic rendering explicitly reveals his own awareness of his poetry's failure as language. While he acknowledges that language mutates and dies out, as metaphors become clichés and truth becomes platitudes, he cannot escape the knowledge that uncertainty itself stems from his own reliance on language.[16] While he states that "entire taxonomic groups" will undergo erasure, it is actually language that must finally undergo erasure. Metaphor, ironically, as it tests the limits of strict meaning, becomes the only way to attempt to keep language alive. His sense of fragility comes from a forced return to language in the world, a tenuous space that cannot be controlled, but in which humans live.

In the fourth section of "Ars Poetica," Domanski uses animal metaphors to highlight the complex minutiae of biological processes even as they are tied back to the divine parallels mentioned earlier:

Dionysus in the intestinal flora

of an earthworm staggering drunk on soil. (*AWU* 93)

The ambiguity as to whether it is Dionysus or the earthworm that is "staggering" adds to the plurality of intended meanings. Metaphors such as this "help in freeing us of our singularity," Domanski argues (S.D. Johnson 253). Dionysus as earthworm is a jarring initial reference, as the classical god is normally associated with the grandeur of leopards and panthers, and always with the power of more charismatic predators. But here, Dionysus, as the deity of inebriation, underscores a nature inebriated on itself. Nature's profundity, its over-productivity, is like a drunkenness of weird and strange diversity, as Domanski's example of the intestinal flora of an earthworm attests. Domanski's attention

to the smallest details in nature reflects his interest in the larger, Dionysian excesses. Even in the intestinal track of an earthworm, nature is drunk on its own wild productivity.

In the end, the earthworm metaphor alters the way in which we conceive of the spiritual power of Dionysus. As Mark Johnson suggests in his study on metaphoric language, the type of god/animal metaphor Domanski finds is not only "a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language," it can finally be a metaphor that shapes "our ordinary conceptual system," and "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day . . ." (3). The focus on spores and earthworms reflects another aspect of Johnson's observation, as Domanski explores natural cycles that are so often overlooked in human preoccupations. The semiotic interaction between the god and the worm underscores poetry's power to shape a new thinking. The animal metaphors provide Domanski a means by which he can override language's authority while still retaining language's ability to evoke the fecundity of the world.

In Domanski's "A History of Sunlight," animals finally supplant the divine creator as the sacred element in a dark moment of meditation undergoing decomposition. But in this new view, humans challenge the natural order. The poet writes: "loneliness of deep forests old growths dark with genetic / drainage" (*AWU* 60). To emphasize the loss of this undeveloped space and to further this ecological concern with deforestation, Domanski uses the loss of the creatures, such as the spider, who are "part of the rust and pulse / of the day falling" (60). He identifies with these animal others: "presence is what I saw yesterday in the dead robin / extending its wings on a slow glide into the earth / beetles moving like fingernails along its back" (60). The memory is ironic because the

presence he speaks of is no longer present. It has, instead, become an absence now remembered, cast into doubt by the language of memory. Thus the bird, like the dead rabbit of the earlier poem, "Ars Poetica," gains presence in its disappearance through decomposition. It forces the poet to acknowledge connections between all living creatures that verge on a mutual identity.[17] Although self-awareness differs among creatures, we share a sense of presence or being. Lippit surmises this animal element as the key to a new transcendental experience. "The animal," he writes, "is magnetic because it draws the world-building subject toward an impossible convergence with the limits of world," allowing the animals, as metaphor, to re-animate and join the natural world again (*Electric Animal* 166). Domanski does this both by fusing the animal and spiritual realms, and by drawing into question the language we use to frame these relationships.

Domanski's explorations in "A History of Sunlight" and "Ars Poetica" underscore his wonder at the forest's minutiae. He achieves, in part, an understanding of the "mystery" inherent in natural process only by the conscious act of relinquishing human control, such as poet Wendell Berry suggests:

> To walk in the woods, mindful only of the physical extent of it, is to go perhaps as owner, or as knower, confident of one's own history and of one's own importance. But to go there, mindful as well of its temporal extent, of the age of it, and of all that led up to the present life of it, and of all that will probably follow it, is to feel oneself a flea in the pelt of a great living thing, the discrepancy between its life and one's own so great that it cannot be imagined. One has come into the presence of mystery. ("Native Hill" 25-6)

Coming into mystery opens up yet another dimension of biological and spiritual explorations. Domanski returns to the forest's edge to experience a renewed sense of its diversity, and to somehow regenerate his own limited sense of self. In the title poem "Parish of the Physic Moon," he articulates his sense of a world overrun with life:

> hard to live with all those presences among the trees
> snakes placing subspaces beneath every movement
> each fox a spirit of dominions overgrown with existence
> patterns implacable rituals merciless
> hawks in their banner mice in their afterlives. (PPM 30)

The stanza teems with a mysterious quality of lushness that the poet finds overwhelming because nature presents him with a language he cannot speak, as he cannot understand its rituals, or the actions of its animal inhabitants. The poet's "dominions" are continuously overgrown with an immediate sense of life he cannot control, or interpret. "[T]he driving force behind all this fecundity is a terrible pressure," Annie Dillard suggests, " . . . the pressure of birth and growth, the pressure that splits the bark of trees and shoots out seeds, that squeezes out the egg and bursts the pupa, that hungers and lusts and drives the creature relentlessly toward its own death" (163). In the end, this movement toward death presents Domanski with the mystery of life outside human control. It is the key to the biological pressure of need that the poetry expresses in trying to articulate the experience. And it is this which finally returns him to the sheer overwhelming sense of the world in transition.

Domanski's explorations of a possible *divinanimality* and renewed biology at the poetic threshold of metaphor celebrate both the mystery and the threat of the unknown. It

sets the stage for the impending meeting between the poet who is "motionless in the stillness" and essentially without words, and the greater spiritual powers. As he acknowledges, forests "are the footsteps of our master / coming home the long way through worlds" (*AWU* 97). By decentering the human, Domanski's work not only creates for the reader a wider lens to view Atlantic Canada in reference to his own fantastical inner world, but it offers an opportunity to witness a phenomenological unbalancing that returns us to experience. As Campbell attests, "To be marginal in a literal sense is to live at the edge of a continent, but to be figuratively marginal is a more complex condition" (156). The complexity might be a mystery lived through, and experienced by both the poet and the reader as they come together across the field of language.

To re-think the animal, then, Domanski troubles the notion of human superiority, addressing the isolation inherent in an anthropocentric reading of the world. In their present state, the poet says, humans are incapable of achieving transcendental enlightenment as they privilege language over spiritual prosperity. By incorporating the residual power of mythological elements, Domanski suspends human history inside and outside the animal/god continuum, in what Derrida has called an "irreducible living multiplicity" (41). Thus, Domanski provides trail markers for those places where interconnectivity went awry. Through his use of the natural sciences, animal metaphors foreground how all complex cycles are interconnected. It is, in essence, a "convergence of language and body" that provides Domanski with a means to move closer to the animal, and subsequently to the world (Lippit, *Electric Animal* 146).

While Domanski's project seeks out metaphors' dynamic possibilities through metaphysical and physical encounters, John Steffler reaches toward a renewal of regional centredness by feminizing and animalizing the landscape. For that reason, Chapter 3 of this study, "John Steffler: A Way to Corner Myself," will explore how the poet participates in "a retrieval of regional bearings" through his encounters with Newfoundland and the animal that haunts the people and the land with its synergetic and troubling animal presence (Whalen 33). Steffler's peripatetic poetry fuses his extensive knowledge of Newfoundland, memory, physical sensuality, and the animal into a new arrangement of masculine vulnerability. Dissonance and the animal encounter become primarily a physical meeting of language and body for Steffler. While Domanski challenges the rigidity of the human condition, and points to its failure at the limits of language and wonder, Steffler expresses languages' inability to capture sublimity in the chimerical landscape. Domanski's observations inadvertently foreshadow Steffler's work in the next chapter: "There's so little we comprehend," Domanski insists, "yet we keep coming back / to the world" (*AWU* 64). At the centre of Steffler's work, then, is the realization that the only failure in experiencing the living world comes when one insists on experiencing it at the limits of language rather than the limits of the animal.

Chapter 3: John Steffler: A Way to Corner Myself

Truth does not inhabit only the inner man, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.

(Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*)

One of the strongest voices to consider Newfoundland's relationship to the land and to its animals is former Parliamentary Poet-Laureate, John Steffler. Steffler is a contradictory figure; this chapter will show how he often leads readers to disagree with his position through his zoopoetics. Steffler's understanding of Newfoundland also perpetuates his contradictory style. The province often manifest for him as an uncontrollable animal that refuses to be named, one that rears up, toothed, sharp, and often violently refusing his handling, one he wishes would play a feminized surrogate for his troubled relationships. While his human relationships are not simply the cause of his search for animal relationships, his feminization of the animal and the landscape is a product of his already problematic relationships with the opposite sex. Tackling Newfoundland in this way necessitates inquiries into different kinds of relationships, into alienation, and into the rift between the world and the poet. But most importantly, his poetry moves from various controlling measures to the landscape's ability to animalize or become animalistic: "I don't see landscape as a backdrop to our culture," he contends, "but as a living entity to which we are connected, a kind of 'character,' a kind of primitive deity with which we have a complex, deep relationship" ("Ten Questions"). Specifically, his "complex, deep relationship" with the region reads Newfoundland's

landscape as an animal, a reading cultivated through his detailed findings along the province's west coast, near Corner Brook—his adoptive home from 1974 until recently—as six of his seven poetry collections attest. As Steffler states, "An important part of getting to know Newfoundland and coming to terms with it—its climate and 'foreign' culture—for me, involved getting to know its landscape, getting out in it, living close to it" ("Ten Questions"). The living relationship, however, is not something he can control. The animalization of the landscape, therefore, often reflects his isolation and struggle to dominate his world.

His first collection, *An Explanation of Yellow* (1981), written during his university years in Ontario, might be considered a collection of juvenilia, and does not directly address the question of animalization. *The Grey Islands* (1985), his second collection, however, was written ten years after he moved to Newfoundland. It demonstrates the influence of the East Coast of Canada on his work, as it explores the harsh climatic conditions, the lack of good farmland and soil on a mostly rock province, and the outpost style of life. Newfoundland, as seen through the eyes of a recent transplant to the island, captures his anxiety toward the undomesticated land. The wildness is a potent state of being, where even scrub spruce take on frightening animal qualities, as they are "so deliberately set they claw / cries and speeches out of the wind, moaning / singing their furious stories" (158). *The Wreckage of Play* (1988) continues to grapple with the starkness of the island and the poet's inability to alleviate an anxiety based on his own difference. In this collection he writes in a tent at midnight while "dueling with animals and saints / at the same time" (47). *That Night We Were Ravenous* (1998) furthers his discovery of an animalized Newfoundland by exploring the physical and emotional

connections to landscape. Steffler's poetic personae are often rugged, masculine individuals who face the raw and visceral elemental forces of nature.

Masculinity and the presence of animals are very much foregrounded in *That Night We Were Ravenous*, as the fourth section "Animal" attests. In the guise of St. George, he crosses "a frozen lake with some huge / creature swimming underneath" (91). Slaying the dragon is a near orgasmic experience for him—a "rampaging / heat swelling / my body" as he carries his phallic sword high and throws off his armour "before it burst" (90). *Helix* (2002), a new and selected collection, draws from the previous three collections written in Newfoundland. Its poems are lyrical meditations on place and liminal spaces, which encourage Steffler's sense of seclusion and displacement. His most recent collection *Lookout* (2010) continues to investigate these concerns with the poet's relationship to his surroundings. He has said that this collection is "a kind of goodbye to the island and its people" ("Ten Questions"). Even after thirty years living in Newfoundland, however, Steffler confesses that knowing and articulating the island is a futile project, because "even in beauty's beauty / it's possible not to know one word in the language / of sea smell" (*Lookout* 32). His outsider status carves out a privileged position for him to remain as an observer even though it also compounds his sense of alienation. In this, his poetry speaks to critic Terry Whalen's observation that "neo-provincialism," in contrast to parochialism in Atlantic Canadian writing, delivers "a new faith in a home . . . which trusts the cultural bearings of the region instead of uncritically consenting to bearings that beckon from down the road, over the pond, or across the border" (33-4). In particular, Steffler's "faith in home" opens up the possibilities of animal encounters in Newfoundland through complex metaphors that uncover the very

animal alive within language. The woodpecker in *That Night We Were Ravenous*, for instance, is not only a raucous creature, but also a familiar to the poet, "striking the word *wood* / in every language on earth" (33).

In each of these collections, the process of animalization has specific traits, as animals challenge representations of language that are too often based on the perceptions of the human observer. Steffler's troubled thinking about animals becomes a means to create plural centres for re-presenting Newfoundland. There is friction in the exchange between his own symbolic system of representation (poetry) and the physical world he shares with other animals. His heightened attunement and, conversely, his disconnection with the island and its people, promote his desire to colonize the physical world and align his thoughts with the physical presence around him. Lawrence Buell claims that "environmental texts," such as Steffler's poetry, "practice restorationism by calling places into being, that is not just by naming objects but dramatizing in the process how they matter" (*Environmental* 267). Steffler practices this "restorationism" by encoding his animal encounters into Newfoundland locations—in particular encounters near Corner Brook, his adoptive community. In "Notes on Burnt Cape," from *Lookout*, he admits that the animal's ubiquity engulfs him:

> Sometimes caught in the wind's cold pelt, pure
> sounds—waves' leisurely slosh or thump, gulls'
> high slow staccato—brush past the ear
> like ocean's barbed seed. (13)

The stanza is indicative of his overall relation to Newfoundland. The world is overwhelming to the poet. With the waves sloshing and the gulls' crying, the moment

articulates the stormy coast where its plurality foregrounds a more complex, untamed animal presence that thwarts his Romantic ideals of an ordered and tamed nature.

In exploring Newfoundland's rocky land with a climate that makes human habitation difficult outside of the port city and capital, St. John's, Steffler's work also surprises in his refusal to remain rooted in a literal realism. Though his poetry begins with the biological aspects of the animal, his re-presentation of the land and animals rework experience. In other words, his startling metaphors recognize the otherness of animal life and reconfigure its myths in the human imagination. In "Blomidon Head," for instance, he recounts that there was

> a vole I had glimpsed
> scuttling under the blueberry leaves then startled me
> with a laugh that was like a snowplow's blade
> shaking the road. (*Lookout* 85)

For psychologist Alan Bleakley, the written animal is already part of the animal encounter. Bleakley writes, the "word-animal—bearing the trace of the animal of the field—also intends us, generously, powerfully, again offering an extraordinary otherness" (xii). Steffler's *word-animal*, the vole, startles him as it interrupts his experience of the landscape, and textually interrupts the poem through the poet's abrupt metaphor. As in other poems, real animals seem to peek out beyond the metaphor, signaling their living presence as otherness.

Ironically, Steffler's relationship with animals is complicated by his own personal sense of "seclusion, remoteness, smallness, bareness and rarity" (*Lookout* 9). In such poems, the lone male, separated from wife and home, struggles to gain ground and

meaning through colonizing the animal's sojourn, and grappling with a sense of its ferality. As poet and biologist Harry Thurston has observed, "much of the hinterland of Newfoundland is still true wilderness, conforming to Aldo [Leopold]'s definition of wilderness as an area that would 'take a couple of weeks to pack across'" (*Guide* 122). Here, Thurston uses "true" and "wilderness" in relation to Leopold's definition. Thurston's definition is both "white" and "modern," as Beothuk, a first nations tribe now extinct through genocide, once inhabited this "wilderness." Don McKay's definition of "wildness" also provides a way into Steffler's project, as it is "the capacity of all things to elude the mind's appropriations" (*Vis* 21). Eluding his domestic self through a sojourn in the hinterland creates the ideal space for Steffler to playfully, in this case, deflate the male ego. In "Sour Fire," from *Helix*, he recognizes how in an ironic solitude men share a sort of masculine defeatism:

> Those determined middle-aged
> men whose marriages have failed
> and who've taken to the outdoors
> and puff alone along trails
> with their backpacks and their practical shapeless hats. (105)

To differentiate his own alienation from these men searching for answers outdoors, away from domestic space, he claims, "I do not want to be one of them" (105). But as the poem unfolds, the outdoors becomes a sort of a tongue-and-cheek exile. His wife has left him and he cannot return to "this museum-house, each / item in it swollen with past," items such as the "painted birds over the bed" who "plucked / Ruth out of the air" (105). While his wife's poetic persona "wasn't so keen" on camping and may have escaped through

this bird imagery, the poet is "still going down / down" because "the masculine hinterland beckons" (105). His self-exile is fruitless, however, as he is relegated to "squatting alone by a sour fire, / bitten by flies" and "telling himself he's getting closer to the truth" (106). If the truth is somehow within him, he is yet unable to get closer to it as he moves through the world myopically. At first, he would transplant this desire for closeness to the animal as well, but realizes quickly that the animal, like himself, is a solitary being.

When Steffler overcomes his need to acquire the animal other, this sense of alienation wanes and his relationship with animals grows more complex and rewarding. His reading of the physical world grows out of a semiotics in nature. His poems ignite the animal's ability to raise questions concerning what Alan Bleakley terms an "animalized imagination," which "is a pre-verbal condition of imagination that shapes verbal discourse and prepares us for the perception of literal animals" (xv). Imagination is "grounded in the biological," according to Bleakley, but also reaches into all imaginative systems (xv). For Steffler, the metaphorical treatment of the land and animals becomes a mode for his own recovery. By trying to approximate the phenomenological nature of the experience, Steffler increasingly reinforces the dynamics of place. Finding a home in the outdoors and a bond through the animal encounter dissolves the traditional mind/body dualism so that he may speak in the land's

> non-
>
> language,
>
> pure refusal, blindness
>
> to my dimension. (*Lookout* 83)

His moment of illumination crystalizes as he imagines himself outside of the domestic framework of his society and closer to the animal inhabiting the land, and yet he becomes increasingly aware of the linguistic failures and limitations in capturing this experience. By grappling with his own sense of animality, he also comes closer to an awareness of his poetic self. In "In the Lewis Hills," a simple hike evokes the animal as the sky is a "cold wide height with caribou / carved on a bone-white cloud / outside of time" (*Helix* 116). The physical animal and the animal spirit inscribe the land. It is "the slick whittled rock" Steffler stands on which "plunges / titanic eel" (*NWWR* 11).

By animalizing the coast, he brings out the interconnected qualities of landscape and being. Cultural critic Akira Mizuta Lippit suggests that animal metaphors such as those described above are integral to literature's reconnection to a viable human history, which in turn can shed light on the present: "The animal functions not only as an exemplary metaphor but, within the scope of rhetorical language, as a kind or originary metaphor," by which Lippit means an ongoing relationship to the world ("Magnetic" 1113). Steffler's animalized and feminized investigations delve into the "primal quality to the island" (Thurston, *Guide* 120). The animal, then, takes on more than metaphorical stature for Steffler; it replaces his interior language of self-accusation and incrimination, and forces him to materialize his self as part of the larger natural landscape.

At the same time, however, feminization is a process that continually returns him to a relationship based on troubled hierarchies and problematic over-simplifications. Feminization becomes a Romantic reversion to his understanding of place and, at least initially, a means for the masculine ego to seek self-definition. It is most prevalent in his later collections. The Humber Arm, a fresh water inflow into the Humber River in

western Newfoundland, for instance, epitomizes femininity for Steffler. The Humber Arm wears "a sleeveless dress" and is "every morning in your bed" (*Helix* 124). Steffler claims to walk "the meadow of her upper arm, the musky hollow near where her breasts begin" (124). And she is, in the end, "sweet as lobster flesh" (126). Each of these images demonstrates Steffler's desire to appropriate place: the Humber Arm does not exist for its own sake, but for the poet who, in the end, can catch and extract "her" essence for his own use. Steffler's equation of nature with femininity is a problematic position. It takes up the Wordsworthian idea of nature as female panacea for masculine woes as "Nature loves to show'r / Soft on his wounded heart her healing power" (*Descriptive Sketches* 13-15). Animalizing the land in this manner further complicates his reading of the world. As Steffler's treatment of nature continues to foreground the masculine ego in the face of "the romance of perception, and perhaps of travel in general," the colonial nature of his quest is exposed (Mulvey 176).

Feminization of the Animal as Landscape

While the animalization of the landscape allows a new or renewed relationship for the poet with the landscape, it opens itself up to problems of metaphoric relationships reflective of older, dualistic prejudices. Coding nature with the feminine is problematic, as gendered tropes create an arbitrary continuum between women and nature, erasing the distinctions in each. Simone de Beauvoir has criticized this practice. She reacts to the traditions where "woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the sap, the material beauty and soul of the world" (262). Gendering landscape divides the explorer and explored into

traditional categories of subject and object, setting up "a privileged domain of the master" and a clear power structure that elevates the explorer, or in this case, poet (Plumwood 3). To bring the present poetry back into the animalized context, Steffler reverts to the feminine in order to offer a sense of presence to the animal other. His impressions are aligned with a Romantic understanding of the world and women and animal Others in the process. As Stacy Alaimo argues concerning the dangers of gendering nature: "Defining woman as that which is mired in nature thrusts woman outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency. . . .Whereas men mark their own transcendent subjectivity by separating themselves from the natural world, women, seen as the embodiment of nature, are doomed to immanence and otherness" (2-3). Alaimo's observation points to a tired tradition, which Steffler reinforces in "Mail from a Pregnant Daughter," where he relies on this tradition to read women, in this case, as vessels for nature: "what a woman holds— / river of earth from the Milky Way, where we hatch / to which we return" (*Lookout* 38). Women, as metaphors for nature, hinder many of his animal encounters from being interspecies meetings. The feminization of the land both poses these problems and helps define the particular nature of Steffler's relationship to the land as more of a subjective rather than objective encounter.

The land, though primarily perceived in these poems as female, may also be a way to recoup animality. As early as *The Wreckage of Play*, three poems attest to Steffler's animal-eroticism, and manifests uninhibited moments. The following excerpts clearly show a masculine prowess, yet the animal imagery adds layers to what could be read as merely clichéd, objectified sexualization. In "Seeing Stars," for instance, a quasi-symbolist poem, his partner transforms into an uninhibited cat:

sometimes you only want to be

a dark cat facing the moon

on all fours

me kneeling behind you

like a wind making your hair

stand, biting an ear

your fur's billion tips

are the stars. (19)

She likewise undergoes imaginative transformations into the animal. While the man/cat mounts the female cat in a fairly violent way, the woman/cat takes on infinite dimensions suggestive of night and constellations. Steffler's imagery, here, plays with a dangerous metaphor. While the language is suggestive of male domination and rape, the female has perhaps given her permission for violence as he bites his lover's ear. The image of the stars romanticizes sexuality, especially such violent sexuality.

From the same collection, "The Plains, The Future Full of Growing Things" also reworks a sexual union, but in this case, Steffler explores a more primordial occurrence:

We came together in an ancient way.

Within us monsters bray and

claw the sand and clash their bony plates, pteranodons

mate the way they must have done. (18)

Steffler dramatizes, here, that sexual violence is inherent in sex as reproduction. He reads across a feminist cultural analysis of sexuality, but not necessarily against it. He deconstructs animality, as representation of our "baser instincts," in the sense that culture must control sexuality. Sex can be, after all, animalistic and have violent undertones, as the couple "bray" and "clash" and give up any sense of romanticism. "Morning, Late October" with its naturalistic detail and elliptical description, is less violent and raw, and resembles a love poem more than the earlier examples. The poem begins in domesticity, until a moment between the couple is interrupted by "wings, swish / overhead a raven barks one black joke, cold's / alert pleasure, splitting our thin roof" (16). The raven's call rings "our bed in mockery" and puts into motion the couple's coming back to the earth from flying heights. The poet is awakened in more ways than one by the moment: "we pitch out tangled in bedclothes onto the earth's / true face: crow-echoing" (16). As they make love they are in free-fall and "plunge naked, spinning, / down the cold sky" (16). His identification of the animal with passion in the human encounter precedes much of Steffler's later animalization of the landscape. It is natural that he transfers this animality, its power and evocative character, to the landscapes where he later travels alone.

Eventually, Steffler re-connects the Newfoundland people to a preternatural moose through collective memory and erotic encounter. "How Do I Know This?" from *That Night We Were Ravenous*, continues his project from *The Wreckage of Play*, but, as with many of the poems here the relationship is more complex and sophisticated in his handling of the animal-erotic. The moose refuses to be appropriated through imagination and remains a powerful but invisible force throughout the poem. Though Steffler depicts the people as being single-minded about the moose as food and survival, the moose

bridges material and figurative configurations of relationships. The poem begins with the people filling an evening with socializing, only to bring us to the threshold of the animal encounter, where the moose hovers in the background of all activities:

> When night has swallowed the Blomidon
> Mountains, the people of Benoit's Cove
> down on the coast, while they talk
> on the phone or play cards in the kitchen,
> are always vaguely thinking about
> moose, high on the slopes above them. (95)

While the moose are present in so many familiar moments, Steffler extends this encounter so that both the lust for the hunt and the animal's existence have a sexualized nature:

> this vague awareness of moose
> is a musk of excitement around whatever
> they're doing, like the promise
> of sex—the nearness of those hot
> shapes of blood, nameless dispersed. (95)

Feminist Marti Kheel suggests that hunting narratives and sexual narratives both stem from a similar masculine drive. "Both the hunt and the sexual act," she writes, "are premised on the notion of the buildup of tension; the orgasm and the kill provide the sought after relief" (91). Kheel's assessment is problematic, however, as it suggests that male sexuality is only predatory. While such proclivities can be said for individuals of both sexes, her metaphorical analogy essentializes male sexuality. Steffler creates a

communal animal space that counters the predatory. While the moose reveals "psychosexual roots," the people are a sensorium (88). Privileging scent over sight and hearing speaks to Steffler's combining dominant human and animal traits so that humans are more easily identified with the body rather than the mind. The moose manifest themselves through heightened senses that are dull in humans. They are "the slight / sound of twigs crunching" and "long / plumes of thought reading the smells," which circumscribe the area outside of the community (*NWWR* 95). These animals, therefore, can "travel the history of each / smell back to its beginning" (95). They breathe Benoit's Cove's "fish, dogs, / woodstoves, deep-fried chips" and they "flow down on these ribbons / into the homes of Benoit's Cove / into the swallows of rum and Coke" and "into the cigarettes" (95). The people, in turn, breathe the essence of moose "as they think of their guns / as they think of moose stew" (96). The infusion of moose with human awareness, and the people with sensatory and natural elements of the wild reverses the subject/object dichotomy of hunting. For Steffler, the animal is empowered by the confusion of the human senses.

Because the moose is their commodity, however, the people's understanding remains "vague," "hot shapes of blood, nameless." (95). By the end of the poem, the spectral moose "are not / where the people of Benoit's Cove / think they are" (95). Rather, they are able to

> enter the bedrooms under the closed
> doors, seep under the sheets and wreathe
> the lovers in their own excited
> smells. (96)

In this, the moose haunts the text by intertwining humans and mooseness; it is the Other that will not settle down but roams in and out of the community, troubling the ontology of each in its presence. The feminized landscape and the female as figure in the animal itself, represent the poet's return to a place of male orientation, from which he can continue to explore not only the world but also his relationship to it. But as he pushes against the colonialism and domestication of these more primal experiences, he simultaneously regresses and challenges the earlier feminine perspectives on nature.

Colonization: The Imaginary and the Real

Because animals return Steffler to an unfinished sense of himself and the land, he continues to feel dislocated in Newfoundland, as his ability to know or make sense of himself and his world—his "Alcatraz" as well as his "centre of gravity"—often fragments (*Wreckage* 100). Despite his pursuit of regional bearings, he is often too absorbed in both his own personal crises of separation and divorce, and in perceiving himself as an outsider in his "awkwardness . . . off all the maps" (*NWWR* 4). In this, his poetry reveals an inability to articulate the world of the animal, which creates a necessary lacuna in human knowledge. As he states:

> I think that in Canada we need to get to know our landscape as it is. As colonists, we have tended to see our land either as a vast stockpile of resources or as a hostile wilderness in need of European-style civilization. ("Ten Questions")

But in his efforts to reject the European tendencies, Steffler's poetry reinforces how colonizing the animal as Other, as a means to show how, in Alan Beardsworth's words,

"nature becomes the unmeditated origin from which the liberal humanist subject affirms his or her integrity," reveals how difficult it is for the poet to articulate the world without colonizing tendencies (n. pag). Critic Wolfgang Hochbruck also surmises that revamping the colonial narrative, as Steffler does at times, challenges outdated modes of thinking about animals and land, and re-invigorates place by foregrounding the non-human elements. "'Post-colonial regionalism' shows in some of the best writing in the Maritimes," Hochbruck writes, "as a quality that is both regional in its connectedness to the space, and postcolonial in its move away from the apologetic/defiant modes of past literary periods" (17). For Steffler, the post-colonial regionalism begins with an awareness of the ways in which he is both different from and part of the landscape. His knowledge, however, does not prevent him from slipping back into colonizing practices in some of his poetry.

From his collection *That Night We Were Ravenous*, he expresses his sense that experience cannot be solidified through poetry. It is a position that brings out the fallibility of language as the mode of his quest for identity with the Newfoundland region. The sentiment appears in "Eclipse Again," a poem that explores the unknowable experience of natural phenomena, such as a solar eclipse and the complexity of an animal encounter. Steffler begins the poem by admitting that it is "So hard to parcel an event / without lying," because the mind is not reliable in relaying an experience into words (44). He is critical about how quickly humans order experience: "animal / busy in the wild, and you decide tick / tack toe to connect the dots across this thing, / and that represents all?" (44). Language as a system is simply inadequate for encapsulating the animal. "Even choosing / a chain of events is an equally old language," he continues "even saying

'I' and 'it' / and 'happened'" foregrounds a pre-determined subjectivity that excludes the plurality of the animal. Poetry colonizes the experience with the animal by asserting human authority onto the moment (44). Focusing on the active sense of himself rather than the animal yields poor results. These last lines seem to reassert a truth in the moment of meeting the animal but, as he stated earlier, it is impossible to relay information without lying.

Colonizing animals often means destroying what one desires to possess. In "The Green Insect" from *That Night We Were Ravenous*, the poet claims to own an exotic insect that is a "descendant of an ancient nation, regal, rigid in ritual" (81).[18] It possesses "a brain coiled in amulets for whom nature is all / hieroglyphs" (81). Hieroglyphs prove unreadable, so the poet objectifies the insect through his understanding that the animal provides him with inspiration, despite his inability to read its nature or, to even recognize its ontology. The insect's biological identity, in its primordial guise, rejects the poet's authority to exhibit it as a simple curio. It participates in categorical sabotage by refusing to meet the observer's expectations. As "people gawked, and a woman pointed a camera," Steffler's intense desire to grasp the insect "like a badge, like my accomplishment" breaks off one of its legs (81). Though he "laid it down gently on a clean page," the wounded insect, in retaliation, "wanted no convalescence" (81). Instead, "It ripped up reality, it flung away time and space" and "unwound its history" as prescribed by humans (82). Steffler's zoopoetics allows the green insect's autonomous existence because, as Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert observe, "animals destabilize, transgress" and "even resist our human orderings, including spatial ones" (5). The insect moves from its reference as marginalia, "around my page," when Steffler tries to show it

to others because it "denied me and my ownership" and "left nothing but this page faintly stained with / green" (82). Steffler emphasizes the trace of the animal, in this instance, by splitting the line at green; it is the last word in the poem and resonates with both the insect's disappearance and the dangers in desiring to possess the Other. In a post-Derridian world, this trace also signifies the sign of the poet's language, destined to fail in capturing the escaping insect.

Enigmatic animals also appear in Steffler's work as radically unknown and unknowable creatures that ignite the ontological question, *what is it*? Despite the animal's impenetrable being, the colonizing ethos persists in desiring that which it cannot become. By physically trying to keep the animal under language's authority, Steffler further complicates this sense of colonizing the animal in his most recent collection, *Lookout*. In a very surreal example, Steffler brings home a strange, unnamed animal that refuses to disappear behind language. The title "*As if wind was blown into it*," refers to the animal's physical ability to expand despite the poet's best endeavours to control it. Even more provocative is the fact that this poem is missing from the Table of Contents. The animal's exclusion reinforces its refusal to perform within a codified, linguistic system. In this case, it eschews participating in the very organization of the collection. The poem begins with Steffler slaughtering the animal: "Having brought the animal to the table, suspended by the tail, / I killed it by chopping off its head" (82). The animal, however, refuses to succumb. Its "mouth continued to open and shut and the eyes to roll intelligently" (82). The family tries to annihilate the intelligent animal with a stick to no avail as its jaws "closed with violence" (82). When they try boiling it, its "back heaved and / the sides puffed out as if wind were blowing between the skin and the flesh, and instantaneously

the head, which lay on the ground three / or four feet from the tub, opened its mouth with a hissing sound" (82). By the end of this surreal poem, the poet has torn out the animal's heart "which, strange / to say, was still throbbing with life" and "kept on beating until about noon the following day" (82). The poem ends with the heart and not with the poet triumphing over the creature.

Victorian colonial narratives have distanced us from the land, as Steffler shows in "Collecting, Bay of Islands." First published in *Helix* and later re-published in *Lookout*, the poem evinces Steffler's early interest in entering the animal world through the colonial narrative. In this prose/journal poem, he ascribes surreal characteristics to imaginary species, which he discovers in a legitimate Newfoundland location: Benoit's Cove, north of Corner Brook. He incorporates the binomial naming system for the species, which uses two Latin words to indicate both the genus and species, such as "*Umbra fimbriata*" or "*Umbra variata*."[19] Using this system, as Carolus Linnaeus did in the sixteenth century, reinforces the naturalist's need to create order from nature while naming, in this way, legitimizes species. In Steffler's case, each imagined life form uses "umbra" or "shadow" in an effort to both parody a naturalist's intention of categorizing in order to understand and preserve, and to display the poet's power of harnessing life within the natural world. If animals, outside of human consideration, have no meaning except for that which humans ascribe to them, the naturalist's vacillating encounter of seeing and not seeing the shadow creatures generates another level of ambiguity within the animal encounter. The poetic metaphor of "shadow animals" pervades our sense of wonder. Entomologist Edward O. Wilson suggests that "because we evolved within" species diversity, rather than separately, "we have never fathomed its limits" (*Biophilia*

10). For this reason, we are most restless in the living world because "the greater the knowledge, the deeper the mystery and the more we seek knowledge to create new mystery" (10). Steffler's shadow creatures encapsulate such cyclic thinking. Steffler's use of these "shadow animals" mirrors both Wilson's definition and his own epistemologies, as the creatures continually slip out of his sight. They reinforce the unsettling character of the animal that hinders recovering the mystery at the center of Nature. In two problematic ways, these creatures, then, engage the more vital, mysterious ontology that real animals present to the naturalist.

While Steffler attempts to highlight how troubling colonizing nature is, he also participates in it by again feminizing it, suggesting that this rhetorical tendency may be very difficult to avoid. The surreal shadow species' nomenclature is encoded as feminine. By using these feminized renderings of nature, Steffler also uses an earlier naturalist's tendency to objectify species by gender, and yet plays on the sexual fecundity of nature, especially in such examples as phylum "*lascivum*," from lascivious, meaning playful, jovial, or lewd; "*medusum*," from Medusa, suggesting a seductive power that destroys men by turning them to stone; and "*voluptum*," from voluptuous, meaning desire or appetite. The collector's gaze reveals that the alluring land and women are deeply connected for him and that both, through his use of "phantasm," meaning something that is not physical, have disappeared in the face of language's authority. Tracing the interplay between the animal and the female representation, feminist Gillian Rose writes that feminizing the land gives meaning to desire and ownership for men: "The sensual topography of land and skin is mapped by a gaze which is eroticized as masculine and heterosexual. The masculine gaze sees a feminine body which requires interpreting by the

cultured knowledgeable look; something to its own . . . the masculine gaze is of knowledge and desire" (97-98). Early in the log, the naturalist sees a Bib Shadow or *Umbra fimbriata* in the form of "a cast-aside skirt or slip," for instance (*Lookout* 68). In the third section, the poet imagines sightings of "*Phantasm Lascivum"* which is "probably a Bell Sprite," "*Phantasma medusum*," a "pink-tinted and a little fringed," and "*Phantasma voluptum*," which is "in the form of an infinite series of naked female legs high-kicking above the footlights of a stage" (68-9). The feminization of these imaginary shadow-creatures suggests that Steffler sees them as human parodies, such as *Tinkerbell* and *stripteasers.* The collector's particular ideology becomes apparent as his metaphors for these ephemeral creatures derive from language suggestive of women made to fulfill roles in male entertainment. The erotic quality of his encounter suggests that the animals have seduced him. But the problem of colonizing both the animals and the female through metaphor persists in his poetry. It creates a conflict within the poet's own sense of identity, as both association with and distance from the landscape.

A further problem with these shadow or "phantasm" creatures stems from their ephemerality—a condition that allows Steffler to favour language over the animal's ontology. While these imaginary species remain an "unstudied life-form lacking material substance," they likewise cannot be reduced to language alone (69). Because they are purely his creations, yet will not comply with the names he gives them, these animals resist the collector's desire to order them. These ephemeral species, as shadows, emphasize the missing animal in the face of privileging language: a Faun Shadow or *Umbra variata* flirts "where an aspen tree's leaves sifted the falling sunlight"; and *"Umbra nebulosa*, which is like "shadows of clouds cruising overhead" (68). Their

metaphorical equivalents also reinforce their ephemeral quality, as they are only dipped sunlight and cloud cover. These creatures represent a metaphysical alternative to scientific language, and a panacea for the collector's despair over the limits of the human condition.

The poet's struggle to capture the pre-linguistic experience, to gain a better understanding of his elusive findings, becomes a physical struggle. He confesses that dismemberment may be the only solution: "Perhaps with what I collect I hope to flesh myself out, reconstruct my anatomy in a form less human, less estranged. / Or is it characteristic of the creatures I search for to erode or digest their observers? / If so, I should list my sense of dismemberment as one of their properties" (68). In the Romantic vein, Steffler's naturalist reads nature as a vessel for inner reflection and emotional experience. The creatures' strangeness so disturb him that he feels himself taken apart, in a Wordworthian sense of emotional upheaval in the face of such a sublime experience that requires a poet's mindset rather than a scientist's.

Metaphors, like Steffler's, become a discursive mode of language that "shatters not only previous structures of our language, but also shatters the previous structures of what we call reality" (Ricoeur 85). They become a gateway for the poet's outsider status in the face of aesthetic appreciation or for "the persistent faint sensation of being nothing more than a rib cage, flayed, eviscerated, like that of a sheep hanging at the butcher's" (*Lookout* 68). The dead animal simile is apt here as it again foregrounds his inability to confront the animal's ontology and instead hides behind language constructs and the beguiling materiality of the dead sheep. He gives his shadowy creatures corporeality and agency, and they consume him, investing him with a sense of his own ephemerality.

Steffler further troubles the boundary between the textual representation and the biological animal in the poem by stating that these creatures are "two examples of what the local people call / Cobblies" (68). Here, he plays with local names versus hegemonic categories while adhering to the misunderstandings inherent in colonizing the animal. The naturalist is not privy to the language of the locals, and the collector's outsider status resists familiarity. Thurston notes several such local names for birds found in the Newfoundland dictionary: "a murre, in Newfoundland English is a 'turr'; a shearwater, a 'hagdown'; a black-legged kittiwake, a 'tickleace'; a razor-billed auk, a 'tinker'; a black guillemot, 'a pigeon'" (*Guide* 127). Multiple names for the same animal reinforce the animal's plurality and the impossibility of its being categorized through language. Steffler emphasizes this by denoting the creatures as "Cobblies," which may be the imaginary beings that can travel between parallel worlds, according to Clifford D. Simak who wrote that they are alien creatures who believe they are "stronger than any other arm or paw" (219). And most importantly, an animal/human encounter takes place in a specific cultural, historical, geographical, and linguistic context. While humans cannot see them, animals are often thought to detect them, such as when cats and dogs stare at a spot on the floor or in the corner of a room. The poetic animal challenges the authority of language, as did the earlier unnamed, unrecorded animal in "as if wind was blown into it," as it exists between actual biotic and semiotic systems. In doing this, language, or more specifically the word, is "made animal," highlighting the tension the poet seeks to reconcile between the imagination and reality, despite his own estrangement in Newfoundland and in the face of unclassifiable organisms that resist his authority (Lippit, *Electric* 161).

Near the end of the poem, however, a real bird grounds him back in the world and generates something numinous: "[W]hen stillness gathered to a heaviness that had to drop, a white-throated sparrow would sing very loud nearby, all of Earth's gravity in its words—so good to have weight, to be drawn in" (*Lookout* 69). In returning to reality from his own imaginative cataloging, the sparrow's unassuming size draws the explorer into a sublime, uncontrived moment captured in birdsong. Its singing reminds Steffler that the world possesses startling beauty and wonder. Its non-linguistic signaling expresses what the poet cannot.

Domesticity: The House of Cricket Cries

If colonizing fails to cultivate access to the animal, remaining in domestic spaces also creates a problematic encounter. Steffler struggles between craving domesticity with a wife and family, and turning away from it in order to reach new epistemologies. Steffler has been quite candid in his poetry about his failed relationships and his draw to Newfoundland's hinterland. By "indulging in masculine idleness" in the outdoors, Steffler's work often places him on the outskirts of the domestic space and at the cusp of the animal encounter (*GI* 30). Steffler sees poetry as having the potential to expose a deeper sense of being: "Poetry for me is an exercise aimed at bringing me closer to the world and to my essential self" ("Ten Questions"). We find, however, much of the poetry dealing with animals brings out not only a more "essential self" but a darker sense of the human/animal divide, as he keeps "warm burning / bits of a house" (*GI* 130). Each of his collections address this divide with increasing frequency.

Steffler questions domestic space but, no matter how he writes of it, it is never a proper fit for him. In "The Eighth Elegy," Rainer Maria Rilke says we cannot access the real animal world, a place that is "Nowhere without the No" (49). This is also the place where Steffler attempts to plumb for answers, which only returns him to his sense of dislocation within the world. His discomfort stems from not knowing how to be in domestic spaces, or on an island, or in the world, and from his fear that moving into a liminal space may provoke ferality. For instance, in the early prose poem "Concentric Rings," he deems renovating "old houses" simply as "History, which produces nothing but decay" (*Wreckage* 57). The failure is that "the earth which is after all everywhere and always has been" is "only temporarily worked up here and there into little platforms, little enclosures of wood or stone that are still just earth" (57). The ephemeral nature of the "house" becomes clearer as he sees the futility of domesticity in the face of an encroaching nature. He deprecates renovations and insists that it is "laughable what people fuss over, the moldings and paint, the distinctions they make between this kind of gesture and that" (57). Here, the human gesture, like the moldings and trim of a house, is an always vanishing sign. In the end, the most important gesture for him comes when "the walls are replaced" by the natural world, where those "wiry widespread voices of night" occur (57).

Animal calls interrupt Steffler and awaken him to the difference between the house and the outdoors in "March 22" from *That Night We Were Ravenous.* The animal *qua* animal signals to his sense of being outside of domestic space. In this poem, Steffler contrasts the simple freedom of birds near his home in austere Newfoundland to the elaborately decorated tract housing of Waterloo, Ontario:

the birds are scribbling

wildly with brilliant

crayons,

and the spirals and saws and mazes

tangle and fade

and are overlaid with more bird iconography. (40)

"Scribbling," "mazes," and "tangle" all convey that such iconography in Newfoundland is illegible to Steffler. The birds' movements solidify into "landscape according to Blue Jay, Grackle, Starling / Robin" and his zoopoetics points to the untamed, uncontained edge of nature (40). Steffler's appeal to bird script and movement turns his intention to self-reflection instigated by kinetic nature and away from the contrived sense of being inside the fabricated home. He wants, most importantly, a visceral interaction with the birds. He wants

to paint the inside walls of my skull with these

scrawls

which are more useful than all the buildings of Waterloo

all the blunders of roads and suburbs. (40)

In order to fully confront his growing sense of dislocation, he needs to be outside of the urbanizing effects of housing developments. He is, ironically, out of place in the very spaces reserved for humans. The sense of boundlessness found within the gestural semiotics of the birds, therefore, offers him a way to renounce the untenable groundedness of home.

His Romantic understanding of the natural world remains thwarted in "Walls of Sound," from the same collection. In this case, the animal calls have disappeared and the poet, rather than be reminded of his own forsaken sense of being, is further plunged into a sense of madness without animal presence. Steffler uses crickets, the ubiquitous summer night sound creators, to emphasize his sense of unease in living in Newfoundland. As only male crickets chirp, the poem returns to Steffler's exploration of solitary men in the island's hinterland:

> Crickets can't stand it in Newfoundland,
> so you need a good house there to keep
> the silence out, the buzz of "folly! Folly!"
> your ears make in an empty space. (32)

The missing cricket call amplifies the poet's sense of "folly" for living in Newfoundland where self-reflection, despite the silence, conveys his own sense of indoor madness, as the word etymologically derives from *fol* or *fool*. The crickets' missing, maddening calls speak to Newfoundland's chaotic wilderness, which is at odds with Steffler's unaware and compromised Romantic leanings. In juxtaposing a barren Newfoundland to the noisy suburbs of southern Ontario where "birds plunge in the blue / air and crickets build walls of sound more / full of curly depths than William Morris wallpaper," the poet makes clear that the crickets and birds are a distracting affectation (32). In Ontario he has "support," as so "many creatures choose to live here too / and love it" (32). A Newfoundland home, in Steffler's rendering, is austere, lacking wallpaper and luxury. It is suffused with a maddening silence and lack of mammalian life. Steffler's sense of living on the island, consequently, means living closer to himself and thus closer to a sort of bush madness

that crickets might alleviate if they were present. Unlike the suburban crickets and birds that bewitch the air with music and movement, nothing fills the empty space with domestication and decoration in Newfoundland. The title, however, may allude to the trouble in such a Romantic ideal of nature: walls of sound in southern Ontario are constructed as the houses are and they block the way for an experience with the world. It is the experience that ignites Steffler's sense of exposure.

Birds also expose Newfoundland's austerity through their songs. In *Helix,* Steffler compares exotic birdsong in bright New Zealand to that of birdsong in dark and damp Newfoundland. "Bird Songs in the Two Bays of Islands" claims that New Zealand birds express exuberant moods as they "whistle long / and elastic" and "twist and bulge into rich chuckles" (109). They are carefree performers: "portly ventriloquists on a greased trapeze" (109). Newfoundland birds, on the other hand, possess none of these qualities. They "sound wistful / and distant no matter how close they are, *lonely me me me* / *me*" (109). In Steffler's thinking, the island's barrenness prevents them from celebrating the wonder of place as their calls only point to solitude and echo the earlier cricket chirps of "folly, folly." These birds only sing of "rock and ice," "cold / marrow," and "brief shadow, / unrelated to light" (109). Steffler distorts the Newfoundland birdcall to convey his own sense of despair in the cold comfort of the island. In this way, animal languages reciprocally emphasize the differences in the landscapes, both animalizing it and leaving it stark and exposed as a reflection of the poet's own sense of otherness on the island.

Ferality: The Inhuman Within the Human

While both colonial and domestic themes thread through subsequent collections, there is also a turn toward a deeper awareness of the formidable nature of the environment of the island. In collections written after Steffler had lived some decades in Newfoundland, the domestic space fails and the "homeless man is / naked" (*NWWR* 32). The natural world becomes a catalytic and dangerous zone of transition that shifts Steffler's sense of self toward a new awareness: that of ferality. A feral existence entices him, but also exposes his fear of losing his cultural grounding, particularly with familiar and romantic relationships.

Written ten years after Steffler moved to Newfoundland, his semi-autobiographical long poem, *The Grey Islands: A Journey* (1985), extensively explores a return through one man's initially Romantic excursion to an abandoned island of emptiness and ghosts off Newfoundland's northern peninsula. *The Grey Islands* returns to the aftermath of the 1950s resettlement and relocation programs that intended to modernize Newfoundland by depopulating rural outposts. Entire communities were uprooted. The people had little say in the matter. Steffler's collection witnesses what critic Martina Seifert asserts, "Many had to be dragged away by force" (18). In the aftermath of such a setting, the principle narrator, a town planner from Ontario, in the midst of a crippled marriage, plans to spend a summer away from his wife and children on the desolate Grey Islands among decaying outposts. Exile tests the boundaries of his sense of self, as he loses "the illusion of a stable lyric self," at the same time that it exposes the fragility of the rational self, and "posits nature as an experience of disruption

and dispersion" which "identifies the ecological as an important locus of contestation in discussions of Newfoundland cultural identity" (Beardsworth).

Critiques of this collection emphasize its successful treatment of a man grappling for balance in a place abandoned by almost everyone. Don McKay notes that "with its combination of poetry, prose fiction, travel writing, memoir, ghost story, cuffer (the Newfoundland oral tale similar to the tall tale), and pseudo-historical account, it works to create a multi-dimensional sense of the place" (Introduction 27). But at the center of this collage, the narrator's slippage into a feral experience emerges as a context for questions concerning "a particularly Romantic strain of environmental writing" and reactions to growing environmental problems (Beardsworth).

The narrator, an unnamed town planner or "Town joe-boy," is "dying bit by bit" in Milliken Harbour, Newfoundland, as he realizes that his civic position and his Upper Canadian superiority complex are not going to change the community. He had thought that he would transform the cluttered and disorganized community into "the new Jerusalem, the four-gated golden city with market squares and green belts and pedestrian streets and old buildings restored and tourist money pouring in" (*GI* 23). But the disillusioned Town Planner, "straight from U of T," whose only projects, to date, have been an incinerator to keep the bears out of the landfill and away from inebriated locals, and a tree-planting project for which he insisted on importing hardwood trees from Ontario that could not thrive in Newfoundland's climate, fails miserably. Thus his outsider status as colonizer continues: "Four years and I'm still like a tourist here," he remarks, "I haven't even left the motel" (26). If the Town Planner sees himself as "a fragment blown out of the nation's centre, wife and children gone" in his displacement,

he still hopes his summer sojourn on the now-abandoned islands may provide him with his own Romantic existential confrontation (131). The island may be a "way to corner myself . . . Some blunt place I can't go beyond. Where excuses stop" (13). His expectations resonate with fallibility, as he lacks "marriage and household," which are, in Gretchen Legler's observations, "key metaphors in the vision of a sustainable, personal ecology" (Legler 26). In order to expose himself and find a new sense of personal sustainability, he needs to be hunted to the point of his own extinction or transformation.

The Town Planner's isolation entails a sabbatical from his administrative position and his family and home. In essence, he cannot conceive how he will change when he corners himself or what will transpire from this change. The anxiety stems from Steffler's construction of masculine identity and world. Such anxiety reflects ecocritic Neil Evernden's suggestion that "[t]here is no such thing as individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place" (103). In the context of this pre-condition of learning, the landscape epitomizes the individual defined by his own sense of erasure and his leanings toward a feral version of himself. His fear of ferality stems from encountering strangeness, an otherness that is also familiar. Interestingly, there is evidence on the island that other men have made this same pilgrimage before the Town Planner. The island, in fact, exudes a heroic masculine celebration of domestic ostracism. When he first arrives at the small cabin on the island, he finds "Chain oil, blood, rust, fat, scrawled in like a diary. All the guys gutting their ducks and fish here, cleaning their guns, stripping their engines down, hands dripping black spreading bolts and bearings among the plates of beans" (*GI* 60). The island draws in men with their "scrawled" and physical language even as they are "indulging in masculine idleness"

(30). Like the Planner, these men come "here at the end of their calculations and budgets and fights and fantasies. Building into crude space" because they possess "No home. No sofa. No wives. No home. High boots, hunting knives and booze and not getting washed" (60). The space is the antithesis of normal, mainland domesticity. It is a transitional stage for his awareness of the animal in the wild: the breakdown of preconceived borders, particularly with masculine expectations, that exposes the animal's space and invites the Planner into this liminal experience.

As "there's nothing out there at all" on the Grey Islands but "a herd of caribou," Steffler creates an ideal environment for exploring how one man's colonizing leanings and superiority break down after living on the verge of ferality for the summer months (15). The island is haunted by lost communities of animals, like the caribou, and the elusive, interstitial "hermit," Carm Denny, who is "sure to be more afraid of you than you are of him" (31). The Town Planner, as community voyeur or habitué, fears Denny as his own wild other in this state: "Visions of me trying to meditate on the tide knowing this froth-jawed fighter of devils and martians is scanning my every move through the sights of a gun. Visions of two gaunt men stalking one another boulder by boulder over the island hills" (31). Denny is a creature of metaphor. In his feral state, he frightens the Planner, while conversely, he is admirable in his ability to abandon social codes.[20]

It is the encounter with the potentially feral man, who troubles the distinction between human and animal attributes, that the Town Planner fears most. In his description of this hypothetical encounter, Steffler does not use dialogue between the men so much as he does physical description, such as "stalking," and "froth-jawed," terms which convey a loss or incapacity of speech. "What he learns there is, in part,

practical phenomenology," McKay suggests, "registering the experience of the glaciated, lichened rock, constantly changing sea and stark sky in vivid perceptions" (Introduction 27). In the Planner's disempowered state, he begins to see himself as part of the island.

Carm Denny's undomesticated presence signifies the failure of the community project, the dangers in nostalgia, and the transformative powers of time. In his insistence on staying and resisting contemporary changes, Denny manages, although struggling both physically and mentally, to keep a nearly extinct idea of Newfoundland alive through his solitary existence as a feral human. The Planner realizes his own dangerous role when he states: "*A madman is living alone out there*. The one inhabitant left. Holding out in the ruined town. Holding the whole island in his head. Thinking it into reality, every stick, every bird" (*GI* 22). The Planner's anxiety heightens when he imagines encountering this man/animal who brings about his own sense of animal nature. It is, in essence, his painful self-identification with Carm as a man who has allowed his unrefined, animal nature to take control that incites such fear. Denny's actions, consequently, are indecipherable, as they are no longer bound to a cultural code. Carm embodies animal.

Agamben suggests that humans at thresholds, such as Carm Denny's, provide a means to challenge binary interpretations of place. What makes them objects of fear, as the Town Planner discovers Carm Denny to be, is that humans who have returned to nature become transitional figures, challenging the simple dualism of human/animal identity. They represent neither humans nor animals but "a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—a werewolf" which "is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city" (*Homo* 105).

The wild animals on the Grey Islands also leave a potent impression on those who visit, as they disturb the human understanding of emptiness. Nels, one of Steffler's narrators and the guide for the Town Planner in Englee, on the east coast of the Great Northern Peninsula, relays the story of his experience in Hooping Harbour, an abandoned fishing village so dilapidated now that there are "Black holes where the doors and windows used to be" (*GI* 64). As Nels and his crew wait below deck for a squall to pass over, they hear footsteps above. Nels claims, "An ugly grey cat" jumped down into the boat surprising the men in its displaced strangeness in such an unlikely place: "The hair on the back of my neck stood up stiff as a brush" (64). Nels likens it to "something dead that was up walkin' around" (65). It is not merely the cat's appearance, however, that unnerves the men, but the cat's movements. The cat is immediately seen as some kind of spectral, non-living presence: "like there was machinery under its hide instead of bones" (65). In a number of ways, the cat, as ghost image and as textual sign, plays off Alan Bleakley's suggestion that literary representations of animals like this speak to the anxiety one feels when the animal will not stay in its place as animal, but becomes representational of memories and experiences with other, living creatures it resembles. The animals "refer back to the biological animals," Bleakley writes, and images like Steffler's unnatural cat are more "like animals in a dream, they have no body or stench to press us, but rather haunt us as ghosts, spirits, familiars" because they constantly reference outside themselves to other memories of living creatures (xii). The haunting presence of the cat becomes a returning awareness of the old fishing village, its inhabitants, and its once-vibrant inner workings.

The more Nels and the others attempt to repress their sense of loss of community, the more prominent it becomes. The cat, then, makes the lost community return more vividly—much in the way, as Jean François Lyotard says, that the anguish of repression is that of "a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think—if one claims to exclude it, if one doesn't give it an outlet, one aggravates it" (2). Though running across a stray cat in itself is not an uncanny encounter, its presence "agitates" the men's sense of where they are. It destabilizes their familiarity with place and animal. The historical image of the cat, eighteenth-century French naturalist Georges Louis LcClerc Buffon suggests, already attests to this: it "may be said to be only half domestic," as it "forms the shade between the real wild and real domestic animals" (qtd. in Ritvo, *The Platypus* 40). The cat metaphorically reconstructs the forgotten islands and disrupts the men's understanding of not "a soul in the place" by becoming strange "machinery"—an avatar for failed progress (*GI* 64). Its dual nature, as once wild and then domestic, and now wild again, reinforces the shifting nature of distinction that Steffler would try to make between himself and the creatures of the landscape.

As Animal Studies scholar Randy Malamud observes, the animal's ability to appear uncanny disrupts our ability to control what the animal means. It is as if the "animal's profoundly unhuman movement," Malamud writes, "like the weird trajectory of a bat in flight or the eerie feeling of an ant climbing on one's leg, can highly unsettle a person" (108). In Steffler's poem, the cat unsettles the men so much that they move away from the shore. In a recent paper, "Feral Cats in the City," Huw Griffiths *et al*. suggest cats cause anxiety because they transgress boundaries between the domestic and the wild,

and refuse "to stay" in their "allotted space" (63). Along with the textual image and ghost-like qualities of the poem's cat-presence, the elusive nature of the real creature enhances its power within the natural realm. The feral cat becomes a source "of abjection, engendering feeling of discomfort or even nausea," specifically because of its ability to relate two different worlds (63).

While their fishing boat floats at the intertidal zone or land wash, Nels and crew remain in the ambiguous state between land and water, and past and present. Thus, the cat sabotages the men's understandings of both place and animal. They anchor "about fifty feet out" in order to distance themselves from the cat's physical presence—a body that "felt thick and heavy like it was made of wood inside" and was "Cold as mud" (*GI* 65). The cat and Denny both function as reminders of a diminished present and a shared materiality. They have slipped into a cultural context where their ability to interrupt linear time troubles the men's perception and their own sense of distancing themselves from their past. It seems certain, by this moment in the poem, that the men "can never banish" such feral animals "from the psyche" (Griffiths 63).

Beyond animal displacements, however, both the cat and Denny trouble the exact definition of place through their refusal to remain categorically manageable: Denny is silenced, Nels says, because he had turned "pretty strange" and so "the RCMP took him off late last fall. He's in St. John's now. In the mental" (*GI* 43). The cat, on the other hand, is thrown overboard. Both of these beings depict the domesticated lapsed into ferality. Steffler suggests that Denny's new place is not better:

> and where is he now? shot full
> of sedative in some bed or chair.

> nothing at all in his head or hands.
> his life work broken off
> smashed by our superior tidiness
> as though it's a favour to him to have
> stopped him from meeting once and for all
> whatever was hunting him. (110)

Though Denny's world may be "smashed by our superior tidiness," Steffler's observations here finally show the Planner's empathy for otherness. While Denny and the cat loom larger than life in the poet's mind, they form a hyperbolic ghost story that makes them quasi-immortal and reminds the reader of his/her own vulnerability.

By remaining on this abandoned island in a liminal state of existence between human and animal, the Planner is also conscious of regressing into a feral existence, thus excommunicating himself from the world. Subsequently, he is aware of being erased or ghosted in the process. As Denny becomes "a kind of organic shadow," the Planner realizes that his inability to assimilate into Newfoundland culture has also made him a shadow of his previous, untenable life (139):

> Karen dying for Yonge and Bloor, Kensington Market, Spadina Avenue. And I'm dying for it too. We get there and drag ourselves over the sidewalks and I hate the place. Two weeks every year. We're like ghosts looking for something we've lost. The city changes in four years, people move, we don't have a home. And we change too. We fade slowly. Into ghosts. (27)

Steffler's Town Planner claims that Karen's family is "alert to the smell of divorce" and that they are eager to "take her into their arms, drooling condolences" (30). The island does not seem to change while Toronto changes too quickly, leaving both the Planner and Denny out of sync with the world.

Eventually, the Planner begins to settle into the island by confronting his fear of a monstrous ferality and by refusing to re-appropriate the island. Both the Town Planner and Denny participate in self-exile, or a refusal to meet societal expectations; the poet/Town Planner is sensitive to this looming sense of displacement. While sleeping in Carm Denny's abandoned cabin, he confesses:

> I know the door is about to burst in with
> some monster
>
> some mountain thunderball screaming
> ripping splinters splattering teeth
> bone-chips bloody clots of hair.
>
> Carm Denny
> who loved this island
> and lived alone with its grinding voices
> must have expected the same. (111)

Here, it is clear that the "monstrous hybrid" becomes a state that both men share. Its presence disrupts the planner's perception that nature and humans are ordered. The planner's precarious existence becomes more evident through his growing connections to

the missing Denny and his inherent ability to make entirely real what Denny has left behind. While digging for angler worms outside the old man's abandoned shack, the Planner confesses: "I feel a bond of brotherhood with Carm, as though I am touching some extended parts of him, veins that had spread from his body taking root in the land from which he had never divided himself. I move swiftly, borrowing his life, his island's life, feeling it coiling, pulsing under my hands" (139-40). Denny's choice to relinquish civilization, to stay on the island, is both organic and primal in this instance; he coils around the Planner's hand, as the worms do metaphorically, linking the cyclical composition and de-composition back to the identity of the land.

When his food runs low, for instance, the Planner sees himself "in a constant race with bacteria / to see who can eat the most" (84). He turns to clam digging for sustenance. Unprepared for the task and without a shovel, he quickly becomes enterprising and resourceful by digging with an old stove leg until he discards it in favour of using his hands. At this point, he claims, "I dig like an animal / ramming sand under my nails / spade my fingers around the plump shells" and in this way he pulls "the muscular buggers up / their white flesh still bulging / leaking juice" (86). Ill equipped to survive alone on the island, he enters the partial feral space of the wild man, of Carm.

By the end of the collection, the Planner has found some solace in himself and with the island. No longer scared of his surroundings, he locates wholeness from his pre-conceived chaos as "birds' talk thinly mixing, holding / everything in a blue shell" (177). His new sense of being part of the island is best conveyed in the scene where he pulls cod traps with the fisherman, Cyril. The entire scene is kinetic with animal presence. In the "little wooden" bull skiff, Steffler sees the water as a

vast bare plain of galloping animals.

plesiosaurs, ichthyosaurs, dragons,

leviathans, medieval chimeras

shoulder to shoulder herding, charging, the world

is a monster stampede! (160)

The power of the cod, which "should be fierce fighters" as they "love to live tightly focused, like bullets drilling the / sea" astound him (165). Despite the cold and the wet and the birch capstan snapping from the weight of the cod, the Planner's exhilaration with his encounter with cod in the Atlantic is apparent. He describes Cyril's excitement when the catch drops onto the longliner's deck and he pulls apart the dip net to see the "five tons of fish slippery as / pumpkin seeds": he "works like a man in a fairy tale / who is shown a mountain of gold / and told he can keep whatever he digs in a day" (166, 164).

While cleaning the fish at the splitting tables with the men deep in water and blood, the Planner begins to lose his equilibrium and slips into a gutting spree that troubles the boundaries between himself and the cod:

all this life being

hacked apart, us letting

blood out of its envelopes,

the world suddenly seems to be all

alive, blood running inside

of us and outside of us, inside

our hands and over them, with little

between the two, a cover of skin

keeping me in or out I'm not

sure which, but some sharp

bones have gone into my hands

and some of the running blood is mine. (167)

The scene echoes his earlier anxieties about being a fragment blown from the centre of the country. For him, the world is alive, because fragmentation now hallmarks transfiguration. He is no longer "a monstrous hybridity," but part of an experience where animals enliven his language and thoughts by giving shape to his world in Newfoundland and diminish his sense of otherness.

Animalizing Landscape

Steffler's human/animal relations are grounded in a biological understanding of the animal, as demonstrated earlier in his naturalist's narratives and in his transition to ferality, but his use of the animal metaphor extends to psychological, textual, and conceptual animal presences as well. In many of his poems, the animal resists his definitions and subsequently reveals "a character and life of its own" embedded within the landscape ("Ten Questions"). Through the dynamic animal metaphor, Newfoundland takes on an almost theriomorphic characteristic, taking the shapes of animals as the gods did in Greek myth. The metaphors seem to perform acts of metamorphose, bringing Steffler closer to a recuperative experience through the animal encounter. With its residual traces of living inhabitants, Newfoundland's landscape transforms so that, as Bleakley suggests, "the given biological is articulated through the literary imagination" (40). Steffler creates for himself, here, what Bleakley terms the "psychological animal,"

which "is neither essentialist (has a closed identity), nor constructed (as an element in a human social system), but presents a separate discourse of animality that cannot be reduced to the biological or the conceptual" (40). The new "discourse" may be read in the encounter on the animal's terms, through the animal's environment and perspective. "This animal is ontologically real," Bleakley goes on, "but it is neither just matter (literal), nor just an idea (construct)" (40). Steffler's new animalized landscape is fluid. Its plurality allows for myriad definitions of the animal. In its ubiquitous state, it can incite anxiety while simultaneously reasserting its vital presence in all aspects of human life.

Such manifestations are prevalent in all of Steffler's collections as he struggles to find a definition of place. In seeing Newfoundland from this animalized perspective, he leaves the mystery of animals and their worlds intact, while still struggling with his sense of displacement and with his equating the animal's place with femininity: a surrogate for his loneliness. His animal metaphors and analogies convey the entanglement of the animal in human perceptions, as real animals signal their presence through the poetry. After a spring rain, for instance, sparrows not only populate the land but re-create it as they weave the still damp afternoon with their own movements and

> plunge
> in, deft brown strokes of the feather
> brush, finding the shadows that wait
> for them like cool suits of clothes. (*NWWR* 34)

Their presence becomes interplay between nature and creativity. For Steffler, the birds paint the spring afternoon into a moment that animates his language. Even the shadows,

often symbolic of mystery for humans, become a positive place, an intermediate zone that speaks to the poet through their actions and their embracing the afternoon.

In recognizing that he cannot construct a consciousness that will cater to his own expectations of animal presence, Steffler animalizes Newfoundland's landscape to foreground rather than diminish its presence. The animal's relentless teeming and claiming territory is best expressed by Newfoundland writer Edward Riche, who argues that the animal presence returns despite prolonged attempts at colonizing Newfoundland: "The Norse had failed. The Basques had failed. And now the British Empire and its Canadian water boys were failing. The island belonged to the black bears and caribou and lynx and crows. And they would soon have it back" (87). Animals not only inhabit Newfoundland's hinterland, but also Steffler's imagination. The animalizing imagination, Bleakley argues, protects biological animals and the animals of our imagination and thoughts. Recreating the biological animal through poetry reinvests literature with a new empathy for life and the animal. "Writing itself," Bleakley asserts, "becomes an animal act, not a representation of life but a participatory and celebratory gesture" (117). Steffler's poetic gesture celebrates animals in Newfoundland and reinforces connections language has weakened, as he insists that "language also has deep roots that go back to a time when humans still lived more equitably with other creatures" ("Ten Questions").

Steffler's seeing Newfoundland as biologically and metaphorically eclipsing the human brings him into the arena of the Other, no longer dominated by his own epistemology. This was certainly what he experienced earlier, on the *Grey Islands*, when he left domestic space and feared ferality. He no longer remains on the periphery in a parallel world built on human invention, but gives himself over to the metaphor itself.

Wilderness becomes the undomesticated, wild space that dominates his sense of place. His thinking echoes Gary Snyder's assertion that wilderness is ubiquitous; it is "everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeast, and such that surround and inhabit us" (*Practice* 14). The world, teeming with life, takes over Steffler's imagination. Now barren willows are "something the great gull of winter shat / from the sky" and "the lobster's molecular gospel" seeps into "the water we drink;" in this way, the animal adheres to our very being (*Lookout* 10, 3). Heidegger claims this sort of absorption is a giving over of power to language. He writes, "To undergo an experience with language, then, means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into it and submitting to it" (57). Steffler's animalizing imagination suggests new forms of subjectivity based on an ethical consideration linking humans and other life forms. He enters this new subjectivity and experiences more fully through the poem.

As seen earlier, the link between animals and humans for Steffler often reaches back to a pre-linguist era when metaphor defined the relationship. In a more recently published poem "Cave Art," for instance, the connection is forged over thousands of years and through a common spirituality:

> For 25,000 years we told the same stories,
> engaged with the same gods, the great animal rivers, the obdurate alien fellows, stacked-up dense and barging, rhinos, lions, bears, bison, aurochs, mammoths, in the tundra's slopes and valleys, never far from ice. (20)

Reinforcing an understanding of animals and land situates humans at "great animal rivers," where "barging" wildlife interferes with anthropocentric readings of place. Jed Rasula suggests that cave art also offers a visual metaphor for our lost relationship with other species: "Psyche, art, and myth are ways of attending to the human by circulating images of the lives of species. The plural is important: for the Paleolithic mind, the human is syncretic, compounded by enabling pluralities of which other species were contributing features" (175). The poem becomes an elegy for this lost time and seeks to celebrate the animal by diminishing contemporary anthropocentric leanings as "human participation in the world was *through* animals or *as* animal" (176; emphasis in original). As the title of Steffler's poem attests, the cave art has left residual reminders of how the animalized imagination, through the biological animal, has inspired humans:

> The herds of thick-bellied horses, the reindeer, red deer, ibex flowing north and south, upland and downland, always pursued by the poor sun. We watched and adored them, filling ourselves like ticks with a drop of their vast life. We were sticks, we were zigzags, we were eyes only, drinking in, swallowing images to build ourselves, lines and words to hold the animals inside our limbs. No stars or sun. The reindeer were the sun. No plants or rivers. The horses were the plants and rivers. No human faces. Only animals. We were invisible. Bottomless. Witnesses. ("Cave Art" 20)

Foregrounded animals catalyze early language formation, which the metaphor expresses. As humans struggle with "lines and words" to keep the magic of the animal alive within themselves, the land remains animalized: reindeer are suns, horses are plants and rivers,

and all faces are of that of the animal. The animalized lands does not only ignite an ecstatic experience during Steffler's encounter, but also confronts him with the sheer power of its visceral presence.

Exploring cave art and deep time also appears in another recent poem, "Winter Quarters," which extends the cave metaphor, but situates it in present time to reiterate how long humans have animalized the landscape. While spelunking in a crevasse, the animal/land reveals itself to Steffler:

> nose and ears find the deer's passageway, the route
> summer takes to her winter quarters, across plains and plateaus,
> over glaciers
> and passes, down into a valley where the sun lives,
> where bison are born. (112)

The limits of this interstitial space between the "deer's passageway" and the mountain's "heart sky" intrude into his world so that he lives within the animal and its representation. It is a physical experience as he describes his body being birthed from the crevasse's darkness into "horses reindeer aurochs lions, I worm / into their faces' fame, their muscles' / rich business" (112). The sense of a sentient, animal presence within human perception becomes "flesh," as Merleau-Ponty suggests when humans become entangled in the perceptual world. "Flesh" forms a common membrane between humans and the world, by being open to both connection and creativity through metaphor. In doing this, traditional divisions between animals and humans dissolve. Merleau-Ponty writes, "Once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside,

between my inside and its outside (*The Visible* 136). Here, then, is Steffler's phenomenological experience: where the land transforms into animal and folds and refolds so that the differentiation becomes difficult to locate.

In *The Grey Islands*, the animal guise expresses its strange duality as rancorous Newfoundland landscape and mindscape. Its cacophony also folds and folds so that the Town Planner is unsure what might be human or animal:

> the sea slops and thumps
>
> gurgles and knocks
>
> suddenly loud
>
> so close I turn expecting some
>
> person or creature climbing the bank. (*GI* 68)

The newness of his landing on the island reinforces the imaginative encounter, and highlights the animal's presence where

> even a bumble bee
>
> touring slowly in at a door
>
> and out
>
> can make the cabin hum like a guitar. (68)

The Town Planner discovers in the land and the animals a resonant encounter, contrasting his isolation and enriching how he perceives and understands animalized land.

Steffler's zoomorphic efforts to animalize features of Newfoundland's landscape on the islands also creates a vast menagerie with "Cliffs" and their "thin green cover, / like dinosaurs crouching under a rug" and landscape with its "Two rock paws" and "Long grass ducking, galloping up a hill" (59-60). When the tide changes direction, it does so

quietly, as if "the shore had wandered inland like a herd of caribou" (80). A sense of encroachment compounds the longer the Planner stays on the island. In his understanding of being alone on the island (as he is the only human), he forgets again and again that the island possesses a polysemic quality, as it only ever reveals a part of itself. When he least expects an animal encounter, the land creeps up on him and eclipses his space:

> An eerie feeling when you're fishing a brook and you glance up and notice the tall peak of an iceberg jutting over a hill. On blue sunny days their slab sides blaze unnaturally white, and having forgotten they were there you suddenly see them as giant polar bears craning their necks to spy on you. Shamans' creatures. Come from a far time. (109)

Focusing on Newfoundland's geography, specifically the metaphorical and textual surprise**,** creates a new relationship between the poet and the theriomorphic landscape. His understanding of the encounter stretches back to a pre-linguistic time, as it does in his cave art poem. The animals appear to contact him from so many years before humans separated themselves from the natural world. Because they are real *and* imagined, and their meaning is in constant flux, the animals startle the Planner.

The enigmatic animal brings *That Night We Were Ravenous* into the present focus, as Steffler studies a "whale-shaped iceberg," and a river valley near the Conestoga and Grand reminds him of "the old giant world" of "mammoths" (18, 50). On an early fall morning "At Woody Point," the moon is a "shark's fin in a school of stars" and tree leaves move like "tripled minnows of light" (15). Both images of marine creatures become a kind of "music" that "takes you into its unexpected / depths" (15). Music is the transformation that reorients the poet. Steffler's breaking the line at "unexpected"

emphasizes the startling "depths" that the animalized landscape offers. It is the full experience of the physical terrain that consumes the poet, revealing the world anew to him. The experience does not end here, but is reinforced by the poet's new sense of wonder: "the flame-furred sun / huge and clearly a creature / is perched on the headland in cloudless blue," to where finally, in a realization of the beauty afforded him through this new land: "the grass rippled and posed like a handsome animal" (20, 29).

Steffler's animalized landscape unfolds into a critique of political contrasts as well. He is particularly critical of the logging and fishing industries, which he depicts as destructive presences to communities in *Lookout*. The pulp and paper industry rears its ugly head, in "Marine Drive," as the forest is "drawn into this chewing mouth" and "comes out in paper, smoke, sludge, / paycheques, houses, lovers, mittens, photos, classrooms, / crack-ups, breakups, poems, single men sitting in cars" (21). These lines from his most recent collection convey both the consumption of the land that "Newfoundland pours through" and the devastation to the community (21). In his sequence of ekphrastic poems, in *Lookout*, "Colonial Building Archives," Photo "Bio-38 Lee Wulff Fishing the Upper Humber," pivots on contradictions between the famous American fly fisherman, Lee Wulff, who is as oblivious to the ironic divide between ecological reality and his own perception as an outsider, as Steffler once was:

> the land
> like the matted hide of a dead animal,
> flat, pitched at a broken angle, dull,
> unlooked-at, suggests in a slur, a
> darkness, a background, a passing,

a reassuring nothing you drive through. (107)

As Steffler grows more connected to the landscape, he no longer sees it as an Alcatraz. Instead, he develops empathy for the island and its inhabitants. This is Steffler's intention in the above poems; the land's matted, broken, and dead animal-quality forces readers to reconstruct their perceptions of the land. If the land suffers in its animal-guise, the animals also suffer.

The Elusive Animal

In the end, Steffler's animal remains both elusive and central, a new language that is never fully grasped by the explorations of the poet. Newfoundland's hinterland and animal encounters often jar Steffler out of his existential anxieties. The animal, however, still eludes him. It appears in an inchoate and fragmented form, emphasizing how the poetic imagination draws the animal closer to humans, but it will never allow an unmitigated division. These moments function as contingencies that propel Steffler's imaginings into new directions: outward toward the world rather than remaining within his own psyche. It is in *The Grey Islands* that we see most prominently Steffler's understanding of the animal and its elusive character. On Nels' boat over to the islands, for instance, the Town Planner is deep in thought when animals interrupt:

slim birds flit low, banking,
twisting, skimming the closing troughs,
and I feel it,
    knowing it a laughing
fact: the harder your hungry eyes bite

into the world (the island cliffs penciled

in blue haze, and *there*, Nels pointing:

whale spray!

Huge flukes kicking at the sun), the more

you spread your arms to hug it in,

the less you mind the thought of diving under,

eyes flooded, gulping dark. (55)

His thoughts on consuming and controlling the world with "hungry eyes" that "bite / into the world" as his earlier colonial desires revealed, founder here in the face of the ephemeral experience of the whale's breaching. By placing the whale in parentheses—a typographical strategy that reflects the whale's flukes—Steffler emphasizes how easily humans miss such sublime encounters. That Steffler continues his prosaic thoughts after the encounter, points to his "gulping in the dark" or his inability to fully grasp the whale encounter or the whale's resistance to reading.

In other places in the same collection, the animal disorients the poet by traversing a landscape unaccommodating to humans. For instance, where a herd of caribou roam is not where humans may follow. As the Town Planner attempts to assimilate to the island (without completely giving up his previous identity), he struggles over unyielding trails that make for a cumbersome and inaccessible hike:

black spongy paths,

caribou trails, cut

deep in the wiry scrub,

wander up on the island's plateau,

fade on the rock outcrops

pick up again in the brush,

drop, skirting bogs,

fan into squishy hoof-holes

black soup

stranding you hopping tussock to tussock

then gather again with the rising ground,

thick tracks cleaving mounded moss,

juniper, blueberries, crowberries, heath,

knee-high billions of matted micro-leaves

sharp in blue light tiny fruit trembling. (73)

Bog land is difficult for humans to cross, with its slippery and teeming ground. Because he does not understand the path as a caribou can, the poet is stranded. Geographical misunderstandings highlight the tenacious relationship that people have had with a land that animals move over naturally. If "every piece of land is itself a text, with its own syntax and signifying potential," as Jonathan Bate argues, Newfoundland seethes with overgrowth and a lack of textualization or directions for humans (237). These caribou tracks "fan" and "gather" because the caribou's physiology allows it to cross such terrain. Their "cleaving" destabilizes the ground, troubling the Town Planner's crossing and reading of place. The signature of their tracks interconnects with the land's regenerative

and elemental cycles much like the "knowing" moon has its "exultant power like some great animal" (*GI* 85). As the land and animal turn strange in their refusal to separate into neat categories, they are more intrinsically linked. At the same time, the poet can watch, but not be part of this union.

It becomes increasingly clear that Steffler inserts himself into the animal encounter through his acceptance that the animal's poetic potency troubles material meaning: its ontology challenges the poet's assumptions of what makes an animal *animal*. While he scrambled over the boggy terrain in *The Grey Islands* to reach an imaginative understanding of what the animal embedded in landscape means, "In a Makeshift Blind" from *That Night We Were Ravenous*, he admits that he must "abandon the corporation of myself" in order to experience where animal and human overlap (25). As a contemplative poem that plays with rainy days and writing poetry, the dark morning's profundity springs from a creaturely magnetism. The morning is an "Inclusive animal" that walks with "rough grace" and beleaguers the poet, drawing him away from his desk and "pile of unfinished poems" (25). By turning away from his writing and language, he discovers the morning in all its animal being:

> This morning I lie in a makeshift blind and watch
> what the animal does.
> He wanders around in crowds of air. I cannot
>
> distinguish him from the worn leaves rubbing,
> the yellows.
> The smell of the earth is the same

as his skin. (25)

In passively studying "what the animal does," Steffler gives up trying to control the experience.

Animals are always beyond human perception and almost always misunderstood for this reason. The animal is at first camouflaged and indistinguishable from the air, leaves, and the earth, as it is a copious encompassing of all orders of the outdoors. Steffler's recognition of animal subjectivities derives from his acknowledgment of the animal's inherent mystery. He finally states this in "Ponderous Matter" from *That Night We Were Ravenous* (and responds to it later in *Lookout*'s "Skink's Tail," an exploration on the elusive skink, a member of the lizard family). In "Ponderous Matter," Steffler suggests that the "camouflaged skink / of Newfoundland" resembles "dead kelp" so much that it is never detected by humans or even other animals. It is so embedded into Newfoundland's landscape that it sparks an ontological unease in Steffler:

I crouch over the camouflaged skink,
my clasped hands trembling,
or over where I think it might be,
it is so like me, and yet
entirely alien. (*NWWR* 97)

Through its elusive behaviour, the skink offers the poet a glimpse of infinite strangeness, yet it also reminds him of his own sense of being overlooked while in plain sight. When Steffler returns to the skink in *Lookout*, he surmises that the animal will continue to elude humans and their imagination:

Some animals pace and pace in a shiver,

their eyes never meet yours or, if they do,

look right through you. What you take for their bodies

is an accidental facet of whatever they really

are. (72)

In this poem, however, Steffler understands that the skink's ontology will always elude his imagination. It quivers on the edges of human understanding, but it will never be in full focus for humans, as it possesses facets that resist mindscapes and landscapes, just as it can biologically escape predators by shedding its tail and moves like a snake rather than like other lizards. What Steffler sees is only a small glimpse of its shifting ontology: "The animal, like an iceberg, / is conducting its affairs out of sight," he writes (72). The skink and the iceberg, both strange to the poet as their true size and depth remain unseen, merge and cannot be differentiated, as the poet is not looking closely enough at either.

Though the moose was introduced to Newfoundland in the early twentieth century, it is perhaps the most iconic animal on the island and in Steffler's collections. Its incongruous and startling presence in the poems also shows how it is identified in the region as both a target for hunting and a hazard for drivers. In the title poem from *That Night We Were Ravenous*, Steffler develops a unique challenge to this traditional view during a moose encounter.[21] The moose as an import to the island deconstructs notions of wildness and control. Like the skink, the moose raises questions concerning ontology and epistemology. When Steffler and his companion unexpectedly encounter a moose during a night drive, it skews their previous knowledge of what moose means. The first stanza transforms the road at dusk into an active bestiary and underscores the plurality found within Newfoundland's landscape: "swooping and disappearing ahead," the road is "like

an owl, the hills no longer playing dead," but sticking up "their black / blurry arses" (116). Through the dimness, the hills heave "themselves up for another night of leapfrogging," while the road appears as a "hunchbacked horse with a goiter, maybe a team of beavers" (116). These configurations stir Steffler's imagination into fanciful creations because he cannot pin down the meaning of the moose. His understanding of the encounter encapsulates the province: "it was the / landscape doing a moose, a cow moose" and "she was more part of the forest than any tree. / She was made of trees. The beauty of her face was bred / in the kingdom of rocks" (116, 117). The moose then fuses the poet's awareness of that metaphorical link between the place and the animal. Her presence marks the beginning of a new awareness on the island.

The moose is not only a literary conceit but also an awe-inspiring encounter that evokes the sublime and triggers cultural associations through the expansive nature of the metaphor. Stacking metaphors suggest the sheer impact of the moment on the poet; it is ineffable and fragmented. In his extensive list, the moose is "more part of the forest than any tree" (117). She is everything that compromises the poet's insistence on demarcation. Steffler writes, "Her eyes were like Halley's Comet, like factory whistles, / like bargain hunters, like shy kids" (116). By blurring the boundaries between land and animal Newfoundland becomes pluralistic and protean, depending on the reader's own set of associations. Each of these descriptions transcends the moose across all categories. She appears, for the poet, as the history of Newfoundland itself, as a pre-history of the island, and as none of these at the same time. She becomes part of an oral history, as her meaning shifts "like events in a ballad" and "She was a plot of earth shaped like the island of / Newfoundland" (44) and "She was Newfoundland held in a dam" (117). She

also troubles the poet's understanding of both linear time and space: "She surfaced in front of us like a coelacanth, like a face / in a dark lagoon. She made us feel blessed" (117). Reference to the Cretateous fish, the coelacanth, recalls Steffler's interest in the primordial and pre-linguistic quality of the encounter and the awe that this incites as it collapses time at the moment of contact. The coelacanth is a particularly poignant choice for Steffler's use because it is a fish long thought extinct. Its rediscovery in the 1930s is an example of how an animal can collapse time by appearing where it is not expected. The collapsing of time extends to the moose's imaginative or metaphorical link to humans when it steps in front of their car.

Steffler's evocation of the moose as being in and out of time reminds us of what Bleakley argues about knowing the Other. The moose becomes a moment of awareness that demonstrates "both a sacred and aesthetic attitude to human-animal relationships," reinforcing the animal's transcendent abilities, and our attitudes "towards the animal in its own right, as opposed to a wholly secular and functional outlook typical of our attitudes towards animals as walking larder and experimental objects" (131). When the moose collapses temporality, it becomes present in the poet's moment and representative of all time. When Steffler encounters the physical animal, he experiences awe and a flash of understanding, which speaks of how the incantatory nature of the encounter changes both how he sees the moose and how he understands Newfoundland.

When it leaps in front of the car, the moose destroys mundane time, and subsequently, it breaches the couple's relationship by encouraging them to step over boundaries so that it "made us talk like a cage of canaries" (*NWWR* 117). The animal becomes a means to access the interpersonal moment of the poet and his companion. Its

appearance incites "passion," which in turn, provokes the "great sublime in nature" (Burke 57). Steffler writes:

> That night we were ravenous. We talked, gulping, waving our forks. We entered one another like animals entering woods.
>
> That night we slept deeper than ever.
>
> Our dreams bounded after her like excited hounds. (118)

For the poet, and the reader, it is astonishment, the "effect of the sublime in its highest degree," that crowds out all other thoughts from their minds, rendering any attempt of the mind to "reason on that object which employs it" utterly futile (Burke 57). As Steffler discovers, and Burke notes, "far from being produced" by our "reasonings," the moment "hurries us on by an irresistible force" (57). The sheer magnitude of the encounter propels Steffler to binge and be ravenous in order to compensate for the ineffable nature of the experience.

The poet's experience, or the one that he strives for here, is close to that shamanistic experience of the supernatural within the natural. "The psychological animal is autonomous, unpredictable and potentially pathologized and pathologizing," Bleakley argues, "but may come with erotic-affective and educational intentions, as familiar and guide, and is treated as such in classical shamanism" (129). It is only a small step for Steffler from empowering the animal to feminizing the landscape so that, in the end, the cow moose seduces him even as he would seduce his companion.

John Steffler's poetry, grounded in the imagination, engages the animal through his own anxieties and attractions to Newfoundland's landscape. His use of the animal metaphor signifies his psychological state, as he is a contradictory figure who does not offer reconciliation for the ways he compromises his zoopoetics with his own colonial tendencies. Instead, he reinforces how difficult it is for the poet to escape the entrapments of language and control. If Steffler's world is a troubling sphere of control, sexual frustration, and the animalized landscape overriding the poet's ego, Harry Thurston's work, explored in the next chapter, involves a completely different encounter with the animal. Though Thurston also struggles with how to relinquish control, he moves almost systematically through various lifestyle changes that lead him to a scientifically informed, ecological reading of northern Nova Scotia.

Chapter 4: Harry Thurston: Devil's Purse

If the time should ever come when what is now called Science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.

(Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*)

The greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of the sciences and humanities.

(E.O. Wilson, *Consilience*)

As a versatile writer of poetry, creative non-fiction, and environmental journalism, Nova Scotia's Harry Thurston explores the place of the human in the natural world, and often in the animal's world. His commitment to seeking out and his failure to find confluence for expressing an interspecies kinship prevails through six of his eight poetry collections. Thurston's thinking on the animal is explored primarily through three areas of interactive concern: farming, science, and ecology/poetry. While ecology has increasingly occupied Atlantic Canadian poetic subjects in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this chapter examines how Thurston invites readers to follow his own meandering path toward ecologically-informed poetry with a sense of humility. His relationship to the animal changes as his poetry develops. He does not begin with a fully formed understanding of animals and their ecosystems, but comes to this understanding

via his earlier experiences on his family's dairy farm in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia and, later, as a formally educated biologist at Acadia University in the 1960s. These experiences add dimension to his perception of the animal, until he reaches an incomplete zoopoetics that articulates his ecological understanding. Each of these experiences alters and redefines the trajectory of his thinking concerning animals. By the time he wrote his later collection *If Men Lived on Earth* (2000), his ideas about animals become a "fierce consciousness," a "*hurt hawk*, brooding on man's hooded vision," as he brings together his experiences in farming and the study of biology to finally ground himself in ecological sensibilities that call and respond to his earlier disciplines (100, emphasis in original).

While Thurston's poetry attends to many places and themes in Nova Scotia, Tidnish Bridge, his home for the past thirty years, has been a constant inspiration for him. Though Tidnish is part of John Thompson's Tantramar Marsh, Thurston's marsh means something very different. Thurston's poetry combines a deep respect for nature's intricate interrelationships and dependencies with his own struggle to apprehend the animal encounter through poetry. Thurston's poetry expresses a longing to be transported by nature while giving into its authority.

Critic Lance LaRocque has pointed out that Thurston's poetry exhibits "a dwindling of the presence of the autonomous self and a re-invigorated sense of reciprocity between human and nonhuman beings" (118). But in order to do this, the poet must shed something of the natural human desire to control. Not surprisingly, Thurston's poetic self evolves through the encounters, rather than simply naming or identifying past experiences. At the same time, he struggles with the "opaqueness of the world," where

his own position as interlocutor is decidedly what some would call anti-Romantic (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 121). His inspiration is not drawn from simply observing the landscape, but from inserting himself within it.

The movement from farm boy to scientist to environmentalist and poet is a process that brings him closer to understanding the very nature of the language he needs. As such, language for him does not appear "as an interior screen through which to view the world," as LaRoque observes, "but as something sensuously ingrained in and traveling among objects and place" (116). More than this, language becomes a part of the changing phenomenological experience as it evokes lived experience. In other words, animals are not abstract concepts for Thurston. They are simultaneously sources of otherness and identity, as the term "animal" derives from *animale*, meaning any living creature that breathes. In a Merleau-Pontian turn, Thurston's language attempts to dissolve dichotomies through his poetry's "ecological turn," because the etymological connection aligns his state of being much more closely to the animal-other. It is this connection that eventually leads Thurston toward recognizing the Other in the animal as a breathing subject, which foregrounds the shared world because it points out how he does not always find the right word for the experience.

Thurston's poetry and philosophy often seem to align with what sociobiologist E.O. Wilson has termed *consilience*, which is a synthesis of knowledge from a wide range of disciplines. It is "a 'jumping together' of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation" (7). While Thurston perceives that a unified theory of knowledge is unachievable, this study sides with Wilson's *consilience* as it at least allows for an uneasy marriage between the

humanities and sciences. Through something like *consilience,* then, Thurston's view of poetry, science, and ecology appear to shape an understanding of environmental ethics, which can expose us to the physical world's plurality and grandeur. Where Wilson suggests that "studying disciplines in pieces" creates "gaps" in our understanding that do not provide a more "balanced perspective of experience," Thurston finds that the gaps become an inexpressible aspect of the experience itself (14). Wilson's theory that "Neither science nor the arts can be complete without combining their separate strengths," as "[s]cience needs the intuition and metaphorical power of the arts, and the arts need the fresh blood of science," addresses Thurston's own struggle to find a new language of nature (237). But in the poet, we see that this combination of perspectives ends up being the struggle itself. In the poetry, the natural world is a biological/phenomenological matrix that yet cannot provide the poet with a satisfactory articulation of lived experience. By drawing on his knowledge of three different disciplines, but realizing the limits of them all, Thurston seems to agree with Wilson that seeking out reciprocity "is to view the boundary between the scientific and literary cultures not as a territorial line but as a broad and mostly unexplored terrain awaiting cooperative entry from both sides" (*Consilience* 126).

Thurston's new understanding works to shape his consciousness toward an environmental awareness, or "land ethic," that informs his experiences with animals in the most delicate of ecologies: Nova Scotia's watersheds and salt marshes. The notion of a land ethic comes from Aldo Leopold's foundational book on modern conservation, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), and might also give voice to Thurston's later efforts to read the complexity of place. "The land ethic," Aldo writes, "simply enlarges the

boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204). As animals move in and out of Thurston's view, the meaning of their presence resists full disclosure; he comes to realize that they are more than what his poetry does impose on them. Finally, for the poet, the land becomes the animal voice itself, just as the land manifests animal. Even a diaphonic foghorn on a stormy south shore can give rise to an image of the "mythic half-human, half-animal, / a Minotaur tethered at land's end" (*IMLE* 13).

Crediting Leopold, Thurston declares that "The inherent value of living things . . . is 'uncaptured by language.' Regardless, this is what a nature writer tries to do, capture 'the others' in a net of words" (*APBT* 225). What is "uncaptured" must be celebrated in its ineffable state, as "it is not enough to be picturesque," (*IMLE* 136). His attentiveness to Nova Scotia as a sense of ineffable loci reinforces a bioregional interpretation at what some have called "the most conspicuous shoreline features of the east coast of North America" (Bertness 313). "The living / speak the language of the scallop and lobster," Thurston declares, "the dialect of cod, haddock, and herring, / the eloquent babble of the seabirds" (*IMLE* 136). Here, the language is specific to place: "dialect" and "babble" convey an awareness of regional discourse, but also a language which belongs to the fish and birds. Progress through disciplines and practices transforms Thurston's poetry, and brings him, finally, to the edge of that gap between the animal experience and poetic language.

Farming and Traditional Land Culture

Thurston's experiences with animals began on Brook Farm, his family's dairy farm in Yarmouth County in the southwestern region of Nova Scotia. Time on the farm involved the day-to-day maintenance, which his father expected him and his brother to carry out. His family grew a garden in the rich marshland soil, while also keeping cows. Brook Farm was where "Cattle bawl wanting out of the impending / dark, rain that is coming" and the "Howl of a tethered hound rises / out of the valley" late in the afternoon (*CFBE* 32). These years shaped Thurston's early poetic inclinations, despite his chores and tasks, which often involved him in the death of an animal from disease or economic necessity. In such moments, he found himself wanting a more definitive relationship with animals and a more complete language. He often struggled to stay on the practical side of such a livelihood rather than letting his thoughts roam to poetry.

In terms of agri-poetry, Thurston joins the cadre of the farming poetry tradition long upheld by such writers as Robert Frost at Shaftsbury Farm, Ted Hughes at Moortown Farm, and Wendell Berry at Lane's Landing. Thurston often returns to his early days on Brook Farm in his poetry collections. As he writes in "Returning," from his selected collection *Animals of my Own Kind* (2009), "All my life I have been returning there, / in dreams to that first place—home, / a farmhouse on a hill above a river" (118). Often these returns take on the tension inherent in seeing animals from an economic and pragmatic point of view. So, early on in the poetry, Thurston seems to defend the farm life as an economic necessity by fighting back against his own inclination to identify with the mystery in animal existence.

With a nod to John Thompson, whom he claims, "plumbed the iconography of the Maritimes in his own writing," Thurston includes a ghazal, "Minding the Homestead," in his second collection, *Clouds Flying Before the Eye* (1985) (qtd. in Graham 41). The poem explores a more Romantic version of the farm. While the first lines realize the inexpressible animal, the poem also strives to reveal beauty and reinforce the bucolic moments on the farm:

> Days. I live with horses and water.
>
> Between me and light, the rough Bay.
>
>
> I touch the mare's winter thick flank
>
> in the dark:
>
> 'Beauty'. Speak softly, the horse's
>
> Memory is long. (54)

As an early example, the poet's connection with the horse in the barn may be reduced to "beauty," as too much language buries the immediacy of the moment. When he suggests speaking softly, he addresses a need to remove language from the moment.

Later in the same collection, Thurston writes of his vision of the end of the world. The setting is a quiet morning in the barn with only himself and a bullcalf. The world does not end, however; only his role as the language-dependent being disappears. The bullcalf's indifference conveys how overblown humanity's place in the world has become:

> This is how the world ends
>
> if you want to know:

I go out one morning

to feed my bullcalf.

And as I always do

I get down on my hunkers

to watch and listen

to him feed awhile.

His snout flecked

with the grain

he looks up, sees me

slumped down—asleep.

And in the whole great sounding

of the barn, there is only

the music of his soft face

in the trough. (65)

Even as early as this collection, he is already beyond the normal psychology of husbandry, losing himself to the animals that should sustain him. His world ends with neither "thunder nor fire" but in a quiet turn toward sleep while feeding the calf. That "there is only / the music of his soft face / in the trough" speaks to the fact that the poet's erasure and his silence do not upset the balance on the farm. The calf barely notices that he has fallen unconscious. The title, "Revelations" is an allusion to the Biblical book of

"Revelations," which predicts that the world will end with thunder, fire, and the final word from God. While the poem references epiphanic revelations, Thurston discovers humility in mortality that does nothing to interrupt the serenity in the barn with the calf.

Thurston's experiences on the farm, however, are not all idyllic moments. He lived on a working farm and witnessed a casual cruelty that forced a detached understanding of the animals. In these cases, Thurston's struggle stems from his need to seek out a language that expresses his role as working farmer and his emotional sympathies. Thurston's struggle between being a farmer and a poet becomes most evident in poems like "Christian Name," section three of the long poem "Apocrypha" from *If Men Lived on Earth*. Here, the debate among his relatives over naming the newborn Thurston links him to the farming lineage, and in particular to his grandfather who sees Thurston as the man's "last chance for a namesake" (86). Later, his grandfather dismisses Thurston's poetic inclinations. "Harry, a poet's name?" he asks, "'No!' I hear / my grandfather raise his objection / from the grave, 'A horse's name!'" (86). As a name for a horse, Harry maintains the status quo of farmer and as a touchstone in the family lineage as he remarks, "obediently, I pull the name of a horse / into the future" (86). Part of his struggle, here, may come from his inability to define why he drags horses and agriculture into his future.

Farming also cannot work as an adequate model for him because his inability to focus only on the farm hinders his education in husbandry. In Berry's rather high Romantic definition of farming, he equates its practice to caregiving. Describing a farmer, he uses very maternal language: A "man who is in the traditional sense a good farmer," Berry writes, "is husbandman and husband, the begetter and conserver of the

earth's bounty, but he is also midwife and motherer. He is a nurturer of life. His work is domestic; he is bound to the household" ("A Native" 179). Bondage, however, comes at a price for Thurston: it ruptures the poetic temperament by returning him to the harsher realities of farming. He nurtures life, conversely, by seeking out the ineffable because his family's livelihood, while a point of pride and respect for traditional ways, will inevitably dampen his early poetic encounters.

In "The Younger," from *If Men Lived on Earth*, Thurston recounts a terrifying childhood incident when a mink living beneath the family woodshed manifests as his farming/poetry conflict. In their first accidental encounter at the edge of the house, the mink's strangeness infuses him with awe and aversion. It is both a symbolic and physical avatar for mystery. The mink manifests as an "unexpectant visitant" because its transitory and uncanny presence is both familiar and alien to the young Thurston (21). It is the mink's eyes, in particular, that emphasize its unknowability. Humans depend on eyes and eye contact to reassure themselves of good intentions in strangers. The mink's eyes, conversely, are human-like and very unhuman-like. They spur the young poet to return to the mink time and again in attempts to *read* the mink's intention. Thurston recalls the "feral eyes" that startled him, forcing him to study them for "a long time / to be sure they were really there" (21). He claims to have returned each day just to see these "quick, yellow, fearless" eyes, as they make his "heart beat faster" like a "nightmare bolted in light" (21).

With its mystery translated into Thurston's poetic associations, the mink embodies the connection between the symbol, and the world. Nature is no longer an end in itself, as in nineteenth century Romantic poetry, but the catalyst for self-discovery and

for seeing the Other; as Thurston asserts—the mink is his "nightmare bolted into light" (21). He discovers a new way of knowing, moving from traditional aspects of farming and land management toward a growing sense of identifying with animals as poet and naturalist. Though the mink's illuminating presence exemplifies how fear can be the catalyst for "an imaginative ascent," the human drive to appropriate often dominates in the end (Glickman 45). The mink's ability to trigger fear and awe startles Thurston's family. Thus, they attempt to eradicate the strangeness that the mink manifests from its place below the woodshed. The focus shifts from poetic encounter into a real farm encounter.

Subsequently, the third and fourth stanzas in "The Younger" shift the trajectory of the relationship, as Thurston brings the mink to his family's attention and the poetic encounter disperses. When he discloses his experiences with the mink to his family, they investigate and find the mink watching them through its "tiny phosphorescent lamps in the woodshed twilight" (21). The mink's eyes gleam through the dimness and remind the poet of its shadowy existence on the periphery of his and his family's existence. From under the porch, it is "[s]tunned by the brightness" of the world the humans inhabit. Its mercurial nature suggests the poet is unable to force categories onto it. The mink's strangeness increases when Thurston's older brother spears the mink with "the clothespole" while the family watches "[a]gog" (21). Finally, the mink transforms from an exquisite mystery back to farm vermin, which must be disposed of for the sake of the farm. In the end, it is a "stretched pelt hung in the workshop," and Thurston regresses back into his earlier self by claiming it "fetched a good price" (21). The mink, sold rather than celebrated, shakes Thurston out of his poetic reveries on the animal as Other and

returns him to his upbringing on a farm where there is no mystery, only a livelihood. So early on in the poetry, Thurston seems to defend the farm life as an economic necessity by fighting against his own inclinations toward identifying with animal's mystery.

There is, subsequently, a pivotal moment of identification. In the final section of the poem, Thurston decreases the distance between himself and the mink when he encounters his brother on the porch with a loaded gun. Here, he states, "if I turn to flee into the light / my brother will pull the trigger" (22). The moment mirrors the mink's plight earlier when it is "Stunned by the brightness" and "unsure in which direction to run" (21). It is an important detail, as Thurston and the mink share a fear of another human. They have both been treated as vermin, as something in need of eradication.

There are increasing numbers of incidents in his poetry of this kind of struggle between the old self and the new. "The Tubercular Calf," from the later collection *Animals of My Own Kind*, captures his dichotomous position between poetry and husbandry, but this time he resolves to leave farming behind. In the first stanza, Thurston's world resounds with Romantic and poetic overtones. It conveys "great golden" pregnant cows as "queenly," "horned goddesses" who offer him "hermetic blessings as they saunter around the field" (117). He sees the farm as "my inheritance: / red and barred hens, many teated sows, / queenly cows" (117). When the calves, however, contract Bang's disease, or bovine tuberculosis, the infectious disease moves through the farm "like a biblical plague," reducing "the sickly calves" to "wobbly-legged" creatures "streaked with mustard feces" (117). His idyllic understanding of the farm evaporates. It is here, again, that he struggles with identifying a language appropriate to his experience of the transformed farm. The classical and Romantic

references, such as the "goddesses" and "biblical plague," expose his dilemma. Try as he will to poeticize them, he cannot simply identify with the animals or release them from their harder, farm-nature realities. He nurtures them: "bottle nursing" until "the barns would echo empty," as the last calf succumbs to the disease. In seeing the farm for what it really is, a place of life and death, Thurston claims at the end, "the ghostly cattle would come no longer / when called" and he admits, "I would have to learn a new language, / find meaning among animals of my own kind" (117). His new language releases him. It allows him to escape the farm in search of a language of science, even if science is only another way to control nature and exert his authority over it. For all his efforts, however, encounters with cattle remain intertwined with his farming experiences, invoking his recognition of interconnectivity and rifts in language.

The Poetry of Science

In conjunction with the early farm years, Thurston claims that the salt marshes of his childhood also served as his "laboratory for learning firsthand about the cyclical workings of nature" (*APBT* 5). The experience spurred him as a young adult to study biology. His work toward an eventual degree in Biology at Acadia University in the late 1960s gave him a new scientific understanding. It further complicates his relationship to animals, however, as he changes from seeing the animal from an economic point of view to seeing it from a scientific and deductive one. His earlier sense of the economics of the dairy cow becomes "a pulsing flask" and an "experimental calf" out of an objective necessity based on his studies (*CFBE* 68). With science, he gains different insights into animals by seeing how complex their systems and worlds are. He also discovers that

animals become objects as he undertakes various experiments, which often devalue the animal as a living creature. Yet, as his new understanding grows, Thurston takes both the farming and biological worlds as the subject of his poetry, proving to himself that any one discipline alone cannot do justice to the complexities of the animal encounter. As he writes of symbionts such as lichen, "Cell-shack squatters, oxygen-eaters, / they are the minuscule mouths / that mock our high sounding conceits" (*IMLE* 32). The lichen's symbiotic complexity here diminishes language's power and mocks an anthropocentric ordering of the world. Thurston's Hopkinsesque compound words also reflect this conflict.

Critics have recognized Thurston's place as scientist and poet. In an interview for *The Goose*, Lisa Szabo-Jones suggests that Thurston's work participates in what "biologist and poet Gary Paul Nabhan calls cross-pollination between the sciences and poetry" (82). Cross-pollination offers a more balanced approach for reclaiming the physical world's dynamic elements than the often calcified epistemologies of science. Merleau-Ponty, a scientist himself, attests that science can only explore one facet of the physical world's immensity. It is through a range of perspectives that empirical knowledge solidifies: "All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless" (*Phenomenology* viii-ix). Thurston's turn toward science attempts to capture experience and authenticate the encounter.

For Thurston, *consilience* between disciplines continuously shifts emphasis and importance. While biology, as a discipline, often represents a rigid epistemology, it can

still be incorporated into his poetry, as it adds layers of complexity to his investigations. This may be because the very language of classical science provides a neatness not found in its metaphorical counterparts. His second poetry collection, *Clouds Flying before the Eye*, demonstrates his early interest in this subject. Juxtaposing his upbringing on Brook Farm with the clinical space in a biology lab during his undergraduate days at Acadia University, "Sanctuary" explores how the laboratory offers the façade of protection. The student defends himself against the flux of the natural world through his ability to label and contain it. Thurston embraces this false sense of security as he embarks on microbe research. He is, ironically, sequestered from biological processes in the physical world while he observes such processes in a controlled environment. The exclusivity of such endeavours calls for a reconciliation between his farming background—"the habit and heart" of his "father's peasant stock"—with his training as a biologist. While "fastened over a microscope lens," he does not completely lose his earlier agricultural language (71). At first, he has simply traded aspects of farming for science, such as "manure / for the agar of horse's marrow" and "the scent of blossoms for the bacilli's effluvium" (71). He also acknowledges that though the lab provides for controlled experiments, he is now distanced from biological processes, which continue outside the laboratory in nature:

> Underfoot the long night of the worm
>
> works its miracle of loam.
>
> The acidic earth eats to the heart of a man.
>
> The spade overturns civilizations. (71)

The lab's controlled environment is also the controlled environment of language. References from science, he hopes, will fit the experience. His science involves

metaphors, however, that derive from farming. His animals are now "a virulent world in miniature," which undergoes cultivation as the "worm," "loam," "earth," and "spade" overturn and rejuvenate the soil for planting (71). Such language reveals a degree of fidelity to his farming background, although this language previously failed him in expressing his animal encounter. Biological processes, such as the worm's role in decomposition, also connote humanity's unstable mortality. The worm will consume the human heart in the end as it "works its miracle." Moments like this celebrate a chaotic world overwrought with fecundity that cannot be controlled or categorized in any complete or final way. Thurston reinforces his own position that science is not an absolute when later in the poem he states that only humans "take inventory of the world" from behind a "clinical cloak" (71-2). He is forced to admit, at the end, that "Man is a strange *animalcule*" [sic] or a strange "small animal" as he imagines Leeuwenhoek, the father of microbiology, "fussily polishing his monocle" and studying "the beasties resident in his tooth scum / discovering, in fact, we are never alone" (72). The diminutive, Latinate designation, the very nomenclature of science, intentionally tries to equalize Thurston's microbes with humanity. The link between his intellectual and creative modes of thinking allows, in using the diminutive, a mindful interaction of a world within worlds. Yet, the poet is now aware that humans are alone, because they have such difficulty in reading the larger world.

Ultimately, Thurston addresses the dangers inherent in relying on such scientific thinking, as it objectifies the animal and distances oneself from suffering, as in "The Technician" from the same collection. His observations here reflect similarities in Merleau-Ponty's investigations, especially in the essay "Eye and Mind." For Merleau-

Ponty, science "makes its own limited models of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals" (159). Thurston discovers that the "limited models" occur, in particular, when the welfare of animals is not taken into consideration. "Science is and always has been," Merleau-Ponty declares, "that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our use" (159). The strength of Merleau-Ponty's argument rests precisely on the fact that he can maintain his loyalty to science while criticizing its objectivity. He is not, however, saying that scientific thinking is erroneous here. He states that scientific models of thinking must, at some point, reconnect its practitioners to the world. Here may be the crucial link for Thurston then, as he moves from the farm to science, only to discover that scientific investigation must return eventually to the individual's lived experience. It is where poetry becomes the bridge for the farmer-scientist.

During Thurston's time as a biology student and veterinary research technician, he was "collecting blood samples for a vaccine development project" from cattle in a slaughterhouse (*APBT* 191). He is encouraged to treat the animals as "object-in-general" because, in his words, "[i]t is the pathology" that he preserves, although it conflicts with his upbringing on the farm (*CFBE* 69). Thurston's job as a science student "is to observe" and "to carry out instruction" (69). At a critical moment, he waits while "a brother in blood / brims a pail at the jugular's spigot; / in a test tube I collect an aliquot" (68, 67). During the observations, "The professor warns: / Don't get too attached / to the animals"

(68). Line breaks emphasize the professor's assertion in separating the animal as sentient being from the sense of animal as object. The animals become "A dynasty of non-entities," where "the experimental calf" is "a kind of portable laboratory on hooves" and Thurston is one of many "kind killers" (68). He cannot, however, justify his own treatment of the cows as object-in-general. With so much "mad circling" and "wall-eyed terror," his language underscores how stark his duties are, as he moves through "aseptic halls" where his job is to "measure out mercy / to the milliliter" (69). He juxtaposes his experience with the expectation, which makes no claim to verisimilitude. At the end of the poem, as in "Sanctuary," Thurston is not at ease in this scientific space. The poem's disjointedness becomes apparent, as his professional and personal expectations collide. He juxtaposes the treatment of animals on farms with these scientific experiments, finding the earlier dismissed farm practice more ethical:

> There are quicker, kinder ways to kill
>
> with a crowbar or 22
>
> like on the farm
>
> but that would tell us nothing. (68)

The sentiment here rests not merely on the technique for killing the animal, but speaks to the authenticity of the encounter and to the epistemological weight overriding his empathy. In the final moments, then, farming does not have scientific pretentions of his present experience, such as experimenting for the greater good. It does not draw out death for knowledge, but kills quickly so that the farm may function properly.

Interestingly, after describing the horrific conditions in the slaughterhouse, he internalizes the experience in the last stanza: "One thing more," he writes, as if it were an afterthought, making the statement all the more powerful:

> I was not told
> I must carry the slow death
> like mineral and ash
> inside the hollowness
> of my own bones. (69)

These deaths will remain with him like new marrow that has physically transformed him (69). For Thurston, science startles in its demand for order and objectivity in the face of these suffering animals. It is a treatment that farm life does not support and it holds a fallacious sanctity that all is done for the greater good. But the poet feels that moral disjunction. In the end, as with his farming experience, science distances him from the animals as sentient beings and spurs an ethical dilemma for the poet.

In seeking *consilience*, or a convergence of experiences between science and poetry, apropos of possessing the physical world, extension of the objective with the subjective often produces culpability. It underscores a hard-earned, ethically informed sense of humility in the poetry. "Common Yellow-Shafted Flicker" is a fine example of this tension, as it traces the subtle interplay between a biology lesson and a meditation on poetic inspiration. Self-reflexive, the poem leads Thurston from field guide knowledge of a Northern Flicker subspecies, whose habitat is eastern North America, to a hands-on encounter. The strength of his argument rests on studying the dead bird, recently exhumed from his freezer after four years. He claims that the dead bird was given to him

and that he accepted it "out of pity" for "the purpose of poetry" (*AMK* 23). Elegiac in tone, the poem conveys Thurston's despair at the human drive to appropriate rather than simply render the bird through poetry. His encounter with the flicker is not the accidental encounter with the mink from earlier, but is here an intentional act and a controlled encounter that dulls the experience. The poem's epigraph from Mary Oliver echoes this sentiment: "Imagination is better than a sharp instrument" (23).

Thurston's dilemma arises as he returns to the dead bird in the freezer and discovers that preserving it for later inspirational use diminishes the bird's spirit and beauty. "Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place," Gary Snyder observes, echoing Thurston's own observations, "and it must be grounded in information and experience" (43). Thurston's discovery of this is the struggle of the poet in a scientist's disguise. How he grounds his experience, now distanced from the natural world, might not translate into a greater understanding. But the bird in the field guide is not the bird before the poet. The "bright yellow corpse" on the table before him is dead and frozen in time, until a more convenient opportunity for the poet to contemplate it. As he studies the bird, he recalls his years as a biology student. His earlier experiences with "things thawing" and preserved for dissection offered him a different sort of discovery:

> As intent
> eighteen-year-olds, we earnestly studied nature in its static form:
> dogfish, mud puppy, domestic cat—laced with tributaries of latex,
> bathed in pools of formalin. (*IMLE* 23)

Many of Thurston's observations from these years are housed in the language of biology. Like an early twentieth-century scientist, he studies the bird in terms of what each part

means to the whole. These observations are genuine; however, they stir up his poetic reveries, thereby blending disciplines. The bird's anatomy remains inseparable from its metaphorical associations. Language like "Primaries, bright shafts of yellow—sunlight in a mine's mouth" and "A yoke of black feathers like a cleric's collar" address nature's elusiveness, and our anthropomorphic tendencies to claim by association (23). The bird, however, is also released as the metaphor re-wilds the zoological classification. Its face, for instance, reminds Thurston of his culpability in exploiting the bird in its death: "A long beak for hammering its death message" and the tongue "lolls harmlessly . . . silently accusatory in the limp language of death" (23-24). While studying this "accusatory" frozen flicker, Thurston offers unobtrusive ways to consider the nonhuman animal for epistemological purposes: "Ecology, poetry, photography, each shares this same desire: to catch the quicksilver of living and let it pass through its fingers, all at once" (24). Rather than keeping the flicker frozen for years, Thurston suggests that the ephemeral quality of the "quick silver" encounter—that aspect of nature that cannot be harnessed or controlled—fuels our imaginations and offers a sustainable and ethical practice for expressing the animal encounter. The poet must eventually recognize his own desire to write out the bird's death and his experience of it, as another way of understanding that parallels, ironically, the capture of the outside world through the sciences.

Contemplating such "a denial of death" reminds the reader of Don McKay's dramatic essay "Baler Twine," which begins with McKay finding a shot raven, strung up to a fence post with baler twine. McKay's conflict in this instance stems from his inability to either position or catalogue the raven in such a state, or to understand the motivation behind such a horrendous act. It does not fit either Audubon's justification for

killing animals for detailed study, he claims, or hunting practices. It is, in fact, a particularly disturbing scene. Thurston is similarly conflicted as to how he should understand the flicker. His conflict derives from the flicker's troublesome state in frozen animation. Thurston, however, still desires to find a way to identify with it. Like the raven, it is still a "brash postcard from the wilderness" (*Vis* 15). As McKay argues, the presence of the bird, in death, primarily points to the human need to control: "[d]isplaying it declares that the appropriation is total. A dead body seeks to rejoin the elements; this one is required to function as a sign, a human category—a sign which says simply 'we can do this.' The raven's being, in Martin Heidegger's terms, was not just used, but used up" (16). By the end of the poem, Thurston acknowledges the bird's still inherent possession of wilderness. It shifts from the spectacle of death and an object of anthropocentric control to the poetic creature of flight that celebrates the flicker's magic and *flickerness*: "With you, friend, I mourn the stilled body of this common yellow-shafted flicker, knowing that no life is common. With you I celebrate its low looping flight, flashing yellow like the flickering beam of a magic lantern" (24). Its magic lantern, now extinguished, as was the mink's, can only be appreciated in the short moments of the real-time encounter. But the poet, recalling it through poetry, releases it only as a longing to capture that ephemeral nature of its essential difference. Thus, the poem revolves around the life of the flicker rather than its death.

Transitions from scientific to poetic renderings of the natural world take on more profound intentions when Thurston crosshatches these with seeing his own child. "Ultrasound," an early poem from *Clouds Flying Before the Eye*, expresses Thurston's initial impressions of seeing his daughter in utero on an ultrasound screen. While his

profound experience cannot equate to his encounters with the flicker and mink, his metaphors, bound in the natural world, slip away from an equipment-laden room where the biological and scientific elements foreground the experience, and send him into associative thinking. Orderly arrangements give way to the astounding experience. The moment draws Thurston into the real world as his daughter's image vacillates between animal wonder and sheer mystery in a realization of creaturely life. The experience is almost completely removed from science. "The 'real world,'" which is "the very world our sciences strive to fathom," David Abram contends in an observation that mirrors Thurston's experience, is "not a fixed and finished 'datum' from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a phenomenological experience lived through from many different angles" (*Spell* 39). Thurston's sense of this phenomenological experience leaves him questioning the science he is in the midst of mastering, even as its language bends him closer to the world. Eventually, he forges links between disciplines while anchoring all of his emotional discoveries at seeing his daughter in the animal metaphor.

As his daughter's presence on the monitor rests on the edge of his capacity for imagining and comprehension in "Ultrasound," his metaphorical associations invoke wonder at the interconnections to the world. Thus, he moves beyond the limited perspective of science to embrace the moment. His daughter transcends the hospital room to encapsulate the mysterious ebb and flow of oceans, deep below surfaces of our awareness. Remarkably, the ultrasound reminds him of "whalesound" and the impression of his daughter's skull is "a small sun's eclipse," while she rests in the "primordial pond" of her mother's womb (39). He reinvests the animality of this prebirth moment into

general human awareness. Grappling with seeing his daughter in this way, he pivots between biological associations and an ineffable quality of experience. The natural process brings him back to the experiential, manifested now through oceanic metaphors. Interpretations of experience, such as this, seem eventually to lead Thurston toward a more ethical understanding of the animal. Science, in the end, presents him with the duplicity of its desires to name and thereby claim the natural world; but, the human/animal moment reifies his desire to experience not a scientific knowledge but fractal knowledge of living things.

Appropriation and Harm

Although there can be a near transcendental moment to the animal encounter, humans cannot reach a completely reciprocal relationship with animals without modulating their perceptions and behavior. Before he can achieve a biocentric reading of Nova Scotia, Thurston must first learn that he cannot practice a "thinking which looks on from above" (Merleau-Ponty, "Eye" 122). He must return, in Merleau-Ponty's words, to "the 'there is,'" which will lead him back "to the site" and "the soil" of his own being and also "to others" (122). Such a relationship demands a respect for animals' ontological difference. On the farm, Thurston is very candid about his own juvenile, unethical actions. In his poems on farm life, he recalls physical harm done to animals in various contexts, such as when fishing or capturing animals. Often, however, he mistakes epistemology for appropriation; that is, he justifies his capturing and harming of animals in terms of a need to understand the animal's otherness. The animals present in such poems are not attendant muses to supplement such encounters; rather they highlight the

unethical consequences of appropriation, "the rage for immortality," as Don McKay puts it, and knowledge which manifests itself when humans use others in their games of power (*Vis* 20). Often, the younger Thurston is filled not with compassion but confusion, as his actions are not based on reciprocity in his engagement with animals. The death of the animal only foments rather than eases his growing need for a taste of such a knowledge of "immortality." It is not until later collections, such as *If Men Lived on Earth,* that he begins to understand how the uncaptured animal's beauty surpasses his grasp on language. At this point, he begins to interpret animals through their fragile ecosystems.

Fishing is one way Thurston eventually relinquishes control and turns toward seeing the fish through its natural, unhooked beauty. Thurston's fishing eventually reveals ontological significance. Early as *Clouds Flying Before the Eye,* in the poem "Surfaces," Thurston's poetic persona laments the rite-of-passage ritual in taking a son fishing for his "first salmon" (51). The dead fish in his kitchen sink becomes a "metallic blue / bright, bloody / spectacle," as its presence in "the stainless / steel sink" diminishes its ontology (52). It is "a gut thing" and "art / disembodied," as it has lost its previous meaning and power in the living stream. Its ontology has changed, as it is now separated from the water (52). His persona's reaction to the dead salmon reflects his previous thoughts on the frozen flicker. Both animals have been stripped of their beauty and power when transported into the domestic space:

> In the end the hooked fish
> brings me to my knees.
>
> There is no more pleasure

in tethering beauty

than in glimpsing it.

Finally I expect

it is only important

to know where beauty

lies: tensed silver

below the blinding surface. (53)

For Thurston, the mystery and potency of beauty "below the blinding surface" eclipses the thrill in catching the fish. Likewise, in "In Springtime" from the same collection, he takes his fear of the destruction of beauty further by describing his own treatment of the fish. The poem becomes a conflict between the brutality inherent in the act of fishing and an appreciation of the fish's iridescent beauty as. As he reels in the trout, he sees it only in terms of value to human beings. It is "like a coin in the current" before it is tossed "up / violent in the grass" (36). His detailed killing in the next lines is crucial to his understanding, as it suggests how easily humans destroy that which they eventually may relate to as beautiful. Humanity, then, turns too late to an appreciation of nature:

Hands in the dew

fingers weak against the shank prying

BANG your muscled neck on the tree root

spills spoiling your sleekness.

Beautiful One. (36)

The fish, which exerted a very visceral force of life and beauty, has this beaten out of it. Harming the animal is not always for food or recreation. It is also in the name of knowledge. His sense of knowledge, however, often overwhelms his own ethical sense of being.

The later poem "Devil's Purse," for instance, explores the poet's crossing from being an observer of the Other to physically intruding into the animal's space. A "devil's purse" is a common name for the skate's egg sack. Such a name evokes an unpleasant association with an animal often feared for its strangeness and otherness. Thurston prematurely splits open the pod pseudo-scientifically "as a surgeon might performing a Caesarean" and exposes the immature skate "in its natal sea," "blinking in all the light like any newborn" (*IMLE* 35). The exposed juvenile skate exposes Thurston's own hubris and his own impatience in wanting biological cycles to complete before their natural cycle. After having opened the case, which paradoxically speaks in terms of both birth and death, the poet "burned with shame, wished the curtain of darkness pursed around this little drama, wished never again to pretend God" (35). That he hopes the darkness might be "pursed" echoes the skate's state prior to Thurston's intervention. The mystery that he hoped the skate would reveal becomes instead an anti-climatic moment when he realizes that he has exposed vulnerability in a living being. The moment reverses on the poet, exposing his own vulnerability to the forces of life and death, even as he accesses those anew through his association with the animal.

Appropriation and control, which constitute the human attitudes that inevitably harm the animal, become the primary themes in other poems in the same collection. His attentiveness to the salt marsh's of his childhood in Yarmouth County, captured best by

the poem "Arcadia: The Marsh Suite," reflects his unsuccess in trying to possess the marsh. The long sequence, comprised of nine sections, pertains to various features and inhabitants of the marsh's ecosystem: the river, the marsh, the agriculture, tide pools, wood duck, mummichog, elver, smelts, and heron. Here, Thurston reflects on the nature of his own treatment of animals in his youth. His reflections becomes the backdrop, as he meditates on the marsh's geodynamics, which prevent "any fixed reference" over the landscape (Soper 6).

As the title suggests, "Arcadia" may ironically refer to the Grecian ideal of an unspoiled wilderness, but in reality, it is grounded in Arcadia, a small community in Yarmouth County. Thurston's Atlantic Canadian equivalent is the salt marsh, though he both celebrates and tries to control the area. The addendum "suite" in the title foregrounds Thurston's willingness to imply that there is harmony in nature, though this is human sentimentalizing. Although "suite," from French, suggests a following or attendance, such harmony, in this case, ends up being a cacophony of disparate forces, as Thurston cannot control or align the marsh into an instrumental composition. David Abram suggests conversely that such thinking may bring one closer to otherness: "Synaesthetic experience is often studied as a confusion of the nervous system"; it is a sensory conduit where "our encounters with the world, our senses steadily intercommunicate and meld. Only by conjoining different sensory modalities can our organism garner insights into the specific otherness that confronts us at any moment" (*Becoming* 252). For Thurston, however, attempts to interconnect the marsh's various elements points to his own otherness. His suite locates various marsh elements and situates them to show their uniqueness and their interconnected roles in a biotic whole, as

Abram suggests, but then runs the risk of rupturing the very systems he would try to understand.

Thurston realizes that his encounters often fail to capture the mystery of the marsh animals, because he is still insisting on controlling and naming the experience. The salt marsh is not a harmonious space, but is simultaneously "a collection place for salt, / driftwood, jetsam, dead cats and living birds" and "a carpet of summer dreams without foreboding" (63). The "Wood Duck," section 4, for instance, encapsulates Thurston's struggles with a creature so strange in appearance that his metaphors strain to impart the duck's otherworldliness:

> I did not quite believe it to be a bird,
> but an altered reality winged as angels.
> Reverence hushed my breathing, stillness
> strained to hold its beauty. (66)

The decidedly Romantic expression of likening the duck to angels and ideas of reverence reveals his inability to get beyond the problematic earlier relationship of the writer to the natural marshlands. But as the poem progresses, wilderness is foregrounded and the poet is "suddenly aware," as a new way of knowing gains ground (66). His wood duck, however, continues to be connected to material metaphor of culture, and this is the struggle between raw and associative observations that the use of representative language forces upon him. The male duck is "anointed in irreverent purples, / visceral maroons, metallic flashes of iridescence"; it is "[a] Noh play actor," an "oriental extravagance," and "an ancient mandarin" (66). Along with problems associated with an "exotic" sense of Asian cultural metaphors, there is also something otherworldly in the wood duck,

something that eludes an interspecies connection: “There is a sadness in this separation of the human and other-than-human worlds,” philosopher Ben-ami Scharfstein suggests, “for it drains the wonder out of an experience where spirits appear to cross paths” (221). Similarly, Thurston’s attempts to search out the best metaphor from his faltering linguistic system highlight the importance of the encounter with the wood duck. In other words, his metaphors are meant to accumulate, displaying the simultaneous inability to fully control or capture the Other in language, and demonstrating that cascading metaphors make up the best attempt to register otherness.

When Thurston’s perception shifts, the bird disappears. It vanishes to become “some brightness beyond nature,” suggesting, as he did with the flicker and the mink earlier, that his inability to evoke the duck’s true being drains his perception of the natural world, making it “the grey world / of drab April” (66). An understanding of the ineffability, Scharfstein suggests, is found in the willingness to suspend pre-associative epistemologies that release nature from rigid understandings of the Other: “The yearning to undergo full experience and to return to primordial superlative states prompts me to recall the synesthesia not of neurology but of imaginative experience and, I should say, of the hunger for completeness” (196-7). Thurston, at first, does not fully realize that these earlier epistemologies are always with him, and, as such, he fails to locate the full sensual experience of looking at the animal in its habitat and applying these associations to his writing.

In other contexts, acts of conquest and exploitation often appear in poems about his childhood, becoming painful memories for him. In such poems, his inability to evoke the animal’s true being often occurs through an act of conquest or appropriation. In the

"Mummichog" section of this same marsh sequence, he exposes his desire to appropriate, as it unearths an uncontrollable longing. The mummichog, a shallow-water minnow that lives on the east coast of North America from Newfoundland to Florida, flourishes where the tides flow over salt hay and eelgrass. Here, the poet uses the mummichog for his own purposes: "I want it for the clear water / of my mayonnaise jar" (*IMLE* 67). The fish becomes only a species in a collection, a representative poetics of curiosity sealed into the unnatural environment of a jar. As he hunts the fish, he boasts about his hunting skills, comparing himself to the heron, as though he is an indigenous element of the marsh, rather than an interloper: "With heron-stealth, I tiptoe, slink / to the tide pool's edge, taking care / not to throw shadow, telegraph sound" (67). The awkwardness comes through, however, as the poet exhibits a clumsy "unheron-like strike," because he asserts his presence (67). As "the beating mummichog" struggles like a "cold heart in my hand," he realizes

> This thumb-sized roughneck,
> yogi of the pond, can survive
> the storm's dilution, the sun's merciless drying
> at the neaps, even winter's ice,
> but not a boy's naïve wonder,
> his need to possess. (67)

These lines capture one of the primary moments of transformation from the observer/scientist to the poet/naturalist, as he considers the mummichog's place in a cyclic, natural existence and acknowledges his own childish selfishness. He realizes, however, that he cannot overcome what is fluid and contradictory. Even his metaphors

for the mummichog convey this conflict, as it is both a "roughneck" or oil-patch worker and "yogi." A roughneck is not usually a yogi, but stacking metaphors in this way demonstrates the strangeness and otherness of the minnows. Though he seeks to excuse the unethical actions as "naïve," the poem purposefully ends with the word "possess," as if in recognition of his failure. Such acknowledgment emphasizes his own changing awareness, through the poem's language, that his actions, as a boy, were erroneous.

By the seventh part, "Elver," Thurston has grown more in tune to animals than he was with the mummichog section. While the poems are similar, the elver or eel makes a larger impression on him. Poetically, it is a major shift, as well. The elver reflects an awareness of the natural language of the non-human creature itself, and Thurston attempts to utilize this language to convey its fear as he *reads* it. While the elver struggles in his hands, Thurston sees that its body reveals the trauma it undergoes. The connection, through physical touch, takes Thurston to a new level of understanding:

> Its visible backbone runs
> its little length, like lead
> in a yellow pencil, a line
> alternately wavy and straight,
> as it writes its panic on my palm. (68)

The difference, here, between his misunderstanding of the mummichog and the wood duck, seems most evident in Thurston's confession that it is "alive in my hand, like a sperm tail / beating at the womb's door" (68). The non-verbal language written on his palm is a moment of connection that goes beyond his own language. He recognizes the eel's difference and place within the wider world, as well as his own culpability in

weakening this connection (68). Now, as if the poem could capture the process of his growing realization, the simile links the eel to other biological cycles apparent in the marsh's inner workings. After this crucial moment of self-awareness, however, "the boy" in the poem, Thurston's own pre-cognizant past, admits: "I snap off its head between thumbnail / and index fat—the long sea road / to the Sargasso is severed" (54). It is an important reversal, as the act refuses his own weakness in those earlier sympathies. His actions in "Elver" create a number of fissures between the biological cycles of his local marsh site and the "long sea road," as well as between his seeking links and severing them.

Thurston's conversion to practicing a more moral or ethical relationship with animals becomes clearest in his relationship within "Fox." Here, he begins to realize more fully that his relationship to animals can be less intrusive. As he springs a trap so that the fox, "a perfect animal with white heat / at the tip of its fiery tail," may escape, he gains insight (*IMLE* 58). His understanding that the fox will not celebrate this action does not deter him from feeling "a bond with his freedom" (58). Empowered now not by his possession of the animal, but by his realization of his part as facilitator of its freedom, the poet makes a transcendent connection unavailable to him earlier in his hunting and fishing consciousness. In liberating, rather than trapping, Thurston also releases himself from his longing to control. He admits at the end of the poem, "the fox does not know how I feel / or could care less if he did / only makes me love him the more" (58). The very fact that he does not physically connect with the fox allows for his greater connection through an association with its freedom. His actions, very different from his

earlier dilemma with fishing and his efforts to capture the animals, speak to an ethical transition in his relationship with animals.

The Language of/in Nature

As Thurston gains a sense of the natural world's sublimity and the mystery of the animal encounter, initially muted by his own discourses in farming, science, and the conquering of animals, he discovers the rudiments of a new language of and in nature. He begins to see Nova Scotia's physical world and its animal inhabitants through an ecological and philosophical lens, which calls for "more thinking, deeper questioning, fewer ready-made maps and more explorative wandering and wondering" (Toadvine 73). Reading of the natural world carefully highlights the complexity of what some would see as the earth's inherent semiotic systems. These are the signs found in tracks, scents, birdcalls, and other naturally occurring phenomena. Thurston's new sense of semiotics allows him to relinquish his struggle to control everything he sees in the world beyond him. Abram suggests that such an understanding of a natural literacy opens humans to new forms of language:

> The earthly terrain in which we find ourselves, and upon which we depend for all our nourishment, is shot through with suggestive scrawls and traces, from the sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land, inscribing arroyos and canyons into the parched earth of the desert, to the black slash burned by lighting into the trunk of an old elm. The swooping flight of birds is a kind of cursive script written on the wind. (*Spell* 95)

Although heavily influenced by the Romantic notion of a "natural language" as a nineteenth-century alternative to the science/poetic renderings of place and animal, a new understanding, as Abram proposes, focuses on animal communications. Semiotic systems such as those that Abram references, provide a way to read Thurston's attempted escape from his own linguistic sense of superiority. Thinking in these terms challenges how humans "view the order of nature, as entirely linguistically constructed," rather than biocentrically complex (Soper 6).

In a similar way, Thurston conveys the complexity of the ecosystems he studies. He extends his particular observations to the estuarine inhabitants of the marsh and how their presence in this region *scribes* the land in a unique way. In his 1985 collection *Clouds Flying Before the Eye,* he writes, "I always count crows / black as words," and, as such, the physical world's presence appears as a myriad of detail that the poet may try to read (26, 18). LaRoque surmises that "Thurston discovers layers of messages, codes, histories, and hieroglyphics. These 'languages' appear written over the body of the earth, and, more radically, the earth itself actively presents its own modes of address to the human world" (116). But more than this, the world is no long simply a "book" that one may read, but rather a set of parallel, even pre-linguistic, signs that are shared by the inhabitants, often to the exclusion of human beings. What happens to language systems, then, that shift from written authority into ideogrammatic suggestions or glyphs? One answer may be that the linguistic and physical systems blur together into a *language of animality* that differentiates his experience with animals from his experiences with agriculture and biology.

The innumerable physical scripts diminish the importance of the otherwise closed human linguistic systems by demonstrating an older pre-linguistic forms of expressions. Through these new signs, the earth addresses the poet directly. LaRocque terms this sort of perception in Thurston's work a "bio-psychic intertext," which resists epistemological systems, such as scientific rhetoric, that might blur his attempts to locate the ineffable quality inherent in the physical world (116). A "bio-psychic intertext" for LaRoque can be read as a relationship between psychological and biological phenomena that displaces the significance of individuality in the larger mazes of the spheres.

At this threshold, Thurston opens himself to not knowing and to celebrating the integral mystery of place that encourages the importance of his own humility where he is "glad to glean," recognizing that "I don't give back much / —these few words" (*CFBE* 25). He understands that, like gleaners, he must accept what is offered to him—the few seeds of truth, the chaff of misreadings, and his "text" of salt marshes, which change every day. In *Clouds Flying Before the Eye*, he begins to identify this new semiotics of place. In the poem, "The Weather," the poet ruminates on the mercurial nature of weather in coastal and woodland rural areas. The epigraph, from Ernest Buckler, suggests the poet's difficulty in articulating his own experience: "There was only one way to possess / anything; to say it exactly" (qtd. on 26). Buckler's epigraph sets up the poet's ongoing conflict in expressing "it exactly" when using a non-exact linguistic-based system. "The poet is dead," Thurston writes,

> The landscape has lost
>
> its eloquent mathematician.

Reduced to zero

but for the sum of words

hedge against nothingness. (26)

The poet as simple mathematician is a contradiction, but through this gesture Thurston strives to minimize human presence and control. Unlike the eloquent biologist who played God, or the curious younger Thurston who demonstrated an unfeeling cruelty toward animals in his search for answers, this poet's humility allows that he is no longer in control, and the "eloquent mathematician" is no more. As cited earlier, he admits, "I always count crows / black as words" (26). Such animal counting returns the poem to a zoopoetics perspective, as each crow houses its own metaphor. Thurston thus enters the physical world realizing it as a non-linguistic field, a place with a language but without human words—equally in most parts, without appellations. When his descriptive words no longer dominate the landscape, the landscape begins to speak back: "The brook's tongue rises against / the roof of the valley's mouth" and

'Tok, tok, tok,' clucks the raven

its tongue like a stream pebble

worrying a perfect circle in the bedrock

of the day. (28)

A breakthrough moment in his realization, readers will notice the new framing of the metaphors is out of the poet's hands; it is more of an expression of the world in which he realizes himself as outsider. The poet must always retreat back into his own acts of

language, but the loss of the self is a positive erasure because new forms of expression arise from the "zero" and "nothingness" left in the poet's wake. The land resonates with new tongues, songs, and mouths.

Natural language, then, reinforces the importance of encountering the natural world and its animal inhabitants through new epistemologies. Such a relationship between psychological and biological phenomena displaces the centrality of the individual and offers an expansive query into how one reads experience. Gary Snyder observes similarly that "language belongs to our biological nature and writing is just moose-tracks in the snow" (75). Whether this is true or not, zoopoetics is evident in Thurston's work. His explorations into the sustainability of the physical world finally work to honour the animal's own ontological status, and, at the same time, to humble the poet.

Such a sentiment lends ascendency to animals in *If Men Lived on Earth*. In "Heron," the last section in "Arcadia: The Marsh Suite," Thurston relinquishes his earlier authority over animals such as the mummichog and elver, and allows a formal reciprocity between himself and the heron. "You are the overseer of tall grasses, / spartina and sedges," he writes (57). Although his interpretive stance still anthropomorphizes the heron, he is searching for ways to write animals in their own terms. For instance, he admires how still the bird is "without weariness, / staring down the barrel / of your beak," while it remains at "reading depth"—a system rooted in the physical world, a zoopoetics, rather than a classical language system (57). A new zoopoetics recognizes the autonomy of the animal, and often highlights the mystery through an animal's inaccessibility.

The heron's marsh exhibits other qualities of Thurston's emerging zoopoetics, such as images that challenge the prevailing anthropocentric thinking that the animal's world is one of silence. The bird becomes "Thoth of the Marsh" after the mythological Egyptian man/ibis hybrid central to writing systems and scientific ferment in ancient Egyptian culture. Such references foreground the essential strangeness of the heron in direct contrast to the poet's earlier trust in empirical knowledge found in science, or his use of the economic knowledge found in agriculture. Here, he suggests that a different language evolves in the heron's presence, outside human creation. Thurston's "Thoth of the Marsh" becomes a "pained writer, picking his way, knees bent, / syllable by syllable," evoking an essential transformation: the writer striving to express himself even in the face of the heron's mysterious ontology (58). In this display, the heron transgresses the classical boundary between poetry and science by encompassing both. The heron not only represents a new mythopoesis, but continues to re-write the land, creating a watery palimpsest "syllable by syllable" (58).

Thurston, however, is still not satisfied with his recognition of the heron's mysteries. He addresses the heron as "watcher," reinforcing his push for a reciprocal experience as the heron exposes him. No longer in the position of the scientist, the poet, as observer, sees that the heron appears to be "recording" the encounter. The change might be read as a prime example of Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that "the animate terrain is not just speaking to us but also listening to us" (qtd. in Abram, *Spell* 153). As the poet slips deeper into the uncategorized world of the heron, the physicality of his surroundings make him vulnerable to the phenomenological nature of the encounter. He relinquishes control because, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, "to listen to the forest is also,

primordially, to feel oneself listened to by the forest, just as to gaze at the surrounding forest is to feel oneself exposed and visible, to feel oneself watched by the forest" (153).

Thurston's sense of exposure also opens him up to the non-judgmental nature of this new language; he becomes a more impartial observer, rather than imposing his sense of mastery, the human ideal, onto the heron's world. He can now read the "suggestive scrawls and traces" found within the world of animals (Abram, *Spell* 95). The epigraph for "The Owl and the Mouse," borrowed from Tomas Tranströmer, frames this new semiotic tension between the biological, human and physical world's systems of signs: "The wild does not have words . . . / Language, but no word" (*IMLE* 59). In this poem, the death dance between owl and mouse, between prey and predator, plays out across a snowfield. Thurston can now translate this in the spirit of Tranströmer because of his own experiences in nature. It is, as Snyder suggests, an alternative form of schooling: "Language is learned in the house and in the fields, not at school," which means that there is a fundamental system of signs that precede human language, and is not a text learned in institutions but from attentiveness to place (*Practice* 18).

Thurston remarks that the mouse tracks in the snow are a "scribbled," "feral alphabet" that end in "a signature of attack / / caesura" (*IMLE* 45). There are two lexicons intersecting here: the mouse's earthbound language and the owl's aerial language. The signs of this encounter are "a simple story, in a simple language, not words," since the tracks are what remains in the aftermath of the flight and the hunt's outcome (45). These tracks are an example of how the physical world intrudes into the linguistic renderings of place, inserting themselves into the poem and the poetics. The "caesura" does not so much represent a poetics but the erasure of such, in favour of the physical emptiness—a

kind of biological script left in the hunt's wake. If the caesura etymologically means a metrical pause in poetics, then, for the animals, it is where the owl has signed the space and left a snowy erasure. The act exemplifies a kind of living "caesura," meaning *to cut something down* or to *shorten* or *abbreviate*, as the owl does to the mouse's life. The poem, as it emerges, transforms Thurston's awareness, moving him further from his classical, biological perspective. Eventually, the animal signs become a physical script. The "visible representation" of the owl's successful hunt "suggests that the terrain itself is now a kind of living page," as LaRoque suggests, transferring the animal semiotic to the land itself (131). Most importantly, Thurston's inclusion of the "//" symbol creates a synaesthetic overlap of textual meanings that functions as a singular moment, and as a simultaneous supplement to the poetic rendering of the owl's hunt.

One of Thurston's most recent collections, *Ova Aves* (2010), best presents his new way of moving beyond the anthropocentric by experimenting with such semiotic overlaps. By using scientific and poetic infusion as the basis for this slim book, Thurston again reflects E.O. Wilson's *consilience* theory, finally finding expression through a primary communication with the animal. *Ova Aves* is a limited edition letterpress volume of only thirty-nine pages. It is in collaboration with Sackville-based photographer Thaddeus Holownia and explores both visual and textual interpretations of a range of birds' eggs found in New Brunswick's Mount Alison University's biology collection. By weaving poetry, photography, and biology together, the images and words cohere to offer a bioregional tribute to eggs. The project speaks to the possibilities of overriding the ontology of scientific realism, while highlighting the *bio-psychic* connection between humans and the wider world.

Thurston and Holownia's rendering of place for this collection is particular to the avian life on the Tantramar Marshes, which stretch inland from the Bay of Fundy between the authors' homes in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick respectively. It is also a significant literary region, reminding readers of the creative ferment of poets such as Charles G.D Roberts, John Thompson, and Douglas Lochhead, to name only a few. Thurston's aesthetics, through "ghazal-like" couplets and a nod to John Thompson's *Stilt-Jack,* highlight ways of interpreting eggs and the poem's range of discipline-based interpretations (Rogers 81).

The collection is arranged with the poem on the left-hand page and the photo of the egg on the right-hand page, accompanied by the English and Latin names for the bird in question beneath each photo. As the poems are left untitled, the taxonomic designations underscore the scientific markers reserved for cataloguing the physical world and the poetic possibilities that may generate from this encounter. This is how Thurston interweaves his disciplines. The book, then, is both a phenomenal project and a physical object that bridges the psychic or poetic space with the biological space that the photo represents. The collection suggests the possibilities housed in non-invasive forms of epistemology, such as photography and poetry, which Thurston considered earlier in "The Common Flicker." These poems become, in Janine Rogers' notes, "a hymn and a prayer" to eggs and also to the possibilities of overriding the ontology of a rigid scientific realism, which, as we have seen, distanced him from an ecologically minded relationship with animals earlier (81). Thus, Rogers suggests, "nature, science, language, and art are layered, membranous, and interpenetrative" and create lyrical tension (83). Lyricism, however, may be strained by the struggle of disciplines at the center of the language of

the poet. Although he has advanced to this point, seeing the eggs in their multi-faceted light reinforces that he has not settled the contradictions between science and poetry. As *Ova Aves* is one of his most recent collections, Thurston presents the latest developments in his struggles by conceptualizing a living nature. The collection, however, is not as seamless as Rogers would suggest. It stands out though, because Thurston foregrounds his struggle to find a language in the context of nature's authority.

"Thurston is uniquely equipped to read the layered chronicles of humanity and of the natural world," Wanda Campbell writes, as his poems respond to "a contemporary ecological ethic" (158). Moreover, his biology background connects him immediately to both the poet's and biologist's viewpoints. The eggs, as biological process, anchor the Tantramar Marshes and the *tintamarre* of avian life to the symbolism of the "egg" as circular and complete. Holownia's photographic arrangements reflect this wholeness, as each egg glows against a black background reminiscent of the iconic photo of the earth, "The Blue Marble," taken by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972. The collection's photos illuminate each egg's individuality, while also highlighting its strangeness in this larger-than-life presentation. An epigraph for the collection by poet Joseph Brodsky reinforces the marsh's cyclic processes and cultural interplay: "Ultimately, there should be a language in which the word 'egg' is reduced to 'O' entirely." Perhaps Thurston is even aware here that the egg-shape will never really be the 'O" of any human-made typeface.

The egg sequence begins with "Unknown," a title suggestive of the reader's own starting point for encountering the Other as egg. The poem is a fine example of how mystery catalyzes creativity and becomes an autochthonic symbol: an egg that ornithologists have not been able to attribute to any breed. It is this unknown bird,

predecessor to humans and their gods, that shows how the integrity of language systems might be rooted in a biological-psychic text. Thurston asks: "Why not believe as did the ancient marsh dwellers? / The sacred ibis spoke the gods into being" (n. pag). He answers his own question: "It was the jet-black ibises, with their hooked beaks / down-turned like the nibs of pens, who gave us writing" (n. pag). These birds *write* the physical world's history and evoke articulation in later semiotic systems. For Thurston, the birds also remind him that he has been inattentive to these other epistemologies. He suggests that humans cannot easily *read* the movements or actions of birds, as most of us do not practice attentiveness. Unable to reach atonement with this world, humanity fractured or lost its mythopoeic capability when it stopped believing that "one story is as good as another" and began insisting that there is only one mega-story.

Similarly, the poem in the collection that most suggests mythopoesis is "Common Loon *Gavia immer.*" Imagining Thoreau's loon from *Walden* through a creative lens, as a primordial avatar capable of straddling human/non-human worlds, allows the poem to progress through various myth-making associations. Thurston writes: "All bird guides begin with 'loon.'/ You are the most ancient, most prehistoric" (n. pag). With a call that is a "harking back to a time before humans," the loon conveys resilience to anthropocentric tampering by suggesting an identity prior to scientific or biological considerations. It represents

> the belief in an abiding mystery,
>
> something alive in the mute cosmos
> besides our nattering selves. A voice

that vibrated in the reptilian brain, echoing

an old world we once knew, need more than ever.

As cultural complexity and scientific rhetoric tended to displace mystery in Thurston's earlier experiences, the old world continues to fade into the past. The lines' enjambments physically emphasize the loon's interconnectivity to the natural world and to the marshes in Thurston's bioregional imagination—a connection that cannot be neatly compartmentalized to fit scientific realism.

By including various creation myths, such as the egg-hatching Eros and the ferment of human language in poetic gesture, the poet also introduces possible ways of knowing based on imaginary encounters. The imagination becomes a means of access to the greater mysteries of the natural world, a unique way for humans to perceive the world a priori, displacing their own inclinations to name and possess. Thurston, in this case, suggests that mythopoesis can reinvigorate human encounters with the physical world by seeking humility rather than pressing language as scientific rhetoric. What is "uncaptured" (such as the loon's song) may still be celebrated for its ineffable quality. Although the poet tries to capture its essence through his own poetic, the conflict between language and semiotic systems does not allow Thurston to naturalize the animal. It remains unfamiliar and a mystery.

The collaboration of poet and photographer is successful in *Ova Aves*, in as much as it allows for the free play of all the elements of "the book" and the natural space of the Tantramar Marshes. The photography brings an otherworldly mood to the simple object of the egg, known by most as an item from the grocery store or farmer's market. As

Thurston writes of the Northern Raven's egg, "You teach us that we cannot stop trying to say something."

In only thirty-six pages, then, eggs are given a reverent tribute. They are presented in all their beauty as fragile and generative, encouraging humans to seek out more attentive modes of being. By this point in his career, Thurston has moved away from his nascent, scientific self, the seeker of classical knowledge, and has begun to see the failure of those efforts to label and categorize the living world. There is, then, interplay within and without the different semiotic systems, evident at least in this recent collection. The poetic breakdown of traditional points of reference in language carries him even further toward his new understanding of animal signification. In a real way, the biologist's failure becomes the naturalist's insight, and the world of natural symbols, for the poet, begins to flourish.

The Bioethic Poetic

Thurston eventually rejects attitudes associated with traditional laboratory practices because the animal is too distant, too much "a pulsing flask" (*CFBE* 68). Laboratory methods and praxes can produce only a partial understanding within a hermeneutic, rather than a closed interpretation of the world. As a result, he turns toward a more open, phenomenological approach to the natural sciences. Recognizing that human consciousness plays a role in animal perception, his poetry becomes ecologically informed. The transition is most obvious in *If Men Lived on Earth* (2000), a collection published after a fifteen-year hiatus while he was writing essays and magazine articles. As the title suggests, Thurston's explorations attempt to locate humanity's place within

the larger world. The collection is divided into two sections: "Field Season," which explores the land and "Fathoms," which explores the sea. Here, Thurston seeks out deeper connections within the world, because a "river coiled through our lives, / an umbilicus that connected us" (*IMLE* 74). For Thurston, the difference between his earlier studies in biology and his new ecological perception is in the observer's role and perspective. Finally in the world he observes, his part as ecologist/poet is a celebration of the animal he hints at in other poems as "light enters your art— / if through the belly of a gutted fish" (*CFBE* 48).

It is as a naturalist and ecologist that Thurston finally confronts the limitations of language, finding poetry alone can somehow bridge the earlier divisions of science and living practice. Metaphors, such as the one quoted above, point to his poetic estimation of how true expression is both intimate and invasive. And so, even from the ecologist's perspective, nature writing "as a literary form," Thurston insists, "is something of a chimera, that fantastic beast of the imagination made up of more than one animal" (*APBT* 1). In his eco-poetry, everything from industrial fishing practices to the human drive to control the animal as Other is taken into consideration. For instance, he explores how the cormorant, a sea bird on the south shore of Nova Scotia, has been treated as a scapegoat for unsustainable fishing practices:

> we invent mythologies to hate them by.
> Shags, we call them, the Devil on life's tree.
> Their guano poisons roots, strips the earth bare,
> so gluttonous are they, their royal blue mouths
> become black holes, devouring Time itself, said the Bard.

> Now that our nets have emptied the seas,
>
> we declare these fish-eaters are to blame!
>
> (*IMLE* 40)

His concerns address the dangers of thinking reductively about complex ecosystems. His inclusion of cormorant quotations from Milton and Shakespeare reinforce how the metaphor of the cormorant's voraciousness has long been instilled in the cultural milieu, making it difficult to bear witness to unbiased biological facts. From Milton's *Paradise Lost,* "Book 4," Thurston borrows Satan who perches like a cormorant in the tallest tree—the Tree of Life—and watches Adam and Eve. The association suggests the bird's nefarious character. Thurston's inclusion of Shakespeare's first speech from *Love's Labour's Lost* reinforces the metaphor of voraciousness; it steals time and life from humans. Whether the shag or cormorant is devouring time or fish, its species is demonized to disguise human culpability.

The underlying importance of Atlantic Canada's ecological debate in Thurston's later work stems from his own understanding of "the depredations this marine ecosystem has been subjected to in the last half century" (Thurston, *Atlantic Coast* 3). While the early poetry fails to find adequate expression in farming or science, it is yet a transformative experience. The limitations themselves spur his desire to discover the deeper nature of the animal. His later poetry possesses an identifiable activist stance, now that he has developed a workable language through natural semiotics. No longer the passive observer, his poetry calls on his readers to realize their past when the "garden on

land and sea / was cross-hatched by harrow and bottom trawl" (*IMLE* 133). It is not "enough to fiddle like divine Celts / as we wait for the seas to fill again" (136).

Thurston's incorporation of ecological devastation within his poetry becomes keener as the farmer/biologist gives way to the poet/ecologist. As he asks in "The Down Collectors," a long poem that tackles animal exploitation and consumerism, "Is it not our towers that dispense filth, / so that white whales wash ashore here, fetid barrels / of blubber too toxic to bury in the earth?" (*IMLE* 41). Wolfgang Hockbruck's observations on Atlantic Canadian literature also reflect Thurston's sentiments: The "Maritimes are experiencing a rejuvenation because" there is "a conscious attempt to balance poetic structure with the exigencies of the environment and/or metaphoric identification with the landscape" (qtd. in Mutton 258). What Hockbruck means by trying to balance "poetic structure" is seeking out, through poetry and metaphor, a way to capture the reality of the region. If Thurston's awareness of the environment increases, it is specifically because of the failure of his early roles as farmer, scientist, and objective observer. Through the early failures, this new awareness is brought forth more forcefully. The individual's sense of responsibility, which has been apathetic or irreverent, becomes a primary component of Thurston's world. At times, his vision is dark; the gap between humanity and the natural world seems uncrossable, much like those remote areas of poetry, farming and biology.

Just as allegorical meaning was attached to the cormorant, the common grackle from *Ova Aves* becomes avatar for "gluttony," "ill omen," and Thurston's vision of environmental collapse. The grackle manifests into a flock, conveying menacing connotations in its hoarse call and watchful judgment: "Black birds burst from our sour

soil, strut over barren domain" while "they cloud the sky above the dying earth, / we withdraw into the dark recesses of resignation" (n. pag). His work here is atmospheric and bleak. Much as he saw himself withdrawing into the dark recesses of the barn in his childhood or into the laboratory in his early adulthood, he now rallies "for want of a solution" because he cannot envision a positive resolution for the pressing ecological crisis (n. pag). His regenerated language conveys this own anxiety.

Farming also becomes an ecological treatise in a new poem from *Animals of My Own Kind.* Although Thurston is no longer a farmer, he is still concerned with sustainability and agriculture. Entitled "Four Ages," the poem traces changes in rural practices. With new insight, Thurston outlines how difficult farming has become due to environmental challenges. The new language, as a description for the exhausted state of the earth, may be applied to his earlier farming experiences, but it is sharpened with an ecological understanding of the transformed land. He writes, "The earth is surfacing, bloated, / floating up like a drowned animal, / its tawny fur matted, dirty with itself" (124). The imagery of a drowned animal in the water for some time conveys his new sense of deterioration and neglect. While farmers "are still burning the old year, shovel, / wet burlap in hand" and others "fork eelgrass into truck beds" to "pile it high against sills to thwart winter drafts," the poet realizes there must be a fundamental change in thinking (124, 126). "Even I am a figure in this seasonal tableau," he writes, as he plans "to anchor iron in the jawbone of a fish" (126). But here, his perception shifts from an earlier remorse at seeing the beauty drain out of the fish in his kitchen sink. Now, he fishes "only to release her, silvery, egg-laden, / to feed upon herself six months under ice" (126). Still in transition, it is the act of fishing itself that intrudes upon the fish's world.

The shift for Thurston goes against his farming experiences of butchering for winter. He becomes more aware of the fish's winter cycle and respects that it needs to sustain itself and the roe it carries throughout the winter.

Farming also becomes "an open space" for his later poetry, rather than reflecting his earlier struggles to find a place for poetry within farming. In the "Ring-billed Gull" from *Ova Aves*, for instance, he seeks out commonalities between himself and the gull. He and the gull seem as displaced as he and the mink were earlier. He claims that the gull has evolved "backwards" becoming a "Land gull" that follows "in the chocolate wake of the plow, / forsaking the clean, blue line the keel makes" (n. pag). The gull's foraging on land rather than sea, he surmises, has caused "that indelible signature at the bill tip," which marks the gull as different from its sea-faring brethren. At this point, Thurston connects himself with the bird: "I am like that, too, carrying smudged words / at my fingertips" (n. pag). While his earlier attempts to poeticize farm animals falters, in his own eyes, as he cannot save the animals from destruction, studying the gull that probes "the black earth" of the farm and landfills provides him with at least "smudged words," or words that do not completely express the encounter. The recognition finally brings him closer to the gull's signature and its changing ecosystem.

Thurston expands his ecological scope in "Dragging Bottom," as he addresses the unethical practice of commercial fishing. The title attests to the futility of the practice of bottom dragging or bottom trawling—the contested commercial fishing method of dragging heavy nets over the seafloor in order to net ground fish. Ecosystems, subsequently, have been veritably decimated, as drags leave "the sea bottom cross-hatched as a griststone" and belch "the benthos onto the deck" (*IMLE* 120). The poem

idiomatically suggests going aground or a futile act of scraping bottom for the remnants of something, and literally refers to the destructive practice of tearing up the seafloor for ground species. The death of a skate, again, becomes the focal point and avatar for unsustainable harvesting practices. These practices parallel Thurston's earlier mistreatment of the immature skate still in its pod. But here, as a slow growing, late maturing benthic or ocean-bottom species, the skate must struggle for survival in densely fished areas.

The first stanza introduces the conflict between habitat and harvesting: "And this magnificent fish, big and flat as a coffee table, / wide wings spread for undersea flight—landed here" (120). From this point in the poem, however, the mood shifts to emphasize the lack of empathy the men feel for the destruction of the skate: "A man, sore and numbed, hefts the biggest stone he can / to crush the skull of this monarch of the deep" and "then kicks the brained fish through the scuppers / to sink" (120). The violent, lyrical language juxtaposes the skate's vulnerable position as ocean meanderer, and the indiscriminate actions of the "sore and numbed" man. It conveys the unethical treatment of the skate and the economic impetus behind resource extraction: "What we cannot sell, we kill or leave to die" (120). The skate's erasure in the fisherman's mind is not a quiet absence but an aggressive removal, which emphasizes the rapacious drive to empty the nets of "this magnificent fish" (120). "This is our shame, repeated again and again," Thurston admits, "until there is nothing but stones and broken shells to spend" (120).

Thurston's scientific background adds impetus to his later ecological arguments. His background both frames human apathy toward the state of marine ecosystems and foregrounds the complexity of the animal. "The Stranding," as an example of this,

explores an intersection between a dead fin whale that has washed ashore and the locals who come to view it on the beach. Julia Kristeva's work on the abject is useful here. She argues that objects, like the dead whale, instill a powerful fear in others. The whale disturbs social reasoning because it is situated outside of society's symbolic order. It resides in liminal space. Abjection, for Kristeva, is caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers* 4). She claims that the abject resonates "from its place of banishment," but "does not cease challenging" the human's encounter with it in its death (2). The whale's corpse is a massive associative object for Thurston. Through its unavoidable presence, he seeks out links and disjunctions between the people on the shore and their treatment of the whale. The title is evocative: "Stranding" can mean literally being stuck or being abandoned, and figuratively leaves someone/something helpless. Geologically, it may refer to the beach, the shore, the edge, border or intertidal zone. The duality parallels the whale's position on the border of human irreverence, where its colossal presence is also an absence. Its physical placement between the land and sea also gives it figurative and literal liminality. "There looms, within abjection," Kristeva surmises, "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1). At this intertidal zone, the "men and women" display apathy toward the dead whale. While they watch a bulldozer dig the beach grave for the carcass, they lean "against the hoods of pickups, / seemingly, forgetful of the whale" (*IMLE* 21). The observer/poet here sees both the human reaction

and the death in the natural world. He is alone in his ability to link the inconsistencies with the struggle for natural order.

With his new understanding, read through a biocentric lens, the whale's carcass is material for both a realistic and a metaphoric interpretation. The poem, for instance, does not allow the whale carcass to decompose naturally; instead, it undergoes cultural appropriation. "Someone has carved an inch-deep slab of blubber from the whale's flank," the poet declares, a "souvenir of rotting flesh" (21). Where once the whale might have been economically exploited, now its flesh represents nothing more than a symbol of human thoughtlessness. Thurston had earlier dedicated himself in to the lab, focusing on the microbes under a magnifying scope rather than reading the world through its cycles; he now turns to the whale as both poetic construction and organic being. The poem, however, echoes those early stages of objective observation, recalling the laboratory dissections, and the student's slow awareness of his own death's difference.

For the people on the strand, associations between the death of the whale and the encounter must be delivered through cultural reference and anthropocentric understandings; they are too far removed from the real animal as an integral component of the natural world. The whale is a "gas-bloated, black bulk, a *Hindenberg* [sic] fallen from out of the sea, a fabulous wreck to mark their own time" (*IMLE* 120). Referencing the Hindenburg tragedy as the metaphorical link between whale and humans highlights the mechanical or Cartesian reading of the world. The whale is denied its ontology and must pass through a system of cultural metaphors. As such, the horrific carcass connotes failure and collapse. As a collapsed zeppelin, the whale is an object with which the locals can benchmark their own lives with, thus separating the whale as a sentient being from

the whale as an anecdote. Distancing, in this way, has parallels with farming practices and biological objectivity, but is unique in that, for the young boys on the beach, who "swirl like gulls around / the whale's head," fear resides in the whale's mouth—a fear that also resides in how thoroughly they are removed from the whale's existence. Thurston observes that they jump back "as if they feared leviathan might come to life, swallow them into a dark journey under tides" (121). If the Biblical Jonah's crime was to ignore God, then these boys parallel that abandonment in their ignorance of the whale's once living grandeur. The carcass becomes merely an abstraction, as the "abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva, *Powers* 1). Here the poet might be reflecting back on his own development as the non-involved spectator, making clear his transition into a participant, a communicator, through the whale's world.

Thurston's own observations shift often from scientific, poetic, and ethical associations within the scene. His careful wording foregrounds the whale's biological being as it possesses "[f]oot-long fringes of baleen," a "flank," a "ventral pouch," "flukes," and "isinglass," also known as a swim bladder (121-2). As he walks the length of the whale, he also notes that it is "A male. Eighteen paces, fifty-four feet, head to toe" (122). From his biological observations, he suggests that the whale's body is an elegy, an anachronistic parallel to the whaling and shipping industry.[22] Its baleen is "moustaches worn by sea captains still sailing in the hand-tinted photos of damp parlours"; its white belly is "the hull of an abandoned ship" and it is "Adrift, crewless in the mid-Atlantic, derelict in cholera-infested La Plata" (121-2). The language of whaling— "abandoned," and "adrift"—reflects the whale disappearance as a species. To reinforce mourning, Thurston conveys its body as an instrument. For example, its "bloated throat" "is a

squeeze box of gases and sorrows" that evokes the now, famously recorded, lost songs of the whale. Subsequently, the poet is "a one-man dirge, part mourner, part naturalist," as the crowd around the whale's burial revel in the spectacle (22).

In the final lines of this poem, Thurston reconnects the whale to human history and to a long pre-industrial relationship before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' European whaling booms. As whales throve before European contact, this is a time, for Thurston, where human failures seem less at odds with human-animal encounters. He writes that the whale's body is "muddied with tidal ochre," which connects the whale physically to the "Red Paint People, who paddled here before the Flood" (122). Although these people were proto-whalers, they hunted using sustainable practices, rather than on a contemporary commercial scale. The whale's body, by this reference, encapsulates the power of the ocean in that its belly housed "[t]he fires of the sea burning brightly in the watery sheaves of the sun; silvery shoals of living moonlight shifting on the flood tide," rather than the abject carcass of before (122). The light imagery and lyrical evocations elicit Thurston's awareness of photosynthesis and biotic cycles, which rejoin the biological and poetic disciplines in his making sense of the whale.

The ecocritical turn in Thurston's poetry is instructive, here, as it reinforces how romantic representations of the region exclude the people dependent on the industry.[23] "Infused with an environmental awareness that moves beyond the traditional ocean imagery of man at the mercy of a perilous sea," Wanda Campbell suggests, "the poetry of the Maritime margin offers a complex challenge to a purely human agenda" (153). Campbell could be reflecting on Thurston's own growing realization of the destructive power of human intrusion onto nature. His involvement in this contentious debate

develops through his poetry, but most clearly in recent works that finally look at both the animal and human for answers. Returning to Leopold's definition of a land ethic, Thurston's convictions are evident: "A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of land" (*A Sand County* 221). Thurston's inclusion of human activity points to Leopold's insistence that the land ethic is integral to sustainable economics and humans are culpable for the devastation wrought from exhausting resources. Such poems become elegies for a human/animal relationship that is no longer viable.

Thurston's push for necessary change in the way humans currently view the living world relates to his new awareness of animal autonomy; through his biocentric lens, he sees that the animal must be foregrounded in order to be protected. By this balance, Thurston demonstrates that he is human and inescapably so. His inability to "write" the animal, or come to a full realization of what the animal means, reinforces how humans struggle to find a balance between industrial progress and environmental sustainability. "In Atlantic Canada many people have persisted in their traditional pursuits of work and life on the land and water, in the woods and mines," Thurston writes, underscoring his personal experiences in such occupations, "despite the forces of the twentieth century that have conspired to steal away their livelihood and their culture" (*AO* 6). His loyalty to the region and his desire for its prosperity do not deter him, however, from reading Nova Scotia ethically. He repeatedly offers an optimistic observation concerning this tension throughout his work: "In Fundy, the great tidal range dominates all living things—large and small—for good and for ill," he writes. "Survival here depends on an ability to adapt to the range and rhythm of the tides. I have found that this principle can hold as true for

people as it does for the animals and plants that live by and under Fundy's waters" (*APBT* 33).

The poetry actually touches on this point in "Greenfields & Grist," from his first collection, *Barefaced Stone* (1980), a collection written twelve years before the Cod Moratorium (1992). The title captures the transition from small farming practices to larger industry and this shift has human costs, as well:

> Men are the harvest here:
> scapula, ulna, femur and skull,
> their husk cracked,
> kernel of marrow ground
> to one consistency.
>
> Crows (snow devils'
> black loci)
> cavil over the spoils. (AMK 18)

The farm imagery is clear: men as "harvest" turn metaphorically into ears of corn, and finally become flour in the grist of modern industrial practices.

Similarly, in "Blue Geography," section two from "Atlantic Elegy," Thurston reiterates that with European contact came the beginnings of large-scale natural resource extraction. "Walrus and people shared the harvest / until sails and guns appeared in the Gulf," he writes, "eyeglass and sextant imposed an Old World / vision. The garden on land and sea / was cross-hatched by harrow and bottom trawl" (*IMLE* 133). With the rise in offshore processing and larger trawlers in the mid twentieth century, the community

fishing industry failed to meet the challenge of sustainability, and the extraction of marine life expanded exponentially. Michael Harris argues that the Cod Moratorium has become a palimpsest for human history, where unsustainable practices lead to "the collapse of the northern cod stock" as "one of the most spectacular failures in the history of Canadian government and an ecological disaster of worldwide significance," which "devastated communities where fishing was not just an occupation but a way of life for hundreds of years" (307). Thurston's poetry echoes this same sentiment: "Trawls ousted hook-and-line, filled with fish / thrown overboard, time after time," Thurston writes, "All / so some restaurateur could serve a fillet / the size of his palm" even as "fishers, fish-cutters become eco-refugees" (134). In these brief lines, he points to how the sourcing of fish creates too much waste. His awareness of this disaster proves that the changes in his own perspective have carried him toward a greater understanding of ecology today.

As "eco-refugees," the men involved in the industry are collateral damage from the environmental fallout. Thurston is of two minds in this situation, because, while "Men meet their fate in yellow dories," there is still the fact that "Seabirds drown in bilge oil" and "brass propellers / split open the last whales" (*IMLE* 134-5). The dual positions show the complexity of his new stance. It is beyond the simple perspectives from earlier. In this world, the sea, while catering to economic trends from central Canada, swallows up men. These men are "at some distance from the centre perched precariously on the rim of the continent, at the edge of the eastern ocean which gives the region its name" (*AO* 5). There is a sense that humans participate in and are part of the world in which he sees the natural language of sustainability. An understanding of the new semiotics of this natural world

includes those creatures that must also survive the degradation in which they themselves have participated.

Thurston's struggle is that humans are unequivocally perpetrators of ecological irreverence and yet victims in the industrial drive to harvest the ocean. While he seems unsure where to place the final stress in his human-animal paradigm, he is always willing to acknowledge that humanity needs to look closer at what is in front of it. His poetry points to the missing species, the oily iridescence over the water, and the unemployment rates. In a very recent poem published in the *Malahat Review*, "Still Life with Golden Bream," he uses a postcard of Goya's painting of the same title to reinforce this need to scrutinize every detail in the animal encounter. At first, the postcard represents only "a heap of little fishes like I see on market day" (60). Goya painted this in the early 1800s, while his wife was dying and so "he took to painting dead animals for himself" (60). Yet, while Thurston's initial sympathy rests with Goya and his loss, he quickly shifts to the fish: "At first I was bemused by this little pyramid / of bright flesh, their live expression, / the constellation of candled eyes shining in the night" (60). That the fish seem to illuminate out of the canvas underline their presence through their "sleepless eyes" and their "pouting mouths," which "are a kind of mute protest / at their innocent lives ended so abruptly" (60). What Thurston sees at the end of the poem is the emptying of the oceans rather than the breams' metaphorical use for conveying Goya's personal difficulties. Goya's seventeenth-century depiction of this harvesting becomes monumental by the end of the poem, because "as usual," he writes, "the more deeply we look / the darkness only grows and grows" (60). That particular darkness has spanned

“two centuries” to meet Thurston at the apex of an ecological crisis, which he can now better voice through ecologically informed poetry.

Conclusion:

Coda: In a Circle of Animals

Poetry's task is to ground human culture once more on a planet rich in nonhuman life and beauty.

(John Elder, *Imagining the Earth*)

My dissertation began with my own attempts to bridle an unruly animal at around the seventieth kilometre of a 150-kilometre horseback-riding excursion through Iceland's hinterland in 2008. At the time, I was not only trying to get along with Blíður, a strong-willed Icelandic horse who was my escort on the six day trip to Krýsuvík's hot springs, but I was also writing an article for *Canadian Geographic* on Icelanders' perceptions of animals. The magazine was particularly interested in the polar bears that occasionally slip ashore on ice floes, and are generally shot on their arrival. And then, I was working on my fourth poetry collection, which explores how often animals are silently present in poetry, and how they inhabit my home province of New Brunswick.

Such questions resurfaced a couple of years after this trip, as I read from my collection *The Scare in the Crow* (2010) to Tantramar High School students in Sackville, New Brunswick. One of the questions that came up about my work was why do I write so much about my dogs and other animals? Unsure how to answer, as my dog has always seemed like a natural fit in many poems, I talked about how animals slip into our thoughts, filling in the blanks we would have to leave empty otherwise. I felt, at the time, that my answer was still incomplete and inadequate, so I began to undertake a study of

the intersection of humans, animals, and Atlantic Canadian poetry. In Steffler's words, this thinking became "language off the leash," in that it is one way we can free ourselves from the mundane, everyday uses of language (qtd. in Harron).

Today, the world seems all the more entangled with questions of the animal, as it presents the dilemma of where humans should stand on that question. As a befitting example, when the first endangered species preservation list was published under the Endangered Species Act in 1967, there were 78 species included (United States 4001). Today, this same list includes over 1500 species (Greenwald). With such escalated numbers, it is no surprise that the work of some of these poets goes on, even after the present study has concluded. In *The Deer Yard* (2013), a recent, slim volume of poems and responses modeled on the Wang River Sequence, Thurston and New Brunswick poet Allan Cooper explore where we locate the complex contact zone between humans and the world. In his introduction to *The Deer Yard*, Cooper suggests that while each poem in the collection is made up of two quatrains, one from each poet, "Often the paired poems together created a third poem, as if something or someone else was also present. We could say it is the luminous presence of the natural world." The presence, which we surmise each time we encounter animals, is a question that each of the poets here asked without adequately answering, though they remained grounded in the real experience of place.

Fredericton-born Confederation poet Bliss Carman once asked, "Who shall prove that nature is not a metaphor?"(39). While Carman was speaking about Romantic or Transcendental ideas of nature, treating it as a central and celebrated subject, as Wordsworth or Thoreau might, his question of metaphor resonates with each of the four

poets in this study as they seek to locate the animal within the "third poem." Each exhibits a draw toward animals, which are always closer to nature than humans by the fact that they live continuously in it. These four poets demonstrate a cross-section of how Atlantic Canadian poetry exhibits progressive thinking about the animal. As an evolving articulation of the relationship with the animal and nature, Atlantic Canadian poetry, then, is not just "nature poetry," but a struggle with different stages of reflecting on the question represented by Thompson, Domanski, Steffler, and Thurston.

In a winged and fanged landscape, Thompson reverts to a pre-settled state with swayback sheds and fallow fields. His influential poetry collections, the earliest in this study, exhibit undertones of "the return poem" as Bliss Carman captured it. Both collections emulate Charles G.D. Roberts' "The Tantramar Revisited" or Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." Return poems move the subject away from the house and into nature, and then return him/her home, changed for the better from the experience. Thompson's work, however, does not necessarily locate the sort of nature as font of inspiration that Wordsworth proposed. Instead, his work, rife with frustration, struggles with the modernist sense of inevitable failure. Thompson's sense of the world generally (and the animal world specifically) is caught up in the existential crises of the 1970s. The animal, for him, is both an intense self-reflection and an escape, rather than an environmentally informed experience.

Thompson is drawn to animals because they are closer to nature and to the primal energy that he seeks to channel. He does not so much engage in a celebration of the natural world, but hyper-focuses on the primal quality in the animal. He exposes the fallibility of language systems, while promising a quasi-communion that he hopes might

somehow alleviate his spiritual doubt. Animals, such as the cow moose in heat, the trout perfectly asleep below the ice, and the brant of the marshes possess the capability of guidance. They offer him an alternative to his unhappy domestic spaces, which only seem to incite anxiety. The animal becomes central to his reluctance and rage in finding himself unmoored and driven to annihilate the language-based individual.

In Cooper's review, *Stilt Jack* is a "careful melding of two worlds: the wilderness he loved and interacted with and the private world of the poet, the drive of the spirit toward illumination" ("Way Back the Woods" 39). In a critical way, different than Domanski or Thurston, Thompson's identification with the animal does not simply explore the relationship he has with the animal world, but tries to get inside animal existence. It is, of course, his own animal existence, in which he hopes to find a fundamental truth, and, at the same time, an escape from himself. Thompson's challenge aligns most closely with Steffler's zoopoetics struggle, in which Steffler senses, but often cannot express, how Newfoundland, like an animal, defies his human definitions. Like Thompson, Steffler formulates ideas of modern masculine identity through a process of animalizing the land. In this process, he finds, as Thompson did earlier, deliverance from domestic spaces. Steffler's trajectory, however, does not lead from pursuing a provisionary language to erasure. Instead, he progresses toward a more fulfilling relationship with the natural world, which he reads from a less anthropocentric position.

Where Domanski and Thurston explore themselves through the metaphor of the animal as a means to decentre individuality, Thompson's unspecified interlocutor—the "you" in many poems—functions as, perhaps, a witness to his transitions. He reinforces the anxiety of such transitions by continuously engaging the pathetic fallacy as a tactic to

emphasis his difference, as his own thoughts are stymied by his eroding domestic life. It is through his animals, however, that Thompson's work also strays from Romantic interpretations of nature; the animal thwarts his attempts to achieve an equilibrium in the New Brunswick woods and marshes because it exists independently of human perception. Thompson's struggle parallels Agamben's view that the animal's presence subverts anthropocentric authority; it troubles species demarcation and highlights subjectivity's erasure: "Insofar as the animal knows neither beings nor nonbeings, neither open nor closed, it is outside of being," Agamben writes, "it is outside in an exteriority more external than any open, and inside in an intimacy more internal than any closedness" (*The Open* 91). Thompson seeks to engage the animal at this level: outside systems where truth may be exposed.

One way that he strives to meet the animal is through the metaphoric use of tools. The brant have little time to fly over the marsh before he shoots them, the ewe has its skull caved in, and the trout fights for its life on a hook. The finite sense of time for the animal speaks to Thompson's own urgency in seeking new measures for articulating experience and his acute sense of impending death— a death that may transcend the language systems he must rely on. Agamben's idea resonates with Thompson because he attempts to remain neither inside nor outside any fixed system. He does not believe in a benevolent encounter with the animal, as Domanski or Thurston celebrate, but relies on the animal to expose his despair. In Thompson's René Char translations, we find evidence of such an external/internal conundrum where animal's spark, "From time to time the silhouette of a young horse . . . comes scouting towards me and leaps the barrier of my anxiety" ("Translations" 183). Thompson's translations expose the disquieting

space between the poet and the animal. As he writes of Char, "the poem is always bound to the creatures and the elements, the flowers and the stones because they are the ground of being" (Sanger, Introduction 25).

Contemporary Fredericton poet M. Travis Lane's work reflects an understanding of Thompson's search for truth through New Brunswick's landscape, which is often still as harsh and elemental as he depicted it in the 1970s. Lane exemplifies, however, a general changing attitude toward animals in Atlantic Canada over the last four decades. Her ecological turn reveals a shift in the poetic understanding of nature and animals in the contemporary world. As she writes in "Portobello," a poem that takes place at Portobello Creek, a national wildlife area east of Fredericton, it is the careful observer who exposes truth beyond her initial impressions of place. Her landscapes, subsequently, display an awareness of Thompson's brutal encounters with the animal's death:

> Each spring the rain sorts out the sand:
> links, hooks, spikes, lawn chairs,
> general debris. The froggy ditches
> fill with trash—a dead horse, once, its hooves
> fox-gnawed, its head in a roll of carpeting. (61)

The presupposed idyllic space transforms into a murderous scene; the horse even becomes reminiscent of Thompson's ewe with its skull crushed at the water's edge. Both Thompson and Lane demonstrate a scrutiny of place that exposes the darker elements of what Sanger calls the "rage for a pure language" (*Sea Run* 16). In Lane, there is a similar turning away from the idyllic as she initially sets up the poem to reveal the trash, debris and dead horse. But here, rather than Thompson's use of dead animals and landscape as

pathetic fallacy for his personal turmoil, Lane's quest exposes both the sinister death of a horse and the collective neglect of areas, even preserved areas, in the province.

While Thompson would lose his "self" in his search through the dark and the light for something greater, Domanski's lost self is more an emptying out of the ego in order to better relate to the animal in its own terms. Domanski's merger with his surroundings shows a naturalist's sense of the world, where Thompson's reading of the world is far more desperate, filled with hazards and danger. Thompson was surely less concerned with the world of animals as animals, and more concerned with his own failing sense of humanity. Distancing himself from the all-consuming ego allows Domanski a thoughtful meditation on many contemporary concerns in Animal Studies: how are species of life communicating with one another, what are the limits of human-nonhuman relations, and how do diverse fields, such as science, metaphysics, poetry, and geology, collaborate across complicated disciplinary lines? The complexity of working with and thinking about animals as divine forces in nature connects his sense of the numinous with the spiritual and secular. Subsequently, his sprawling, stacked metaphors suggest that he is trying to distant himself from language. He incorporates not only other poets, such as Tu Fu and Lao Tze, but also leaves room for all of the animals from mammals and avian life forms to microbes, so that his work is lush with spiritual and biological elements of the natural world. None of the other poets in this study exhibit such a range of life, though Thurston, perhaps, comes closest. But then Thurston's encounters with the animal tend to be a *tête-à-tête* with one animal at a time, which he studies, catalogues, and cultivates through an understanding of how it fits into a poetic ecosystem. Steffler's encounters,

conversely, are often peripheral like dog interruptions into my own poems. They interrupt his inward-looking ruminations as he struggles across a barren landscape.

From a more naturalist viewpoint, Domanski's integration of breams, millipedes, red-tailed hawks, wolves, and hares into his most recent collection, *Bite Down Little Whisper* (2013), explores the mystery inherent to the Atlantic Coastline. He reminds us that "*Quietude is called returning to life* Lao Tze says / even on a Tuesday afternoon in Nova Scotia" (14). Unlike Thompson's turn to silence as a final specter swinging a cross and a bear, silence for Domanski becomes a means to lean closer to the world. It is a welcoming silence, despite of Cooper's suggestion that there exists "the great silence" of the poet's dilemma (*The Deer Yard*). Domanski's silence is an opportunity to rework our understanding of the "immaculate longhand of what's never to be written" (*BDLW* 14).

And yet, all of these poets confront a metaphor "not easily domesticated" (McKay, *Vis* 72) through deep history, place, and myth in order to see the animal as more than an ecological catalyst for a regional re-acquaintance. The animals that skirt Domanski's boundaries appear as regenerative metaphors; they offer us a reading of place where "the wolf's endless sense of itself" manifests as a zoopoetics that refuses to be defined (*BDLW* 83). Thompson also hints at such a place in his Char translations. A title like "Mutterings" blurs language, making what it speaks of unclear, emphasizing his own difficulty in speaking: "Wolf is what I call you, but you have no nameable reality" ("Translations" 177). Thompson's frustration at locating such a space adheres to Agamben's assertion that the animal is capable of possessing both Char's "no nameable reality" and remaining "more external than any open, and inside in an intimacy more internal than any closedness" (*The Open* 91). While Steffler and Thompson struggle with

their external/internal positions as a stance to investigate or preserve the ego, Domanski easily shifts between these two positions. He is equally comfortable sitting on a stump in the forest as he watches a storm roll in from his living room or wandering outdoors. Conversely, for Thompson's wolf in the above translation, the poem is often a meeting place between the poet and the wolf: "we shall endure together . . . though separated, we shall leap across the shudder of the supreme deception" ("Translations" 177). His language emphasizes his struggle to find a truth and manage inner outer worlds, home and outdoors. Both poets seem to read Cooper's observations that two poems together create a third—in this case, Char's poem and Thompson's translation—that tries to break through, via the animal, into the world of alternative ways of thinking. Although Thompson appears to trust very little, Domanski may be the more successful poet in expressing the shifting borders between humans and animals.

Domanski's work celebrates the mystery and traces of connective truth with animals much as Elizabeth Bishop does in "At the Fishhouses." In Bishop's poem, the Nova Scotia fisherman who sits mending nets possesses an astonishing spark of magic for her with "sequins on his vest and on his thumb," just as the tubs are lined with "beautiful herring scales" (51). The fish pop in and out of Bishop's poem much as Domanski's rabbits, crows, and coyotes reveal themselves only fleetingly in his work. Bishop's sense of connection between the people and the ocean, as she sings "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" to the seal, reminds the reader of Domanski's "Leviathan" and its relationships to the Atlantic Canadian fishing community, faith, and mythopoesis. As a contemporary realist, Steffler takes a more sobering approach to portraying struggling fishing communities. There is not so much magic in his poetic depictions, but factual

details, such as in his Grey Island encounters with fishing villages and their hardscrabble lives. Such encounters emphasize the dichotomy between locals and those "from away." Steffler's communities included a more pronounced portrait of the uneducated and the violence among residents who fish only for subsistence. Such portrayals destabilize his Town Planner's preconceptions and colonial thinking. They do not leave room for Domanski's more fantastical zoopoetics, which methodically interlace various human/animal relationships into a moment replete with cultural overtones.

Among the four poets here, Domanski's work at times also seems the most optimistic. While Thompson's poetry reflects his moves towards death, Domanski's work remains regenerative. Often, microbes and carrion eaters take on philosophical and mythical proportions. Scientific understanding continuously complicates the relationship between spiritual and scientific meditations and observations, as if he wished somehow to merge the two in a more realistic future. Domanski seeks to determine a connection with natural phenomena through poetic and scientific thought. Thus, cycles, microbes, and decomposition offer a more unified sense of being in the world as science shapes his understanding of how nature works. As an eco-poet, he makes use of scientific knowledge in his metaphors by employing an epistemology of perception. Early on in his career, he turns his attention to the natural sciences in an anti-Cartesian effort to show how the animal roams through cultural systems and destabilizes binaries. His explorations reposition the animal for a viable awakening of language in the reader. Thurston, similarly, but with a greater sense of immediate conditions, remains grounded in reality, only occasionally letting the animal run away with his imagination. His particular scientific background gives him a means to understand the animal in place. In

contrast to Domanski, whose animals ignite multiple readings of the world, Thurston turns to science in order to evoke the animal. The blue heron reads and writes the water's surface. The elver writes its fear over a young Thurston's hands. Each animal engages the poet as a condition of the world itself.

In direct contrast to Domanski's use of science, Thurston's view of poetry, science, and ecology appears to shape a clear commitment toward an understanding of environmental ethics, which can expose us to the physical world's plurality and grandeur. E.O. Wilson's theory of *consilience*, to emphasize what I quoted earlier, offers a simple explanation of the difference: "Neither science nor the arts can be complete without combining their separate strengths" (237). As he makes clear, "Science needs the intuition and metaphorical power of the arts, and the arts need the fresh blood of science," an idea that addresses Thurston's struggle to find a new language in and of nature (237). It is here that a major difference arises between the two poets. While Domanski often relies on the animal metaphor to expose an inadequate science, Thurston relies on science (and his early experiences farming) to bring to life the animal metaphor. Unlike Domanski's stacked metaphors that spiral out into spirituality and whimsy, Thurston's animal is more often than not grounded in a naturalist's sensibility.

It would appear, in this context, that Domanski is more fully aware of the inherent difference between human and animal (and desires a new understanding through the animal point of view or knowledge). Thompson seeks the animal as a way out of the human dilemma, which for him is the most painful aspect of existence. In contrast to these explorations of difference, Steffler makes use of the animal as a metaphor for the wild in existence, including the wildness that confronts him through Newfoundland's

landscape. In this way, Steffler's sense of the animal is more traditional, and he tends to use the animal as a simple poetic device more than the others. It may be exactly this personification that leads him eventually to feminize the landscape and to attempt an appropriation of the animal for his own feelings and senses. It is also why the poetry at times fails to reach the genuine understanding of nature achieved by the other three poets.

The poets' various personal relationships to the world also play a part in their difference in approaching the animal. Both Thompson and Steffler display a fear of the animal; its wildness is both an attraction and a danger. Domanski plays on anxiety as well, but never seems to really fear for himself in his encounters. His fears seem to rise up from the mystery and limitless possibility he recognizes in all potential animal encounters. Thurston, informed by his background in husbandry and biology, admits to fearing the animal often as a child. As an adult, Thurston's encounters with the animal do not incite fear, but often send him seeking ways to accommodate the animal's presence by locating it in a cultural and biological reading.

In the manner of Steffler's animalization of the landscape, the Atlantic Canadian writer Earnest Buckler suggested, in the late 1970s, that the Atlantic provinces possess an uncanny ability to manifest into a creaturely being: "Nova Scotia is a place where so many inanimate things take on a living quality because of an intimacy nearly personal with the man amongst them" (98). But today, these metaphoric moves must be brought into question. Val Plumwood takes the poets to task for treating nature as merely landscape, animalized or humanized: "To describe the land as a 'landscape' is to privilege the visual over other, more rounded and embodied ways of knowing the land, for example, by walking over it, or by smelling and tasting its life, from the perspective

of predator or prey" ("The Concept" 123). Such a critical approach to landscape seems to be part of these poets' struggles. Steffler, in particular, is often both predator to the feminized/animalized landscape and prey to the sheer animal force of the land. So finally, for this poet at least, the animal continuously unbalances his attempts to define Newfoundland as merely landscape. In this same way, poets have always engaged the metaphor of the land as a means of understanding their own, human relationships better, not simply to make use of the imagistic elements of nature.

Steffler's encounters with the land are sensual and extensive; he treats the entire island of Newfoundland as a living, creaturely being. For him, southwest Newfoundland is the animal and the only way to understand such a creature is to understand the culture of place. His excursions take on physical proportions: "Poetry brings out people's private experience," he writes. It "puts people in touch with their inner selves, and refreshes their awareness of the outside world" (qtd. in Harron). As in both Thompson's and Steffler's struggles, poetry suggests a gap between word and world. They are the two poets here who seem to expose much of their intimate narratives, fears, and anxieties in relation to the land. It is a space that exists between the phenomenologically "accepted" world and the abstract, animalized, primal space that both men are very conscious of existing within. However, in a crucial way, Thompson's fears of imposing himself on the world differ from Steffler's in that Steffler fears that Newfoundland's landscape may consume him. Thompson is often unsure where his forays into New Brunswick's woods will lead him or if he will return. Steffler, with his predacious estimation of place, deviates between a fear of dissimilation and a kind of insanity, and postures against such fears with his masculine personae.

Steffler's contemporaries, such as Newfoundland's Tom Dawe, also use animals to convey a sense of liminality in their attempts to define Newfoundland experience. In "Thoreau," for instance, Dawe sees how animals transform our experience of the landscape: "a woodpecker … drumming / leaves the woods and fields / no longer what they were (*Where Genesis Begins* 86). In "House on the Coast," Dawe presents a similar image of an animal signifying what he himself cannot do through words: on a desolate outport we find "no smoke in the on-shore air / to blur the lines" across the horizon except "seven sea-gulls wheeling / the horizon definite / over rock edges and pools" (*Hemlock Cove* 31). Such stanzas are reminiscent of Steffler's defining characteristics of Newfoundland animals, alienation, and rifts between the world and the poet. Dawe's woodpecker reminds the reader of Steffler's crickets in "Walls of Sound." Those same Newfoundland silences nearly drive the poet mad, reminding him of his own isolation. Dawe's seagulls directly reflect Steffler's use of the animal to foreground space as populous rather than empty of life, as the poet does continuously in *The Grey Islands*. The same is true of Dawe's depiction of an abandoned outport community, where the gulls redefine the space: it is not abandoned but populated with others. Of course, in Steffler's work, the poetry animalizes the landscape even more dangerously, so that the glaciers are prowling bears behind him as he fishes near Denny's cabin, and these provide him with a new sense of place: populated and very much alive.

A younger Newfoundland poet, Mark Callanan, uses animal populations to dismantle anthropocentric thinking much in the way that Thurston does: working specifically towards an ecological conclusion. Callanan's work, however, also moves beyond the existential angst of Steffler's barren landscape to more contemporary

concerns, such as ecological sustainability. "Moratorium" handles the cod moratorium and its fallout in a direct, political address:

> This is no jiggery, no attempt to dangle you,
> dear reader, on the end of a bifurcated hook
> by the flesh of your jowls, but a serious take
> on the state of the fishery. And when I say
> *fishery*, I mean the poem itself, the Grand
> Bank of versification, the metaphysical
> dragger net—soul reaper, clean-sweeping
> instrument of harvest. (47, emphasis in original)

Callanan's poem refuses to let the lines slip into a sense of Newfoundlander grievance. Instead, he admits that the topic is "bifurcated," the reader is caught here on something of a Thompsonian hook. And, in the end, the moratorium is not merely bureaucratic speak, but something that affects the "reader" on a more visceral level. Callanan admits at the beginning of the poem, "You can't have a proper meal without a fish." The human desire for something missing and no longer populous becomes an intimate loss. Callanan's kinetic treatment of the cod moratorium and Atlantic Canada's inability to fully define what it has meant to the region shows how deeply connected the fisheries are to the poet's identity. The codfish, in all its wildness, however, cannot be contained in the poem, but "writhes and bucks" and refuses to remain still. The fish's inability to settle into the poem functions in a similar manner to Steffler's animalized province: both refuse to be reduced to a definition.

But if alienation seems the main legacy of poets like Thompson, Steffler, and Domanski, there is something different in Thurston. As the most conspicuous activist of the poets studied here, Thurston seems to have more of a working relationship with the animal. His early farm life experiences are surely at the heart of this difference. While it is true that Steffler also lived on a farm as a young boy, his poetry does not mine those early experiences as Thurston does so often. While Thompson's visions, at times, border on the mystical in his sense of animal existence, and Domanski strips himself of the ego as metaphysical experience, Thurston is consistently grounded in the naturalist's praxis through engaged observation. Thurston moves from the farm to science, only to discover that scientific investigation must return eventually to the individual's lived experience. But his change is also informed by his early experiences with the animal as Other. Science takes him a step deeper; it allows him a means of exploring the functional nature of the animal. Poetry, subsequently, becomes the bridge from his farmer-scientist frame of reference to his role as environmentalist.

For Thurston, science startles in its demand for order and objectivity and in its fallacious sanctity in the face of suffering animals. He discovers science's dichotomous nature as a biology student working with livestock, and, at the same time, the poet within him feels that moral disjunction. As with his farming experience, science finally distances him from the animals as sentient beings and spurs an ethical dilemma. Looking to the others, science plays a different role. Where Thompson and Steffler never appear concerned with this ethical dilemma of the suffering beast, perhaps because they place the animal as a challenge to masculine assertions, sanity, and language, Domanski places the animal on a higher plain, one which humans strive to achieve rather than simply to

understand. In one way, however, Steffler seeks an understanding much like Thurston's: a way to simplify the animal that haunts him and yet retain a greater sense of the animal as wild Other.

Both of these latter poets address a concern for animal cruelty that has been present in Atlantic Canadian poetry for many years. Alden Nowlan's famous "The Bull Moose" exemplifies human disregard for animal presence. For Nowlan, the sick moose becomes the reflection of human cruelties as "The children teased him / with alder switches" and he seems to "let them pry open his jaw with bottles" (28). Although Nowlan's more traditional approach would equate the ridicule with that of Jesus before the crucifixion, he nonetheless captures the ongoing sense of the failure of human/animal interactions that were found earlier in Steffler and Thurston.

Agamben's argument that the animal's presence subverts anthropocentric authority because it troubles species demarcation and highlights subjectivity's erasure might be read as a critique of all four poets in this study. Conflict, as we have seen, creates the paradox of each poet's lived experience in the face of a failed language, even when the poetry comes closer to the subliminal experience of the animal itself. Is it any wonder, then, that such a position inspires questions of how the animal defines us in our own regions? Reading poetry through a zoocentric perspective gives insight into the nonhuman presence around us, and it should incite us to think both regionally and ecocritically, as it offers alternatives for ways of thinking about the animal world and our own identities.

The importance of this dissertation's argument on regional particularity over generality in contemporary poetry might be used as the basis for an empathetic and

ethical reading of place: “Regional materials take on philosophic importance,” Francis Berces argues, “and this elevates an interest in place to a universal concern with one's place in the world” (117). As these poets admit, the animal always brings us back to the human. The animal crisis of understanding, then, is an existential one. Each poet advocates an aforementioned bioregionalism rather than a simple or restricted regionalism. If regionalism is often based on political and economic determinants, then bioregionalism (with its Greek epistemological roots in “life” and “territory”) is a cultural and political reading of place that espouses environmental tenets. Grounded in the idea of interconnectivity, bioregionalism maintains an integrated identity with the place in which we find ourselves as living beings. The poets here can be read as forging new definitions of bioregionalism through their place-specific, experiential encounters with the animal. And yet, for such a reconstructive ecology to succeed, Michael Vincent McGinnis suggests that there are factors that must be in play. Bioregionalism must first be based in culture. It must be “contingent on context and history, and on people’s connections and the natural world” (5). It is through a creative effort to bring these three forces together that the poets make unique contributions to Animal Studies in the context of a new understanding of bioregionalism.

Other writers seem to be following this same trend. Emphasizing Canada’s established regional discourse, D.M.R. Bentley suggests that Canadian poetry is in a good position to engage bioregionalism’s restorative potentials: “Since its aims are preservative and restorative,” Bentley points out, “an ecological poetics unites conservation and conservatism in a search for manifestations in Canadian poetry of the feelings of responsibility, respect, duty, and interdependence, that constitute the core of

any bonded community worth imagining" (275). But because the poets foreground the dissonance between animal experience and our reliance on language as the expression of our own experience, it is difficult to place their efforts in one theoretical context. In not formalizing an approach through any particular theory or methodology, the present study offers a contextualized reading of the animal-as-presence in specific examples of Atlantic Canadian poetry. At the same time, it highlights a particular bioregion, engaging and encouraging discourses in immediate and broader scopes. For the poets here, the animal locates this nexus and challenges the standard and traditional answers. The animals' various guises highlight an even older idea that "[t]he best poets of nature understand the full extent of our exile" (Gilchrist 147).

Atlantic Canada is a unique region and a key one for demonstrating the struggle for bioregionalism on a national level as well. In this struggle, too, it is subversive because it asks the reader to put aside assumptions and read place from the unfamiliar positioning of writers struggling with questions that yet persist. Robert Kern asserts that "all texts are at least potentially environmental (and therefore susceptible to ecocriticsm or ecologically informed reading) in the sense that all texts are literally and/or imaginatively situated in a place, and in the sense that their authors, consciously or not, inscribe within them a certain relation to their place" (10). All of these poets show an awareness of ecological readings, but it is perhaps no more present than in a poem like Thurston's "King Fisher Creek," where the "spent salmon" "hardly has strength to avoid" the poet's own shadow, and soon, "it will be eaten by the trees" (*The Deer Yard*). Cycles of life and death, and the sun shortening the season, give Thurston these images, and integrate him in both a regional awareness and a national identity. It is the slow time, an

Atlantic Canadian time, and a northern time at the river's edge that makes the poem so compelling.

Returning then to Lawrence Buell's question from the opening comments of the Introduction, "Must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it," we find the question remains unanswered (*The Future* 10). The poets here have attempted to return us not simply back to the physical world, but back to a sense of what occurs when one steps toward the animal and the words fail. They do not deny the humanity in poetry because poetry is a human function. But their various projects show what can happen when we perceive the animal not simply as another species but as a mutual inhabitant of the planet, through sympathy and a shared humility. By foregrounding place and regional identity, each poet makes it clear that he does not accept that "Nature *is* silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (Manes 15, emphasis in original). Their sometimes troubled expressions of time and place are a form of resistance that functions to re-assert region into the very center of our awareness.

Today, finishing this study in a small lobster-fishing village in southwestern Nova Scotia, I can see that the white sand beaches are as empty this blustery winter day as they are in the summer, except for the nine harbor seals out in the surf, the snowy owl perched on a storm-damaged lobster trap, and the small bristly mounds of sea urchins wrapped in the shore-thrown kelp. So then, the beach is not really empty, after all. It simply requires a shift in thinking about place to see its bounty. It means we are continuously compelled

to mitigate the silence with animal presence, and fill the world of human silences with animal being.

By considering the powerful, wordless presence of the animal in poetry, it has been my aim to locate the most strategic places that the animal has entered into the Atlantic Canadian imagination through its power of representation. But it is important that poetic representation of the animal should not overshadow the animal as a real, material being. "We are living through a historical turning point," Derrida states, "where the animal may no longer be 'allegory' or 'figure' but 'literal' and 'real'" (24). These four poets may be on the cusp of a movement that begins to deal with Derrida's suggestion of the animal's greater reality. The intersection, therefore, between the literal and the literary animal, the animal that shares brain activity and expresses passion and preference is still that space where language grows cumbersome in verbalizing an experience that seems at times beyond the poet's ability to articulate. As Derrida suggested in the earlier part of this study, the imagination may be the best way to enter the animal's world: ". . . thinking concerning the animal," he writes, "if there is such a thing, derives from poetry" (7).

In the past few years, such imaginative leaps have brought about new relationships between humans and nonhumans. Currently, there are nearly a dozen course offerings in Animal Studies across Canada, with Brock University being one of the forerunners, offering one of the first *Critical Animal Studies* programs in Canada. The University College of Cape Breton offers an "Animals and People" course in anthropology, and the University of Calgary offers "The Human and its Others: The Question of the Animal" in the English Department, while the University of British

Columbia offers various courses and undergraduate thesis work in animal welfare, to name a few.

Integrating animals into daily life has also taken new directions. Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is just one of a handful of Canadian universities that are now using dogs to alleviate student stress and homesickness.[24] Last year, the university's endeavours reached international news for being one of the first universities to offer "Puppy Room" sessions for students during exam period. Though the name suggests frolicking, mischievous pups, the dogs were actually trained therapy dogs affiliated with a non-profit organization, Therapeutic Paws of Canada. The program had such a high success rate that Dalhousie set up a shuttle service to transport students to a local SPCA where they could walk dogs and visit with cats (McNutt). Similarly, psychiatric service dogs have been increasing in importance nationally. Canadian programs such as Wounded Warriors, the Manitoba First Nations organization, affiliated with the Manitoba Search and Rescue (M.A.S.R) and the Canadian Service Dog Foundation are training dogs for veterans who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PSTD).[25] Each of these programs requires a human openness and willingness to listen to the animal. Similarly, when American poet Mark Doty adopted a companion dog for his dying partner, he discovered a wealth of material for sorting through his own grief by letting go of his urge to define. He surmised that because dogs "do not speak, except in the most limited fashion, we are always trying to figure them out" (1). Just as the poets in this study have attempted to align themselves with a sense of the Other through poetry and the animal, Doty believes that "The expression is telling: to 'figure out' is to make figures of speech, to invent metaphors to help us understand the world."

While the poets here have challenged and been challenged by zoopoetics, the metaphorical struggle for inclusion within the animal encounter, because of its tangential nature, never ends. “To choose to live with a dog,” Doty continues, “is to agree to participate in a long process of interpretation and mutual agreement, though the human being holds most of the cards” (1). Though there may be resolution for Doty and other poets engaged with the animal, there can be no conclusion, as this would negate process.

For the future, our humanness may depend on our relationship to animals. “Being human has always meant perceiving ourselves in a circle of animals,” American environmentalist and author Paul Shepard once wrote, as animals are harbingers and decoders of weather and topography, and are the subjects of our collective elegies and imaginative elements in creation stories, mystery, and ecological health (13). As the four poets in this study will continue to remind us, animals, perhaps most importantly, make us aware of the dangers of our own isolation.

Notes

[1] For those unfamiliar with the region, there is often some confusion as to the difference between "the Maritimes" and Atlantic Canada. The term "the Maritimes" is a complex taxonomy; Donald Savoie has defined it as a "single region" made up of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island; these provinces have a collective history that precedes Canadian Confederation and they have participated in debates concerning Maritime union while being perceived as "as an add-on, a special case, a lagging region, a problem to be addressed by special measures" (Savoie 13). Newfoundland's first premier, Joey Smallwood, coined "Atlantic Canada" after Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, as a new way to understanding the east coast provincial relationships. See also Lawrence Matthews review of Lesley Choyce's anthology *Atlantica: Stories from the Maritimes and Newfoundland* for an example of this intra-national conflict (119).

[2] While there is much debate over the separation of "animal" and "human" as a binary construction, I use these concepts throughout this investigation as many of my sources have written in this manner. To continue using these terms eliminates confusion and awkward transition.

[3] Moe's monograph, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, will be published with Lexington Books December 2013.

[4] See sociologist Mirra Komarovsky's *Dilemmas of Masculinity: A Study of College Youth (1976).* Her 1969-1970 study at Columbia College suggests that while

women in the early 70s felt empowered by their newfound liberties, men of the same generation found little comfort in their traditional upbringings and feminism.

[5] For an introduction to Atlantic Canadian poets and how the landscape and shoreline influence their work see Compton et al, *Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada*.

[6] See David Campbell's 2012 *The Globe and Mail* article, "We Shouldn't Drain Atlantic Canada's Labour Force" for an overview of the conflicts with the Federal government implementing Employment Insurance program reforms to the region and for encouraging out-migration.

[7]The first Canadian English literature came from Atlantic Canada. A list includes Thomas Chandlier Haliburton's well-known satirical work, *The Clockmaker*, which explores Tory characters created to define a developing Nova Scotia identity and his Yankee, Sam Slick, who proposes resource exploitation and industry to the Halifax elite. Julia Catherine Beckwith, from Fredericton, published *St. Ursula's Convent or, The Nun of Canada; Containing Scenes from Real Life*, in 1824. It is considered "the first novel published in British North America written by a native-born author" (Davies 337).

[8]Atwood also addresses a collective existential anxiety among Canadians. She surmises that Canadians actively protesting the east coast seal hunts are acting on "national guilt: Canada after all was founded on the fur trade, and an animal cannot painlessly be separated from its skin. From the animal point of view, Canadians are as bad as the slave trade or the Inquisition; which casts a new light on those beavers on the nickels and caribou on the quarters. But it is much more likely that Canadians themselves feel threatened and nearly-extinct as a nation, and suffer also from life-denying

experience as individuals—the culture threatens the 'animal' within them— and that their identification with animals is the expression of a deep-seated cultural fear" (*Survival* 95).

[9]James Polk differentiates between celebratory nature poetry and Thompson's work in his introduction to *I Dream Myself into Being*: "Yes, nature poetry, but nature seen with a vengeance, as in Gerald Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, or Ted Hughes . . . nature revealed in concentrated images that bring us close to painful cycles of death and regeneration, a world charged with grandeur where language and emotion count and where everything is at stake" ("Introduction" 3).

[10] Biblical references to fishing and hooks echo throughout Thompson's Ghazals. For example, Job 41:7: "Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? Or his head with fish spears?" This is answered in a very Thompsonian way: "But I will put hooks in thy jaws, and I will cause the fish of thy rivers to stick unto thy scales, and I will bring thee up out of the midst of they rivers, and all the fish of they rivers shall stick unto thy scales" (Ezekiel 29:4). Thompson's eventual turning away from tools, such as fishhooks, also has a comparable Biblical association: "The Lord GOD hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks," the Book of Amos states (4:2). Thompson also loses his ability to control animals through hooks (Amos 4:2).

[11]Acadians "called their system of reclamation *les aboiteaux*, for the tide gate, known as an *aboiteau*, which was installed at the foot of the dyke" (Thurston, *Guide* 84). Thompson's poem directly references the landscape and the human manipulation of the land. As Thurston observes: "The aboiteau was a simple but ingenious device that prevented the sea from flooding the land and at the same time allowed fresh water to

drain from the land to the sea" (84). This system, unique to Acadian regions in the Tantramar area of New Brunswick and the Grand-Pré area of Nova Scotia, was brought with the Acadians from France. The dyking system utilizes the fertile marsh soil and imprints the landscape, thus emphasizing separation and continuity.

[12]I use "place" here as Lawrence Buell defines "placeness," which "is co-constituted environmentally, socially, and phenomenologically through acts of perception. Place connotes not simply bounded and meaningful location but also dynamic process, including the shaping of place by outside as well as internal influences" (*Future* 145). Domanski's project exemplifies such a definition, as he attempts to articulate Atlantic Canada through first-order experience at the human/animal threshold.

[13]The term "Celtic ethnicity" must be addressed here, as it traverses cultures, rather than its widely misunderstood definition as representing a single, homogenous culture. The use of "Celtic" troubles the simplicity of the statement as there are continual arguments concerning the breadth of such a term. For example, does the term suggest only the Celtic ethnicity of the Scottish and Irish, or should it also encapsulate Norman and Anglo-Saxon derivatives? See Herb Wyile's chapter, "The Simpler and the Colourful Ways of Life" in *Anne of Tim Hortons* for an extensive analysis of minority groups such as Native writers and people of African heritage which point to "a growing trend since the 1970s to recognize Atlantic-Canadian literature as a multicultural literature" (107). Wyile rightfully notes that Atlantic-Canadian literature may reflect "the demographic mix in the region . . . it is still more monochromatic than the literature of most, if not all, of the rest of the country" (126).

[14]The devouring in “High Bear in the Body” parallels John Steffler’s sanguine protagonist in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright.* As the polar bear devours George Cartwright, his thoughts return to an earlier incident in which he had thoughtlessly shot and killed dozens of polar bears for sport. The final polar bear encounter becomes an erasure for the fallible explorer: "He watches and, incredibly, feels no pain, feels instead the satisfaction of feeding a fierce hunger. He has been starving for so long. And with each bite, as more of him vanishes, a feast of new beauty appears. . . . The bear's white head is a wide pointed brush, moving from side to side, painting him out, painting the river, the glittering trees in" (286).

[15]Peter Steeves sees a threshold crossing, such as Domanski’s man to wolf transition, as a dangerous space:

> “[C]rossing the line between human and animal, we are taught in countless ways, can only result in tragedy.
>
> This is the lesson, I take it, of the vampire and the werewolf in our mythologies. Here, the human becomes animal—the body and spirit—and nasty things begin to happen. The context of the transformation is one of evil and suffering, and the consequence is always death—death for the human victims and ultimately death of the monster as well. The stories warn us to maintain our human identities, for an animal nature brings forth an animal body which in turn leads to death” (*The Things Themselves* 45).

[16]Charles Darwin proposed that language was not exempt from morphological existence, in that language is born, struggles, and sometimes becomes extinct as it loses

purchase among other languages. He writes, "A struggle for life is constantly going on amongst the words and grammatical forms in each language" (257).

[17]Alexander Kojeve explores how the death of a human individual holds more ground than the death of an animal because the human possesses subjectivity and a hardwired sense of individuality that the animal lacks. He writes, "A man is supposed to be 'the only one of his kind,' by being essentially different from all other men. And at the same time he is supposed to have, in his irreplaceable uniqueness, a positive value even more absolute or universal than that which belongs to a 'species' as such" (235).

[18]Newfoundland writer Lisa Moore's short story "The Way the Light Is," from her collection *Open,* focuses on a filmmaker's plans to make a short film based on Steffler's "The Green Insect" and the elusive quality in the poem that points to our destructive desire to own something.

[19]Ecocritic Scott Slovic takes note of the naturalist's logbook and its incorporation into literature. He surmises that "Many literary naturalists imitate the notebooks of scientific naturalists, the logbooks of explorers, or even the journals of nonscientific travelers in order to entrench themselves in the specific moment of experience" (352).

[20]While Adam Beardsworth's very thoughtful paper also explores the Town Planner's transition from Romantic colonizing outsider to his final mental breakdown, as he finally identifies with the madman, Carm Denny, his analysis does not explore the Planner's breakdown as a mode of transitioning into animality, as I argue. Beardsworth reads the Planner's experience through a Lacanian lens where "the Real of nature" infringes onto the planner's sense of reality, inciting insanity. My reading, conversely, sees that his insanity stems from his crossing into feral space, a human-to-animal

transition. The crossing provides him a means to begin to experience the island ecologically, as he distances himself from his earlier reliance on nature's ability to redeem himself.

[21]Moose were introduced to Newfoundland in the early twentieth-century; what began as two couples from New Brunswick has now burgeoned into a 160,000 peak population. Now, they are well known for being "so numerous that they pose a significant road hazard, especially at dawn and dusk" (Thurston, *Guide* 123).

[22]Though Thurston's metaphors here seem at odds with the speaker's understanding of the whale's ontology and new epistemologies, Thurston may shed light onto his metaphorical choices in a *The Goose* interview. Commenting on *A Ship Portrait*, a poetry collection that explores Yarmouth's shipping tradition and the ship portrait painter John O'Brien, Thurston observes, "I was painfully aware of the kind of regional stereotypes that Maritimers have. And I thought that that kind of stereotyping was not only hurtful but also wrong. And because, in the Maritimes during the age of sail, there was an incredible cosmopolitanism . . . part of my agenda for writing *A Ship Portrait* was trying to revise the sense of worldliness that Maritimers have" (Szabo-Jones 85).

[23]After the Cod Moratorium, Atlantic Canadians, particularly men, moved to the western provinces in search of work. The large numbers that made up this out-migration speak to the conflict between sustainable practices in fishing and the dependency of Atlantic Canadians on the fishing industry: "Between 2001 and 2006, 33,000 Atlantic Canadians moved to Alberta to find employment, not including the estimated 25,000 oil patch commuters (most of them men) who worked in Fort McMurray. Air Canada and

Westjet added new flights between Calgary and Halifax, Sydney, and St. John's to accommodate the mobile workforce . . . (Conrad 246).

[24]See Queen's University's report on student mental health. The "Student Mental Health and Wellness" commission recommends "pet walking or pet therapy programs" as community support effort to help alleviate students' sense of anxiety (26).

[25]A report posted on the Defense Technical Information Center website states "[t]he Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS), has been developing the concept of using service dogs with a variety of mental health disabilities, including PTSD for the past thirteen years. In a 2005 survey of Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD) handlers, 82% of the respondents with PTSD who are using a PSD reported a decline in symptom manifestation" (Love 4). See also CTV *W5*'s "Canine Comrades" and Janie Lorber's *New York Times* article "For the Battle-scarred, Comfort at Leash's End," for further insight into the benefits of these service dogs.

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MFA in Creative Writing. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. 2000.

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Publications

Books

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What Really Happened Was This: A Poetry Memoir by Dianne Hicks Morrow. *Atlantic Books Today* 65 (2011): 36.

Return from Erebus by Julia McCarthy. *Atlantic Books Today* 57 (2010): 32.

I Do Not Think That I Could Love A Human Being by Johanna Skibsrud. *Atlantic Books Today* 64 (2010): 34-5.

Of Love and Drowning by Antony Christie. *Atlantic Books Today* 62 (2010): 37.

Animal Encounters. Eds. Tom Tyler and Manuela Rossini. *The Goose: Association of Literature, Environment and Culture in Canada* (ALECC). (2009): 41-3.

The Marram Grass: Poetry and Otherness by Anne Simpson. *Atlantic Books Today* 61 (2009): 34-5.

I and I by George Elliot Clarke. *Atlantic Books Today* 60 (2009): 35-36.

Articles

"Thefts, Contortions, & Yogic Breathing: Nicole Markotic's Trickster Poetics." Introduction to Nicole Markotic's poetry for *Numéro Cinq* 3:11 (November 2012): Web. www.numerocinqmagazine.com.

"The Sally Draper Poems." Introduction to Jennica Harper's poetry for *Numéro Cinq* 4:3 (March 2013): Web. www.numerocinqmagazine.com.

"Killing Ofeig: Polar Bear Plight in Iceland." *Canadian Geographic* 128:5 (2008): 102.

"Herménéglide Chiasson and George Elliott Clarke: An Interview." *Atlantic Books Today* 56 (2007): 18-19.

"Bad Boy Celebrity Poets." *Sub-terrain Magazine* 44 (2006): 22-26.

Honours

Major Awards and Fellowships

Canada-U.S Fulbright Scholar 2011-2011 at Georgia State University.

Canada Council Travel Grant 2011.

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Joseph-Armand-Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship—Government of Canada Doctoral Scholarship 2009-2012.

Dr. William Lewis Fellowship 2008-2009.

Banff Centre of the Arts Scholarship 2008.

ArtsNB Grant Category A 2008.

ArtsNB Grant Category B 2006.

Fundacion Valparaiso Fellowship, Spain 2005.

Canada Council Professional Writer's Grant 2005.

Canada Council Travel Grant 2005.

Canada Council Emerging Writer's Grant 2003.

UGF Fellowship from University of British Columbia 1999.

George Kenwood Memorial Scholarship for creative writing 1998.

Awards and Honours

Pushcart Prize for Poetry (nominated) 2008.

University of Tennessee Chapbook Contest (winner) 2008.

Acorn-Plantos People's Poet Award (short-listed) 2007.

Canadian Broadcast Council (CBC) Literary Awards (short-listed for poetry) 2007.

Canadian Broadcast Council (CBC) Literary Awards (short-listed for poetry) 2006.

ReLit Award for *Unravel* (short-listed) 2005.

John Spencer Hill Fiction Competition (winner) 2003.

ReLit Award for *Translations: Aistreann* (short listed) 2003.

Prism International short fiction contest (runner-up) 2003.

Adapted into audio book for Canadian National Institute for the Blind 2005, for *Translations: Aistreann.*

Relit Award Nominee for *Translations: Aistreann* 2003.

Room of One's Own annual short fiction contest (2nd place) 2002.

ReLit Award for *Bogman's Music* (short-listed) 2002.

Bliss Carman Poetry Award, *Prairie Fire* (Honourable Mention) 2001.

Governor General's Award Nominee for *Bogman's Music* 2001.

ReLit Award Nominee for *Bogman's Music* (short listed) 2001.

Writer's Federation of New Brunswick: Alfred G Bailey Award for best unpublished poetry manuscript (winner) 2000.

League of Canadian Poets National Competition (3rd place) 2000.

Robertson Davies/Chapters Prize for *Translations:Aistreann* (semi-finalist) 2000.

Writers Federation of New Brunswick; David Adams Richards Prize for excerpt from *Translations: Aistreann* (winner)1999.

Residences

House of Literature and Translation, Paros Greece May 2011.

Fundacion Valparaiso, Spain 2005.

Sage Hill, Saskatchewan 1996.

Conference and Presentations

"Atlantic Shorelines and the 'Sea-sounding Speech.'" Paper presented at Rocky Mountain Division of the American Society of Aesthetics. Sante Fe, New Mexico, July 4, 2012.

"The Fiddlehead and a Postmodern Reading of Its Covers." Paper presented at the Association for Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) conference. University of New Brunswick, May 29, 2011.

"An Old Animal Habit: Domanski's Menagerie." Panel for the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC) Cape Breton University, August 20, 2010.

"An Old Animal Habit: Domanski's Menagerie." Panel for Canadian Studies and Cultural Expression. Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, February 14, 2009.

Readings and Panels

Invited reader for Congress 2011 signature event panel with Graeme Gibson "Echoes of a Working Eden."

Invited reader for 2011 Northrop Frye Literary Festival, Moncton NB, April 2011.

Northrop Frye Festival Poetry Workshop: "The Metaphor" April 2011.

Invited reader for University of New Brunswick's Poetry Weekend 2005-2010.

Invited reader for 2007 Northrop Frye Literary Festival, Moncton NB.

Invited reader for Joe Sherman Tribute at University of New Brunswick's Ice House (sponsored by League of Canadian Poets and Writers' Federation of New Brunswick) 2006.

Invited reader for Alden Nowlan Poetry Festival at University of New Brunswick 2004

Invited reader for Poets for Peace, Vancouver Public Library 2003.

Two poems commissioned by Mother Tongue Books (Ottawa) for performance at National Arts Centre for International Women's Day 2001.

Research and Teaching Interests

Canadian Literature

North Atlantic Literature

Animal Studies / Animal Rhetoric

Poetry / Poetics / Zoopoetics / Ecopoetics

Ecocriticism

Teaching Experience

English 3403: Canadian Poetry at Saint Thomas University, January 2011-April 2011.

English 1103: Fundamentals of Clear Writing at University of New Brunswick, September 2010-December 2010.

English 1000: An Introduction to Twentieth and Twentieth-First Century Literature at University of New Brunswick, January 2010-May 2010.

English 1103: Fundamentals of Clear Writing at University of New Brunswick, January 2007-May 2009.

Service and Professional Experience

Jury member for 2011 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize (BC Book Prizes).

Poetry editor for *The Fiddlehead* 2009-2011.

Judge for *The Malahat Review's* National Open Season Poetry Contest 2010.

Guest speaker for UNB's Masters' Class in Creative Writing 2010.

Jury member ArtsNB Professional Category for Fiction and Poetry 2010.

Jury member Canada Council for the Arts Professional Category for Fiction 2009.

Creative Arts Editor for *Atlantis* at Mount St. Vincent University, Halifax NS 2007-2009.

Guest poetry editor for *The Fiddlehead* 2008 (Charles Wright special).

English 1103 Text Selection Committee 2008.

Judge for Writer's Federation of New Brunswick Alfred G. Bailey Poetry Contest 2005.

Judge for *Sub-terrain Magazine*'s annual Lush poetry competition 2002.

Word on the Street volunteer, Vancouver BC 2000-2002.

Bumbershoot poet's panel and table volunteer, Seattle WA 2000.

Editorial assistant at *Sub-terrain Magazine*, Vancouver BC 2000-2002.

Poetry editor at Anvil Press, Vancouver BC 2000-2002.

Professional Associations

Member of Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada / Association pour la litterature, l'environnement et la culture au Canada (ALECC) 2007-present.

Member of Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) 2010-present.

Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick supporter 2006-7.

Member of PEN Canada 2004-2009.

Member of Writers' Federation of New Brunswick 1999-2009.

Member of Federation of BC Writers 1999-2003.

Member of editorial collective *Sub-terrain Magazine* 1999-2001.