Les Murray and the task of the translator [and] The raft

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Les Murray and the Task of the Translator

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

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by

Helen Lambert, BCA

Faculty of Creative Arts

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Certification

This is to certify that:

this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, comprises my original work, unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The thesis has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Helen Lambert

Date:
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Abstract

This PhD comprises two components: a scholarly thesis and a poetic work. The thesis, *Les Murray and the Task of the Translator*, explores the question of translation in the poetry of Les Murray, specifically with regards to his neglected book, *Translations from the Natural World*. I argue that Murray, in attempting to translate the natural world into human speech, demonstrates that poetry *is* translation, that is, ‘bringing the other to presence through language.’ The poet’s task is that of the translator. But what is translation? In order to investigate this question—and indeed, that which constitutes the ‘task’ of the translator—I turn to Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, as a methodological frame for interpreting Murray’s poetry. In Benjamin’s essay, literal translation (however impossible) shows itself to be the only ‘just’ sort of translation. With this in mind, I then return to Murray in order to show that *Translations from the Natural World* attempts to embody this specific form of ‘impossible justice’. Thus if poetry is translation, but translation is impossible, then poetry is impossible as well.

The poetry portion of the PhD comprises a book length twelve-tone poem, entitled *The Raft*. Formally, the poem attempts a ‘translation’ of Schönberg’s twelve-tone theory of musical composition. For dodecaphony, all twelve tones of the octave (rather than the eight tones of the traditional chromatic scale) are sounded before repetition. The result is a new, democratic harmony: each tone is given equal importance, regardless of key. The task of *The Raft* is to translate (however impossibly) the twelve tones of the musical octave poetically. Interpreting tone as voice—*The Raft* serialises and permutates twelve voices or tones over twelve moments, in order to move poetry to a harmonic form that is not simply lyrical, epical, or dramatic, but *tonal*—a raft of voices, each with their own ‘pitch’, and each sounding off in accordance with the rules of twelve tone, for the duration of the work. The narrative retells the famous story of ‘The Raft of the
Medusa’, in which over one-hundred people perished off the coast of Senegal in 1816. *The Raft* begins as the unlucky ship passengers (those with little money or education) find themselves consigned to a raft built from the remains of the sinking Medusa. Their provisions are running out, and their chance of survival has just been cut.
Introduction

Yet, human, with unresting thought toxmented, turned away from these presences, from converse sought/ with deserts, flowers, stones, and trees—
Roland Robinson.¹

The work that follows seeks to raise the question: What is translation? What does it mean to claim that poetry is translation?

In order to begin responding to these questions, I turn to Les Murray’s collection, Translations from the Natural World (hereafter Translations), a text that explicitly seeks converse with nature: deserts, flowers, stones, and trees. It is a difficult book and the poet’s most experimental; and striking because in the centre of the collection, between two slim chapters on human subjects and concerns, Murray turns abruptly away from the human world in order to take up that which Walter Benjamin names ‘the task of the translator’, to give voice to the things and creatures of nature; to translate ‘from the natural world’. Each poem within the collection is presented as a translation—not of a foreign language into English, but of the foreignness of nature.

Poetry is Translation

The first claim is strange: for poetry and translation are generally understood to be two separate and distinguishable tasks. But are the two tasks so very different? Traditionally, poetry is seen as an act of originality, of making or poiesis. This originality is manifest in the poem itself, not only because the poem is original, but

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because in the poem, language is given a different arrangement, a new life. Translation is understood, however, to be a handmaid to poetry—for it attempts to render the originality of the original poem in a foreign language. And because the translation depends upon the original poem, it is seen as secondary, interpretative, inauthentic.

For Murray, however, poetry and translation are inseparable: they are as two sides of a coin, whose difference lies in perspective. The translator negotiates the differences between two languages; the poet translates the foreignness within a ‘familiar’ language. In Translations, Murray sets up two different ‘worlds’ or languages: the human world and the natural world. Poetry is not absent, but rather it is understood as an act of translation; and the title, Translations, reminds us of this truth: for it is the translator rather than the poet, who has access to the natural world; and nature, not poetry, is the original work, and the source of Murray’s translations. Thus, translation, an act that was thought to be second-hand, now shows itself to take priority over poetry.2

If we claim poetry as a form of translation, then there are consequences. Originality is no longer our primary concern. The translator does not seek ‘originality’, but follows the original poem—whether faithfully, justly, loosely or literally. So too, Murray eschews originality in order to translate nature directly—as an interpreter might—thus striving for an immediate copy of nature. But is such an act possible? What might this mean?

**The Question of Translation**

To claim that there is something unique about translating endangers our earlier claim: that poetry and translation are alike, two sides of a coin. But if poetry is a form of translation, it seems that translation had priority all along—the task of the translator, that is, the law or essence of translation, in some way constitutes the task of the poet. In order to understand what we mean by the task of the translator, we...

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2 If Murray raises translation above poetry however, then it is not to claim that translation is more original than poetry, but that poetry is always already a translation and that this truth is sorely overlooked.
need to ask the most basic questions. What is translation? What is the task of the translator? And how does this task relate to poetry?

Such questions motivate a turn to Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, through which the traditional concept of translation as a mimetic art, akin to copying, is destroyed. For Benjamin, no two languages are alike, hence translation is a performance of the real differences that exist between languages. Ironically then, languages are not related by likeness or similarity, but by a profound and incalculable difference. This chasm of difference produces a yearning in the translator, for a language of unity where all things might be resolved. This is ‘the dream of non-translation’ as John Sallis aptly calls it—the desire for a unified language in which expression and truth are as one, a language that requires no translation.

So then, the task of the translator lies in trying to overcome the differences between two languages. But such a task is impossible, designed to fail. This failure has nothing to do with the translator, but everything to do with the task. The question of the task of the translator is essential to Benjamin’s understanding of translation. The task (Aufgabe), however, is not ascribed to the translator—but to the original poem. Prior to the translator’s task lies the poem’s task; and if the poem can carry out its task, it is because it has the power of ‘translatability’ (Übersetzbarkeit). The task of the poem thus exists regardless of whether or not a translation ever occurs, or a translator ever comes along. Translatability therefore, as the task of the poem, is transcendent, goes beyond the poem—for it is the a priori law of any poem whatsoever.

Like Benjamin, Murray recognises that mimesis cannot be the model for translating the natural world. Mimesis is a fiction that claims languages are alike and can therefore correspond. Faced with translating a world that has no human language, however, it becomes impossible to maintain a truthful or like

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3 Translatability is manifest in the poem as that power or law which enables the poem to be translated. Thus, it is not visible, it does not advertise itself, or fall out of the poem like an insert from a magazine.
representation. Murray’s translations embody the failure of translation.\(^4\) By making the law of translatability his own, Murray does not seek to present nature as it is, but to translate the foreignness of nature—that which it makes it absolutely other.

**The Difference between the Human World and Nature**

Before we speak of nature, or Murray’s translations from the natural world, the poet introduces the question of the human world. *Translations* contains one foreign language translation of the German poet, F.G. Jünger, as well as seven poems which take the human world as its focus and direct study. These translations are structurally and theoretically important for the light that they shed on Murray’s translations from the natural world, and on the nature of translation itself.

Arguably, the most telling of Murray’s ‘human translations’ is his translation of Jünger’s poem, ‘Ultima Ratio’. Jünger’s original poem presents a Germany in ruins at the end of World War 2. It is not just the tragedy of ruin that Jünger lays before our eyes, in the most plain and unadorned language, but the authors of the tragedy—the Nazis, their sympathisers, and their totalising and systematic mode of domination. Jünger compares the hubris of Nazi rule to the titans of Greek mythology, whose belief in might over right, ultimately condemns them to destruction. Jünger’s poem, and Murray’s choice to translate it, cannot help but bring politics to the fore of the ‘human’ section.

Like Jünger, Murray’s translation may be read as a critique of the German fascist state and by extension, of all totalitarian systems. However, Murray’s critique is more specifically directed at the Enlightenment, an era in which, for the first time in history, the human faculty of reason is elevated and begins to supplant the dominion of a God or Gods. For Murray, the Enlightenment constitutes a darkening or pall upon humanity, and its effects continue to mark human relations, science, technology and politics. Given that Murray’s translation adds a new

\(^4\) Translation cannot repair or conceal the differences between two languages, nor can it move beyond language in order to unify difference from a higher ground. This may seem all very unfortunate for the translator—but it is not as bleak as it seems. To fail at one’s task, means that the task itself is incomplete. It is failure therefore, that allows for striving to continue; and this striving to express truth, is the translator’s unique task.
dimension to the original poem, it also raises questions as to the role of the translator in relation to the original work. Should a translation follow the original poem in a literal or more interpretive manner? Which method does a greater justice to the original poem? Such questions become particularly interesting in our interpretation of Murray as a translator.

Murray’s human translations address the shortcomings of the human world: the *ultima ratio* (final limit or cause) of reason, technology, politics and violence. These limitations appear to motivate the poet’s turn towards a world devoid of politics and speech: nature. The natural world forms a structural partition in the book, standing between the human centred poems. Symbolically, the natural world is perceived as being both open and closed to humanity: humans are a part of nature, but separated in a unique way, by language. Hence, Murray’s turn to nature as a possible world of recovery or restitution is paradoxical: for the truth of nature, its lack of speech, disappears at the very moment it is named or translated into human language. In translation, nature is fabricated at every turn; as Murray recognises when he says in another collection, ‘Nature gets around like word’. Nature therefore, is never presented as *it really is*, but as something unutterably foreign. The foreignness of nature is enacted in translation, as it is named in the murky, shape-shifting and reflective ground of human language.

*Nature is a Foreign Language: Translating the Natural World*

So then, if we accept that poetry is a form of translation, what exactly is Murray translating? We might answer: the natural world, or even ‘Presence’, a word he attaches as a supplement to the poems on nature. But whatever we answer, nature must be regarded as a foreign language. However, unlike a human language, nature is not a language that we can know, learn or access: for it does not speak in words. Thus, Murray translates nature by naming it—which is, as we shall come to see, another means of translating.

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Murray’s particular mode of translating nature, however, is not in the vein of Ted Hughes or Gary Snyder, two poets who are commonly associated with representations of the natural world in English. First, Murray does not anthropomorphise nature: animals and plants are not allegories of humans or human-centric concerns. Second, Murray gives voice to animals and plants; they appear to speak in his poems; to take the place of the poet. Third, Murray’s attunement to the otherness of nature is enacted in his native language: English is stretched and transformed to such a degree that it sounds and looks foreign to the eye. All of these strategies place the work in a different relation to nature. As a translator, Murray forgoes the traditional fiction of mimesis: he does not bend nature into English so that it seems palatable, safe or familiar. Rather, he pushes English ever further into the unknown, so that it appears foreign, and by turns, denatured.

There are forty-four translations of nature, which appear in a middle section titled, ‘Presence: Translations from the Natural World’, and these form the bulk of Murray’s collection. It may seem strange then, that scholars uniformly overlook the question of translation, preferring instead to interpret Murray’s translations as literal embodiments of ‘presence’, whose aim is to bring the essence of creatures and things to life. But such a reading does an injustice to Murray’s text. The word ‘presence’ extends and clarifies Murray’s goal as a translator, but is in no way separable from the rest of the title, nor indeed from the book’s overarching concern with translation. Presence and translation are not arbitrary terms, but raise questions on the essence of nature, poetry and translation. And as we shall see, they come to mark Murray’s particular task as a translator, whether his subject is the foreignness of nature, or the foreignness of that which we imagine is most natural and homely: human language.
Part One

The Task of the Translator

The task he undertakes is numbering sands and drinking oceans dry—Shakespeare.⁶

Chapter One

The Question of Translation

1.1 Critique of the Mimetic Theory

This foreword is my most immediate concern… But what is at issue is a subject so crucial to me that I still do not know whether I can develop it with sufficient freedom, given the current stage of my thinking and provided that I can succeed in elucidating it at all—Walter Benjamin.7

In his slim foreword, ‘The Task of the Translator’ (Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers),8 Walter Benjamin argues that translation is first and foremost a task (Aufgabe). The word Aufgabe comes from geben and means both to give and to give up (aufgeben).9 And the task of which Benjamin writes is ambiguous; it is an act of

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8 ‘The Task of the Translator’ (Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers) appears as a foreword to Benjamin’s 1923 translation of Baudelaire’s Tableaux Parisiens. I will be referencing Benjamin’s work first in English and then German, to allow for comparison between texts. English citations are from Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) and Selected Writings: Volumes 1-4, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings et al (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996). German citations are from Benjamin’s Gesammelte Schriften (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1972). Hereafter, German citations will be abbreviated as GS followed by the volume number, part of volume, and page number. English citations will be abbreviated as Illuminations, or as SW followed by the volume number.
9 This concept is reflected by the original Greek understanding of metaphor. The Greeks did not have a word for translation, but metaphor (movement and transformation) and metagraphe (transcribing) foreground the modern concept of Übersetzen (to move across, set over or beyond)
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giving and rescindment; at the moment it gives, it gives up. This sense is not shared by the English word task, which derives from the Latin taxāre: to rate, estimate, or tax. If Aufgabe is stressed it is because its contradictory nature is essential to Benjamin’s argument. Indeed despite the title of the foreword, Benjamin is not so concerned with the task of the translator, but with the translation of the task.

Benjamin’s thesis then, is that translation does not strive for meaning or communicability, nor for likeness to the original; it follows the intentio (intention) of the original, in order to find its harmony or supplement in the new language. Intentio, however, means neither the intention of the poet, nor the hidden meaning of the text: but the underlying kinship of languages. In the case of poetry, the underlying intentio is the expression of the poetic in language, or what Benjamin calls the mysterious or secretive (Geheimnisvolle). This intentio is ungraspable, and yet because it belongs to the poem, a translation must translate it to some degree. The poem’s translatability provides the conditions of the possibility—and impossibility—of translating the hidden intentio. And if we conceive of translation along with Benjamin, as a mode that is not based on likeness, or mimesis, but foreignness: the translatable is translated as untranslatable.

The foreignness of the original work therefore, cannot be concealed in the translation, but must be revealed via the Wortlichkeit (word-likeness, literalness) of the translation. Good translation proceeds literally and transparently, following the original, careful not to cover its underlying intentio. The original, however, points towards the ideal of pure language, that is, the presupposed language in which meaning and expression are as one. Accordingly, in translating the poem, the

and Translation (from the Latin translation-em: transporting, translating). However, as Benjamin reminds us, translation is not only transport but commentary or interpretation, hermeneia, the explanation, exegesis or expression of thoughts in words or music, just as it is also metalepsis, participation, sharing or having a share in something (Plato, Parmenides, 131a, trans. H.N. Fowler, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926] p. 213). Metalepsis means: that which participates through, meta, taking and receiving, lepsis from lambano, to get or to have given. So translation is getting the other insofar as the other gives itself to be gotten. Or if you will, we can translate (move from one place to another, one language to another, transcribe, and interpret) because the other gives itself to us, gives itself to be translated, because the other translates itself to us. Thanks to Andrew Haas for pointing this out. John Sallis cites Aristotle’s writing on interpretation as the historical ground for the issue of language and translation as it is taken up by philosophy. Sallis, On Translation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) pp. 48-50.
translator seeks the underlying *intentio* common to all languages, made possible by pure language. The translator cannot produce the *intentio* common to languages, but can ‘represent it in a germinal or intensive form.’¹⁰ Translation represents the unbreachable difference between real languages. And this essential difference is the possibility of all translation—for the task of the translator is both of and beyond the translation. Benjamin therefore, argues for an essential difference between poetry and translation: the original is the poem, and translation the copy—not of the poem, but of the poem’s inexpressible truth, which lives on in translation. The last paragraph of ‘The Task of the Translator’, however, attempting to demonstrate that poetry is temporally prior to translation, ends up showing just the opposite: that translation is essentially prior to poetry. Thus poetry is translation, and the task of the poet is the task of the translator.

These tasks, however, can only be understood within the context of the history of the theory of translation.

### 1.2 History of Translation: Luther, Dryden and Sidney

Yet I have not just gone ahead, ignoring the exact wording in the original. Instead, with great care, I have, along with my helpers, gone ahead and have kept literally to the original, without the slightest deviation, wherever it appeared that a passage was crucial—*Martin Luther.*¹¹

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¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 72 (GS 4.1, p. 12); *translation modified.*

The political and ethical questions raised by Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible into German continue today, with varying emphases. Translation is a volatile act, especially when the original work is ‘inn Gottes worten’. The interpretation of God’s words is considered heretical, and Luther writes an open letter from his hiding spot in the wilderness (ex eremo) against claims that he falsified and modified the original Hebrew, Latin and Greek; not only putting words into the mouths of Christ, Judas, Magdalene, the angel Gabriel, but altering the third chapter of Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Luther stages a vehement defence, claiming that his additions and alterations are necessary where: ‘the literal Latin is a great obstacle to speaking good German.’ For Luther, speaking good German is the most important aspect of translation, and the German language is best served through interpretation, and not strict literality. It is no accident that Luther refers to the act of translation using the words dolmetschen (to interpret) and verdeutschen (to Germanise). The Germanisation of the Bible is Luther’s goal, or at least his justification—for in the act of Germanising the Bible, Luther also Germanises

12 *In God’s words.*
15 The verbs dolmetschen and verdeutschen are no longer commonly used with respect to textual translation. Dolmetschen however, specifically refers to live, simultaneous translation, or the act of interpretation in general. The modern term for translation is übersetzen (to translate, or carry over). Luther’s use of the terms dolmetschen, to interpret, and verdeutschen, to clarify, but also to Germanise, reveal the political underpinnings of any translation. In addition to ‘moving’ and ‘transforming’ the original work, translation moves and transforms aspects of a nation’s culture and identity, too. When Luther translates the bible, he also translates the Germans—hence, at the moment he decrees a passage is ‘not essential’, he translates more freely, in order to make the bible more German, or at least, more appealing to the German ear.
Christendom. Thus, the translator’s question (How literally or loosely should one proceed?) has political, cultural and historical ramifications.

Luther is not the first translator to address the question of literality, nor is he the first to outline a justification for a mimetic form of translation, where the meaning of the original text is interpreted by the translator, and carried over, without doing great violence to the translator's language (but only to the original text). John Dryden’s 1680 preface to his translation of Ovid’s *Epistles*, presents this classical, mimetic view of translation, but romanticises its task: translation doesn’t merely convey the original’s ‘meaning’ or ‘intention’, but its ‘spirit’. The difference of languages is regarded as a purely technical issue, although overcome to some degree by the harmony of the translation, that is, how well it Germanises, Anglicises or Frenchifies the original by removing foreignness. Thus, the real conflict of translation is not ultimately linguistic, but ethical. Can a translator be just to the original text? And through a literal or freer translation?

Dryden offers the figure of the painter by way of comparison. The painter must faithfully reproduce the scene before him as it is shown in nature. Flaws in the original must appear in the painting. Faithfulness is so important to painting that Dryden calls it the painter’s ‘business’. But what of the translator, when such faithful rendering of an original poem produces only gibberish? Dryden does not entirely excuse translation from the rigours of faithfulness, but he does amend its boundaries. Faithfulness in translation does not mean an attitude of copying or paraphrasing, but of capturing the ‘spirit which animates the whole.’ Faithfulness is loose in form, but exacting in spirit; it is upheld in all but two cases: ‘if the thought be notoriously trivial or dishonest.’ If the translator judges a work in this light, the solution is not faithful inclusion, like the painter’s copying of a disfigured nose, but the freedom to exclude them. Dishonest or trivial thoughts should simply disappear.

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16 Luther’s translation of the bible is for a Christian audience—not a Godless or heathen one. Not only is the New Testament the primary frame; but Luther expresses to his (German readers) the hope that his translation leads ‘to the improvement and increase of our common (gemeiner) Christendom.’ See Luther, ‘An Open Letter on Translating’ (1530).

As Dryden instructs, ‘they ought not to be translated.’\(^{18}\) Dryden’s business of faithful translation becomes a most unfaithful kind.\(^{19}\)

Although the tradition holds that the translator’s business is faithfulness, this faithfulness is already twice-removed: the translator’s source is not nature, but an original poem. And the original poem takes nature as its source. As Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* (Defence of Poesy) writes:\(^{20}\) ‘There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of Nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend.’\(^{21}\) While the tradition argues that nature forms the basis of art, Sidney argues that poetry is distinct from the other arts in its mode of creation, and so it maintains a special relation to nature. Music, painting, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and philosophy may describe nature, but poetry ‘goeth hand in hand with Nature’, and the poet makes something new, something of another nature.\(^{22}\) For Sidney, making something new describes a mode of freedom which is not bound by nature or her terrain, but resides within the poet ‘freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.’\(^{23}\) Thus, the business of the translator cannot be to follow nature’s course, but the altered course of the poem.

Nevertheless, the translation is always unjust to the original work. For this reason, Dryden argues against three standard approaches to translation. Translation by metaphrase, where the original is faithfully translated word-by-word, is in danger of producing nothing sensible at all, and thus remains essentially unfaithful. Translation by way of paraphrase, admits a greater licence in expression, in order to follow the author’s sense. Yet, who could know the sense of an author? Translation

\(^{18}\) *ibid.* p. 21.

\(^{19}\) If the translator is both judge and jury, then considerations of faithfulness and freedom are arbitrary and subjective. This poses obvious ethical problems with respect to translation.

\(^{20}\) This is a tradition that can be traced back to the Greeks. Nature is an end, for Aristotle, it is ‘that for the sake of which’ (something occurs). Art makes use of nature in two ways: first, by *making* or using material from nature, and second, by *directing* the use of this material. Aristotle, *Physics*, II.2 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941) p. 194 b.


\(^{23}\) *idem.*
by imitation, where the translator employs the greatest liberty of all, in order to
write as the author might write in the new language, is as extreme as the first—for
‘he who is inquisitive to know an author’s thoughts will be disappointed in his
expectation; and tis not always that a man will be contented to have a present made
him, when he expects the payment of a debt.’24

Dryden argues instead, that justice can only be guaranteed by the
virtuousness of the translator. In order to be virtuous, the translator must be in
possession of an innate suitability to the task. The translator must be a master of
other languages and his own mother tongue, and must have sufficient talent to
‘perfectly comprehend’ the genius of the author. If only a genius can comprehend
genius, this narrows the field considerably. Dryden’s essay is intended to be read by
‘a man justly qualified for a translator’, who will do his duty to the spirit of the
original work. The translator’s perfect comprehension of the poetic genius of the
original should ensure that he proceeds justly. Above all, the translator must write,
‘as justly and with as much life, as if he wrote an original.’25 It is only through
writing as the poet, that the translator can engender the spirit of the original in the
translation. Justice is not served by weighing a translation’s literality or freedom
with respect to the original work, but rather by the suitability of the translator to
the task. Thus the virtuous translator writes in the place of the poet; not copying
the original poem but undertaking the translation, ‘as if he wrote an original.’26

Yet the pursuit of justice risks doing a greater injustice—for once the
foreignness of the original language is covered over, anything is possible.27

Questions of cultural theft and omission continue to plague poets and translators;

25 *ibid.* p. 31.
26 *idem.*
27 As Nietzsche insists: in translating the Greek poets, the Romans ‘violently’ and ‘naively’ omit
original references to place names and personal symbols, as if history was anathema to Roman
conquest. He writes: ‘One conquered then, when one translated,—not only insofar as one leaves out
the historical: no, one adds to this the allusion to the present, one strikes out, above all, the name of
the poet and puts one’s own in its place—not in the sense of theft, but with the very best conscience
for all translation involves some degree of theft. Traditionally, the original work is separated from the translation, and the writer from the translator. The original has priority, if only because it is the model for the translation. However, original priority fades as soon as the translation is complete—because once the spirit of the work has been copied, counterfeited or cited, there is no need for the original anymore. But the original cannot disappear: after all, it is the origin of translation. Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’ responds directly to these question: What is the original? How is translatability, not the translator, the origin of translation?
Chapter Two

The Question of the Original

2.1 The Aura of Translatability

The condition of true naming, on the poet’s part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms—Ralph Waldo Emerson.28

An original work, a poem for example, carries the possibility of its translation, regardless of whether the poem is translated or not. This possibility is the poem’s ‘translatability’. Translatability does not mean the poem’s ability to communicate to an audience—for poems are not composed for an audience or receiver, but rather refer to ‘the poetic’ that transcends them, the mysterious secret of the unfathomable.29 Thus translatability is the condition of the possibility of the originality of the poem.

How then can a poem’s translatability be determined? Is translatability dependant on an ideal translator or reader? Does the essence or nature of the poem lend itself to translation, does the nature of the poem demand it? For Benjamin, the existence of an ideal translator is possible, but not necessary. A translator may or

29 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 70 (GS 4.1, p. 9). For a further discussion of the structure of the poetic, see Benjamin’s essay, ‘Two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’, SW v. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Stanley Corngold, pp. 18-36 (Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin, GS 2.1, pp. 105-126). Although translatability is manifest within the poem itself, it also exceeds the poem, as the poem’s original law. In other words, translatability is prior to poetry. And furthermore, Andrew Benjamin points out, translatability is ‘not just the ‘essential condition’ of certain works, it is the infinite of language: the linguistic absolute.’ Andrew Benjamin, ‘The Absolute as Translatability’, Walter Benjamin and Romanticism, ed. Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2002) p. 120.
may not be found, now, in the future, or not at all. The question of the translator is empirical, historical, not essential. Further, if a poem’s translatability is inscribed in the original poem, it cannot depend on the presence of a translator or reader: the translatability of certain linguistic works ‘ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them.’ So does the nature or essence of a poem demand translation?

In fact, for Benjamin, a poem’s translation is demanded by the poetic therein. Benjamin calls this the poem’s aura. And this is not a material presence; it cannot be seen or grasped or known, but is that which makes the work unique, and uniquely itself in time. The aura is the originality of the original. And while Benjamin uses the concept of the aura with respect to works of art (paintings, sculptures, frescos), it also holds for poetry—for the poetic is the aura of poetry. And the aura is that which allows the original to be reproduced; for it shows the uniqueness of the work of art, and serves as the condition of the possibility of its ‘presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.’ For ‘the presence of the original is a prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.’ Thus the onset of mechanical reproduction threatens the idea of the original by removing the significance of the aura, by seeking to erase that which is essential to the original work: the aura of its origin, or history.

The poem’s aura, however, its translatability, the original poetic, is not threatened by translation—for translation does not mechanically reproduce a poem.

31 Benjamin outlines his concept of the aura in relation to the art work. However, the concept of the aura is equally applicable to poetry, and indeed, to all works bestowed with originality and authenticity. Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Illuminations, pp. 217-251 (‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’, GS 1.2, pp. 471-508).
32 ibid. p. 220 (GS 1.2, pp. 475-76). The work of art is historical. The life of the work is subject to continual transformation: material weathering, changes in ownership, multiple interpretations and critiques over time. Such transformations (inherent in the original work) are testament to the greater life of history.
33 idem.
34 Mechanical reproduction threatens the ‘originality’ of the art work, based as it is on resemblance. Translation however, does not threaten the poem’s originality but rather magnifies it. In other words, translation is not reproductive—because no language is alike—but transformative, revitalising. Thus, the art of the translator is original.
On the contrary, the unassimilable foreignness of every poem’s language in relation to pure language, means that translatability is beyond all reproduction. This relation of language to pure language, gives the poem its aura of translatability and originality: it is the poetized of the poem, its inner task. But this is not paradoxical—for the poem is a translation or de-familiarisation of familiar language, and to this extent is always already translated.

The traditional relation of original to copy therefore, and the understanding of translation as a utilitarian mode of communication, no longer functions. First, once translation cannot reproduce meaning or sense, and thus cannot reproduce the original at all, except as another original work, the division of original and copy does not hold. Second, mimetic translation is utilitarian, communicating the original work to a reader; but translation communicates no more than the original, and the original itself does not communicate meaning. Indeed a clearly transmittable meaning is anathema to the sense and essence of poetry and language. If the original poem does not communicate to an audience, the translation cannot either. Thus the primary assumption of the mimetic tradition (translation communicates an originally reproducible meaning), cannot take account of the poem’s aura, its original poetic and translatability.

35 In an earlier essay, ‘Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’, Benjamin outlines his concept of the poetic task (die dichterische Aufgabe). The poetic task is that kernel within the poem that expresses life. This intensive expression of life (the absolute) is not confined to poetry, but is the beginning of translation too: for the poetic task is manifest as law of translatability. And this law is derived from the poem. So then, the poetic task is double: it gives poetry and translation. Or, it is singular: poetry is translation. Benjamin, SW v.1, pp. 18-36 (‘Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin’, GS 2.1, pp. 105-126).

36 The mimetic tradition of translation conceives of a difference between the original and copy. According to this theory, words act as external signs, assigned to carry or transport the truth of the mind’s ideas. These ideas, or truths, can find corresponding words or signs in other languages. See Sallis’s account of the classical idea of translation (Cicero to John Locke) which holds that thoughts can be transmitted (intact) from one language to another. Sallis, On Translation (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002) pp. 63-71.
Chapter Three

The Question of History

3.1 Life and Survival of the Poem

Benjamin responds to the failure of the mimetic tradition of translation with the concepts of ‘life and survival’. These terms, however, cannot be understood as natural or biological. Rather, the translation issues from the life (Leben) of the original work, as its survival (Überleben). Survival is merely a different form of life, and life is historical. Benjamin writes:

In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The Philosopher’s task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history.

So then, history is no longer an effect of nature, but that through which we translate natural life—for ‘history is more primordial than nature.’ And life means

37 Überleben is commonly translated as afterlife, but this is misleading. Überleben does not only mean life after death (which is more precisely expressed by Nachleben) but literally, ‘over life’, a life that outlives or outlasts, and also, a life that continues life. This idea is better expressed by the word survival. The translation survives the life of the original work, but remains indebted to it for surviving at all. Überleben is both in debt to life, and a higher form of life—for it is the Nachleben of translation that briefly sets the original in a higher, purer air. See Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 71 (GS 4.1, p. 10). Benjamin’s distinctions of life: Überleben, Fortleben, Nachleben and Leben, all impart degrees of temporality that inform Benjamin’s notion of history. See Derrida’s, The Ear of the Other, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) p. 122. For an account of Benjamin’s idea of history and its relation to the philosophical concept of origin, see Beatrice Hanssen’s, ‘Philosophy at Its Origin: Walter Benjamin’s Prologue to the Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels,’ MLN, vol. 110, no. 4, September, 1995, pp. 809-833.


anything that has a history of its own; and any work credited with life cannot help but recall the greater life of history. This is the objective, non-human history of concepts, relations, ideas. Our human relation to this history is secondary; we follow as translators, and submit to its only law: to translate. In this sense, life is translation, and history is the history of translations.

A poem then has life because it has a history. A translation is derivative and remains indebted to the poem for its life. Translation, however, is not merely parasitic—for it brings the original into a different light. This makes the act of translation akin to a kind of highlighting, or re-framing, placing the poem into a higher realm—that is why Benjamin accords the act of translation with a special high purposiveness. In translation, life shows itself as displaced and strange. But here, it is also elevated, survive, above life. Translation is the raising of the poem’s life into a higher sphere, just as certain saints were thought to be ‘translated’ to the heavens, without suffering human death. As the translation ‘elevates’ the poem, it too is elevated: for in that moment of survival, the translation becomes the poem’s ‘latest and most complete unfolding.’ Thus, in translation life appears a) as

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40 As Paul de Man argues: ‘The translation canonises, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice’. Even further: translation has a de-canonising effect upon the original work: for it is through the motion of translation that ‘kills the original’, that one realizes that the original was ‘disarticulated’ and ‘dead’ all along. See de Man’s lecture, ‘Task of the Translator’, The Resistance to Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) pp. 82-84. For Benjamin, following Kant, life is characterised by purposiveness (Zweckmaßigkeit). Kant argues that purpose (Zweck) is the concept of a thing (that which is the ground or condition of its possibility) and purposiveness is the causality or measure (Maß) of the thing’s purpose, its forma finalis. For Benjamin, however, purposiveness means both the ultimate ground of the concept, and the striving towards this ultimate ground. See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951) pp. 54-56. For an interpretation of Kant’s third critique, see Rodolphe Gasché, The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Additionally, Gilles Deleuze provides a very clear synthesis of Kant’s transcendental method in his book, Kant’s Critical Philosophy, trans. Hugh Temlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984).

41 Life is not itself, it is translation. Survival can only reveal different qualities of life, if life has already revealed (in its law of translatability) infinite possibilities of survival.

42 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 72 (GS 4.1, p. 11); translation modified. Successive translations of a poem, however, attest to the irreplaceability of the original; to its ongoing survival throughout history. The history of a poem’s translations endow the poem with a ring of fame. But, as Benjamin points out, this process is not without irony: for the original work appears more original in translation. It is not for nothing that Benjamin raises the question of irony and translation, before reminding us of the Romanticists: ‘It is not for nothing that the word “ironic” here brings the Romanticists to mind. They, more then any others, possessed an insight into the life
survival—for it is no longer ‘life’, but another life—and b) as life—for it is no longer ‘life’ but another life, and therefore, original.43

3.2 Pure Language: Transformation and Renewal of the Poem

If a translation, however, shows itself as life and survival of the original poem, it is just as much because it enacts a renewal of the original language of the poem, a transformation and extension of the translator’s mother tongue. Benjamin therefore accords translation with a ‘special mission of watching-over the after-development of the original language and the suffering of its own.’44 The suffering is ‘specifically linguistic’—and although it suggests an organic or emotive state, it is not simply a function of humanity; rather the original language suffers in its continuing after-development, in its survival.45 But if linguistic suffering can show itself in of literary works which has its highest testimony (höchste Bezeugung) in translation. To be sure, they hardly recognised translation in this sense, but devoted their entire attention to criticism, another, if a lesser, factor in the continued life of literary works’ (pp. 75–76). As the Romanticists know, the value of a work’s life is ennobled and increased through commentary, critique and interpretation. All of these labours contribute to the work’s survival and fame. However, the role of translation is unique: it is critical and original. The translation does not merely confer fame or originality upon the original work; but upon itself as well. And Benjamin continues: ‘Translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering (p. 75).’ Ironically, once translation is itself ‘original’, how can we be sure that translation is not poetry? Or that poetry is not translation? We cannot be sure, and Benjamin introduces a more complicated origin of them both: the concept of translatability, or the task. Translatability serves as the condition of the possibility of human ‘creation’: that is, creation is translation. I don’t think that this is in conflict with Benjamin’s final conclusions. Benjamin frames literary criticism and translation through the lens of irony, and one wonders to what extent irony comes to mark his own text. For an incisive explication of German Romanticism and its structural underpinnings in Benjamin’s work, see Rodolphe Gasché’s ‘The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics’, Walter Benjamin and Romanticism, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2002) pp. 51–68.

43 For Benjamin, the originality of the translation is vitally connected to the poem. Translation is both: originally sovereign (it brings the poem into a new, more authentic realm) and originally enslaved (it is indebted to the poem for life).

44 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 73 (GS 4.1, p. 13); translation modified.

45 In Benjamin, Derrida reads an economy of unceasing debt. He translates the task (la tâche, die Aufgabe) as ‘a mission to which one is destined (always by the other): an engagement, duty, debt, responsibility.’ The debt cannot be given up, indeed, it is a kind of inheritance with which the translator is entrusted, in order to ensure the survival of the original. See Derrida, ‘Des tours de Babel’, Difference in Translation, trans. & ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) pp. 165-207 (bilingual edition). In addition to the idea of debt, de Man notes that, at certain
translation, it is because the original language already suffers from being foreign to itself, both in its lack of communicable ‘meaning’ and its incompleteness. And the translator’s language suffers too: it too becomes foreign to itself, pushed and extended to accommodate the original, and to further in its role the survival of the original work. Thus, linguistic suffering is historical: as when the poem’s original freshness becomes clichéd, or certain expressions sound arch or fall into disuse; and the suffering of translation is the revelation of the linguistic ideal.

Benjamin’s example is helpful: Brot and pain. While the two words mean the same thing (bread), point to the same intentional object, their sense is quite different to the German and the French speaker; the words are not interchangeable—for their expressive mode (language) is in constant flux. Language thus expresses a will, a vouloir-dire, but not meaning itself. Meaning itself (the indivisible and un-mediated unity of intention and intentional object) is suspended until ‘it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all the various modes of intention.’46 This is the unfulfilled and unfillable promise of each and every translation: that all languages might yet converge despite their essential foreignness to one another—for pure language is the totality to which all languages strive, the unity of pure intentional words and their pure intentional objects, the underlying intentional relationship between languages that cannot be realised through a single language, but only as the totality of all intentions.47 As such, pure language is the condition of the possibility of any language whatsoever; and translation, although it strives to unfold the original poem in a new language, unfolds the intentional relationship connecting them, carries with it a promise of the fulfillment of all linguistic intentions in pure language.48

47 The concept of reine Sprache (pure language) describes the unmediated flow of meaning and expression, to which all languages strive. Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 74 (GS 4.1, p. 14).
48 This promise remains promissory, outstanding, a debt to be paid. But because it promises unification, translation struggles with the absolute foreignness of languages, the impasse between
Underlying kinship of languages makes translation possible, the intention of all languages—pure language—remains an impossible ideal. And the attainment of pure language in translation (or original) would annihilate all languages, all poetry, all translation.

Nevertheless, pure language has its correlative in pure poetry, the pure poetized, the absolute of poetry. The pure poetized, however, is not a real poem; it is ideal, a limit concept: ‘The disclosure of the pure poetized, the absolute task, must remain—after all that has been said—a purely methodological, ideal goal. The pure poetized would otherwise cease to be a limit concept: it would be life or the poem.’ And translation too, then, has its limit concept—for in relation to language, poetry and translation share an ideal goal, ‘the absolute task’. In the case of poetry, the pure poetized allows for the possibility of language; in the case of translation, pure language allows for the possibility of languages. The ideal of pure language is only possible on account of the irresolvable différence that lies between real languages. The translation must suppress this difference as it strives to express the underlying unity. Despite the intentions of the best translator, however, no translation could eradicate this difference, nor the difference of differences—for it gives translation its charge: to unify.

How does translation come to terms with fracture, with the difference of languages? On the one hand, coming to terms with difference (insofar as it is...
absolute *foreignness*) is only ever provisional. A final end or solution to difference is not just beyond human reach; it is impossible—for the unification of differences is their annihilation. On the other hand, translation must have this final end in sight: ‘the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages.’ For Benjamin therefore, this end cannot be realised *mit Stumpf und Stiel*—if at all—and translation enacts the impossibility of the fulfilment of languages.

3.3 True Language and The Language of Truth

Difference then, not unification, is the truth of language. And insofar as it is the language of difference, this truth is supposed to be found in pure language. In other words, pure language is the language of truth. And Benjamin insists that this truth of language remains intensively concealed—in translation as in the original poem. Nevertheless, pure language as the language of truth makes the case for translation stronger than before, perhaps even stronger than poetry. Real languages are not arbitrary; their differences are irresolvable. And the truth of poetry is original

53 *idem*. In English, the expression is *root and branch* (a phrase which implies extirpation, a complete wiping out of the possibility of ever translating the end of translatability). Translation strives to express the poem’s non-communicable language—its *imminent tendencies*, for here is the manifestation of the ultimate realm, which can only be revealed as concealed, as *already translated*. Translation strives to express the poem’s non-communicable language—its *imminent tendencies*, for here is the manifestation of the ultimate realm, which can only be revealed as concealed, as *already translated*. Benjamin’s use of the phrase, ‘intensively concealed (intensive... verborgen)’, relates to Kant’s idea of the schematism of the understanding as, ‘an art concealed (eine verborgene Kunst) in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have to open our gaze.’ See Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965) b 181, p. 183 (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymond Schmidt [Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1990] p. 200). But what is true language? Benjamin introduces the discussion with a suggestion of disbelief or unknowability: ‘If there is such a thing.’ (p. 77) If there is such a thing, although this is far from proven, then the language of truth is the harmonic reconciliation of all thought. It is the ultimate truth and: ‘the only perfection a philosopher can hope for.’ (*idem*). Thus philosophy, like translation, craves the language of truth—a truth that reveals itself in translation *qua* concealed—for philosophy too, seeks truth amidst the imperfection of languages, but does so in the silence of thought. Here, it is tempting to think of translation as the ‘muse’ of philosophy. But what is the muse of translation? Truth? (Or irony)?
inspiration (so it is no wonder that the muses are appropriated to poetry alone).\textsuperscript{55} Translation, however, more than any other mode, reveals this truth. In this way, the truth of translation is truer than the original—for it brings the original differences of the plurality of languages into \textit{unconcealment}.\textsuperscript{56}

As the bearer of true language, translation enacts the original tower of Babel: both in its demonstration of the foreignness of languages, and its appeal to the one true language. Benjamin quotes Mallarmé: ‘\textit{les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l’immortelle parole}.\textsuperscript{57} In other words, the fulfilment of languages is impossible, and the task of translation has no end.\textsuperscript{58} Regardless of whether this or that language is spoken or not spoken, thought or whispered, the immortal world remains silent. The supreme language is

\textsuperscript{55} ‘There is no muse of philosophy, nor is there one of translation.’ Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 77 (\textit{GS 4.1}, p. 16).

\textsuperscript{56} Here, Benjamin is close to Heidegger, whose concept of truth is manifest in language as that which cannot be revealed, except in its unconcealment. Heidegger writes: ‘In its essence language is not the utterance of an organism; nor is it the expression of a living thing. Nor can it ever be thought in an essentially correct way in terms of its symbolic character, perhaps not even in terms of the character of signification. Language is the lighting-concealing advent of being itself.’ Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, \textit{Basic Writings}, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) p. 206 (‘Brief über den Humanismus’, \textit{Wegmarken}, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976).

\textsuperscript{57} ‘The imperfection of languages consists in their plurality, the supreme one is lacking: thinking is writing without accessories or even whispering, the immortal world still remains silent.’ Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 77 (\textit{GS 4.1}, p. 17).

\textsuperscript{58} Mallarmé’s quote is the first foreign interruption of Benjamin’s text; and the first that requires ‘translation’. In addition, it is the first quote from another source (there are only three), and so it appears that the poet is the first foreigner to speak, and this poetic beginning—poetry is already shown to be foreign—demands a careful interpretation. Benjamin’s text is not, as some critics suppose, a purely theological act that seeks the literal reconciliation of languages; nor is the text, as Carol Jacobs proposes, a ‘literal translation’ of the opening words of the Gospel according to John. Such an argument topples at the moment Benjamin \textit{translates} anything other than the opening line of the Gospel of John. Although Jacobs provides a fascinating argument, it is hard to imagine that Benjamin would choose \textit{The New Testament} as the prototype of translation, unless in jest. Furthermore, Jacobs cites Luther’s translation of the Gospel of John in order to make her point. But this itself is strange, and a mistranslation—for Benjamin makes no mention of Luther’s version, and cites only the original Greek. Nevertheless, Jacobs rightly concludes that Benjamin demonstrates the \textit{monstrosity} of literal translation, and that: ‘[t]his is the final irony.’ See Carol Jacobs, ‘The Monstrosity of Translation’, \textit{MLN}, 90 (1975), pp. 755–766. Mallarmé’s quote introduces the idea of foreignness or strangeness—which Jacobs names ‘monstrosity’—and this otherness or monstrosity must also extend to the limit of translation: the Holy text. On the one hand, the holy text is not monstrous—it is ‘real’—and understood as the name that we give to the bible. On the other hand, the Holy text is ‘monstrous’ and ‘unreal’—for it is not the literal word of God, but a translation, and thus, full of holes: for as Mallarme reminds us, \textit{the immortal world remains silent}. 

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unspeakable and unthinkable because it is lacking, silent. But the quote does something more: it illustrates the very task of the translator, that striving towards an unfulfillable goal of true language, the language of truth that it cannot know, that remains hidden—for the concealment of truth is the truth, even the truth of truth’s concealment can only be revealed as its essential un-revealment. All acts engaged in writing or thinking remain bound to this truth of revealing/concealing, just as the Gebrochenheit that marks the foreignness of languages in translation is equally present in the original poem, and in language itself.\textsuperscript{59} Thus translation is the higher task, ‘midway between poetry and doctrine’—and whereas translation translates the differences between languages, poetry translates the differences within language.\textsuperscript{60}

3.4 \textit{Freedom, Fidelity and Literality}

In fact, the differences within language demand a completely different approach to translation: for Benjamin, faithfulness does not mean the reproduction of sense, but being true to pure language. It is for the sake of pure language that the translator ‘breaks through decayed barriers of his own language.’\textsuperscript{61} Faithful translation, through the frame of the original, conveys the harmonic relation of each language to pure language. Pure language ‘demands’ a literal approach to translation, where ‘sense is touched by language only the way an Aeolian harp is touched by the

\textsuperscript{59} The foreignness that mars language, comes from language itself, from words themselves. Words for instance, may be similar to other words (word, ward, wood, worm), but this likeness comes at a cost—for no word is like itself. Werner Hamacher argues that this gap or dissemblance in language, where ‘the medium of likeness, is the absolute unlike’, is a repeating concern throughout Benjamin’s work. See Hamacher, ‘\textit{The Word Wolke—If it is One},’ \textit{Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin}, ed. Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1988) p. 166.

\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, the translator’s task is so great, that it could never be fulfilled: ‘the problem of ripening the seed of pure language in a translation seems to be insoluble, determinable in no solution.’ Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 77 (\textit{GS 4.1}, p. 17). And although it is not clear how far translation bends toward poetry, or doctrine, it surely bends toward an impenetrable abyss. Because true language is indeterminable, the way in which the translator goes about translating the truth of difference is of great concern.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.} p. 80 (\textit{GS 4.1}, p. 19).
wind. Faithful reproduction of meaning alone cannot be a criterion for translation—for language communicates itself. Benjamin writes:

The answer to the question “What does language communicate?” is therefore “All language communicates itself.” The language of this lamp, for example communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language.

The words of a particular language in which the poet finds him or herself communicate themselves; and they form the communicability of the poem. In this way, language has a way of speaking itself, through and beyond the poet.

It is no wonder then, that a too-faithful or literal rendering of the original produces incomprehensibility, which in turn demolishes the semblance of a unified or seamless whole. A less-faithful but freer translation, one that Benjamin attributes to ‘the unrestrained licence of bad translators’, is no less problematic. Unlicensed translation serves meaning better, but language and poetry far worse. Instead, Benjamin argues that faithfulness in translation is like following the shards of a broken vessel, in their smallest details, one after another, in order to assemble the pieces together—not so that the shards match each other, but so that they give the sense of the original vessel itself, a (broken) unity of fragments. In this way, the translation does not resemble the original work, but faithfully follows the original’s (broken) form, its every word, thus making both the original and the translation

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62 ibid. p. 81 (p. 21).


recognisable as broken shards of a ‘greater language’. Following the original’s form, the poem’s underlying intention, its relation to pure language, is conveyed. Translation finds their harmony or supplement in the new language; although ‘harmony’ is not harmonic—but a supplement, or a semblance of harmony—for like the repaired vessel, the translation is made of shards. Any translation that conceals the brokenness of languages does violence to pure language. And Benjamin argues that translation must not take over from the original; on the contrary, it must appear in order to disappear: ‘true translation is transparent: it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language…to shine upon the original all the more fully.’ The transparency or see-through-ability of translation is achieved by a literal rendering of the syntax of the original, which proves words and not sentences to be the true element of translation. And Benjamin quotes the opening of the Gospel of John from the New Testament: *en archē hēn ho logos*.

So then, faithfulness in translation is not a pleasing reproduction of the original: it is the literal expression of difference—language in shards. But what of the other side of the traditional conflict? Freedom in translation favours a looser, more light-handed approach to the original work; one in which the rendering of meaning and sense is less important than the translator’s interpretation. The

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66 idem.
67 *ibid.* p. 79 (*GS 4.1*, p. 18); translation modified.
68 *In the beginning was the word.* This ‘beginning’ echoes two different creation stories in Genesis. The first is given in the opening lines (*Genesis 1:1*): ‘Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve’et ha’aretz (In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth).’ In the second account, God creates mankind, from the cover of a great mist: ‘And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’ (*Genesis* 2:4). The first account of Genesis does not begin with logos, but the divine act of creation (what Benjamin calls the creative word (schöpferisches Wort). The second account of Genesis tells of the creation and ensouling of mankind—in which God gives language to man, as ‘living breath’. Benjamin chooses to quote however, not from Genesis, but from the New Testament, in Greek—thus demonstrating that the word (logos) is the beginning of translation, that is, the human task of naming. And every translation carries with it an echo of the divine gift of language, for this is the survival of the creative word. The quote of the Gospel according to John appears in Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’, *Illuminations*, p. 79 (*GS 4.1*, p. 18). For Benjamin’s concept of the original gift of language and its relation to Genesis 2:4, see his essay, ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man’, *SW v.1*, pp. 62–74 (*GS 2.1*, pp. 140–157). For a further analysis of Benjamin’s concept of God’s gift of language and one’s duty-bound human response (through naming), see Beatrice Hanssen’s, ‘Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s work’, *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 54–72.
freedom to be faithful to the original work therefore, is the freedom to be unfaithful. In this model, the translator eschews the words of the original poem, for the translator becomes the poet; and not only understands the meaning of the poem, but its ideal translation. Thus the freer translation does not supplement the original work; it seeks to overtake it, to take away the poem’s life.

For Benjamin, however, this idea of freedom is misplaced. Freedom has almost nothing to do with the translator: it does not mean individual freedom or choice, as in the freedom to be unjust to the original. Rather freedom means the capacity or power to release pure language which is ‘under the spell of another.’69 This capacity to release pure language, from its imprisonment in the original poem is the ultimate act of freedom. It is akin to a jail-break, except pure language is not escorted to freedom, but to a new prison—the translator’s mother tongue. Thus the condition of the possibility of freedom is imprisonment, and like a genie in a bottle, the harmony of pure language is always imprisoned within one language or another.

Freedom in translation therefore, liberating pure language, forces a shift in the translator’s mother-tongue. The translator’s own language must speak differently, as if the harmony of pure language were a stone in its throat. As a result, translation forges a series of unexpected pathways and extensions in response to the original. Assuming the foreignness of the original language, translation grows more faithful to the original work, and more able to free the harmony of pure language, allowing it to ‘shine through’. Thus the task of the translator is to foreignise one’s language, and thereby to capture a fully formed pure language out of this ‘linguistic flux’.70

Traditionally, the foreignising of one’s own tongue is avoided, and this is the mistake of translation. Benjamin quotes Pannwitz:

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70 idem.
Our translators, even the very best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.\textsuperscript{71}

The translator’s task then, is to allow for the original’s foreignness, to show its broken shards. For Benjamin, the language of translation ‘must let itself go’, so that the original work may survive.\textsuperscript{72} But how can the translator be certain that his own language becomes other? Pannwitz is as unsure about a measure of foreignness, as he is about the way in which languages or dialects differ. However, he does regard such differences as true, ‘only when one takes language seriously enough’.\textsuperscript{73} But seriousness is not a measure of truth—for seriousness could equally be irony’s façade. And rather than follow Pannwitz’s measure of earnestness, Benjamin names an altogether different measure: translatability.

For the ‘Task of the Translator’, translatability is the measure of truth—both the truth of language, and the degree to which the original work may be translated: ‘The lower the quality and distinction of [the work’s] language, the more it is information, the lesser the translation that may be attained....The higher the level

\textsuperscript{71} idem. (GS 4.1, p. 20).

\textsuperscript{72} ibid. p. 79 (p. 18). The idea of foreignness that Benjamin gleans from Pannwitz is extremely important, and not just politically, but also theologicially. Benjamin argues against mimetic translation—for words cannot be made alike (there is no iconic representation of God), and, against Luther, the task of the translator is not verduetschen (to Germanise), but verfremden (to foreignise, or to alienate). Benjamin’s interest in the foreign is noted by Theodor Adorno in his introduction to Benjamin’s writings: ‘He (Benjamin) preferred to incorporate thought that was foreign and dangerous to him as a sort of inoculation rather than entrust himself to some look-alike in which he, incorruptible, discerned complicity with the extant and official even when one behaved as if day were just breaking and one were starting anew.’ See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Introduction to Benjamin’s Schriften’, On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections, ed. Gary Smith, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) p. 7 (Adorno’s introduction appeared in Schriften, ed. Theodor Adorno and Gretel Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955).

\textsuperscript{73} Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 81 (GS 4.1, p. 20); translation modified.
of a work, the more it remains translatable even if its sense is touched upon only fleetingly.\(^{74}\) The original poem’s translatability is the measure of its poetic truth, and this means not how it conveys meaning or sense, but its revelation of ‘the expressionless and creative word.’\(^{75}\) In order to judge the worth and dignity of a poem’s expression; its poetic use of language, one must assume that the poem’s ‘use of language’ does not mean *it is useful*, but that it communicates its lack of meaning—its pure expressionlessness. In the poem, this is demonstrated by the particularity of the original language: which is so ingrained and weathered by its own history and evolution, that it seems (from the outside), untranslatable, ungraspable, and the poem itself could not have been written in any other language. This is what Dryden calls the idiosyncrasy of language: ‘[E]very language has propriety and idiom peculiar to itself, which cannot be conveyed to another without perpetual absurdities.’\(^{76}\) Thus, each language is absolutely singular and for this reason, the measure of translatability applies to original works only—translations are untranslatable.\(^{77}\)

The concept of untranslatability is demonstrated by Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles’ tragedies. Hölderlin attempts to harmonise Greek and German, but the attempt at unification is so literal that ‘meaning plunges from abyss to abyss till it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.’\(^{78}\) This is the threat to every literal translation, that it leans so far towards the original’s foreignness, that, ‘the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence.’\(^{79}\) Blanchot argues that Hölderlin was not turning the Greek text into German, nor German back to its Greek source, but

\(^{74}\) *ibid.* p. 80 (*GS 4.1*, p. 19); *my translation.*

\(^{75}\) *Idem.*


\(^{77}\) For Benjamin, form is too loosely attached to content in translation, like the too-ample robes that fold around the king. But if translation is ill-fitting, then it because the original poem is not as perfectly bespoke as it first appears. Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, *Illuminations*, p. 81 (*GS 4.1*, p. 19).

\(^{78}\) *ibid.* p. 82 (*GS 4.1*, p. 21).

\(^{79}\) *ibid.* p. 81 (p. 21).
‘unifying the two powers... in the simplicity of a pure and total language.’\textsuperscript{80} The pursuit of total unity, of two languages in one, turns Hölderlin away from translation and away from poetry, until, doing neither, he advances towards the centre of inexpressible truth, ‘in which he believed he would find collected the pure power of unifying’, like Icarus flying towards the sun.\textsuperscript{81} The power to unify difference threatens all relations, but particularly the translator, whose task is an enactment of this will.\textsuperscript{82} The translator is thus drawn into a ‘constant, dangerous and admirable intimacy’ with the a priori promise of unity, which is given in the difference of languages. The translator’s task therefore, is a kind of madness.\textsuperscript{83}

Hölderlin’s translations are a prototype of literal translation; they are closest of all to expressing ‘the inexpressible’ of true language. Regardless, Hölderlin’s translations could never be the prototype or limit of all translation—for the measure of translatability itself requires an absolute limit, and this is the question of the last paragraph.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{idem.}
\textsuperscript{82} The translator is particularly exposed to the original and prior schism inherent in all languages, if only because, for the sake of pure language, translation enacts real difference: hence, the visible cracks in the vessel, the brokenness of the symbol and the symbolised.
\textsuperscript{83} The translator’s desire for a unified language is pure madness—see Blanchot, \textit{Friendship}, p. 61 (\textit{L’Amitié}, p. 73). However, I would argue that madness is not simply desire, but the \textit{structure} or ‘law’ of desire. In other words, madness is not only an individual affliction, but a structural one. In the case of translation, madness goes beyond (the desire of) the translator—and becomes the condition of the possibility of translation itself. Something of this folly is raised by Adorno, when he discusses Benjamin’s work on the task. Adorno writes: ‘[It is] a kind of a Sisyphean labour’, the attempt to, ‘decipher the intentionless itself’. See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Introduction to Benjamin’s \textit{Schriften}’, \textit{On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections}, ed. Gary Smith, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) p. 8.
Chapter Four

The Interlinear Version

4.1 Translating the Last Paragraph

A translation that attempts to identify itself with the original ultimately comes close to an interlinear-version and greatly facilitates our understanding of the original. We are led, yes, compelled as it were, back to the source text: the circle within which the approximation of the foreign and the familiar, the known and the unknown constantly move, is finally complete—Goethe.84

The last paragraph of ‘The Task of the Translator’ requires the most attention, for here Benjamin introduces two limit concepts: a) absolute translatability, that is ensured by ‘die heilige texte’ (holy text), in which meaning and expression are unmediated and b) the interlinear version’ of the holy text—for this is ideal form of translation. Following the two limit concepts: one ideal (the holy text), the other real (the interlinear version); Benjamin argues that ‘boundless confidence’ in the translation is demanded, before hastily drawing to an end, almost summarily, as if everything were clear and understood. However, even as the last paragraph names an end to all translation, to translatability itself, something happens: once the end is

given a proper name, *the holy text*, it too must be translated. There is no end to translatability, nor to the task of the translator.

The difficulty of translating the last paragraph lies not only in its sudden end, but the dense, enfolded nature of language that gives the work, as Benjamin himself might say, a high degree of translatability. More than any other section of Benjamin’s text, the last paragraph is prone to becoming lost ‘in the bottomless depths of language.’ After the last paragraph, de Man writes:

> We now then ask the simplest, the most naïve, the most literal of possible questions in relation to Benjamin’s text, and we will not get beyond that: what does Benjamin say? What does he say, in the most immediate sense possible? It seems absurd to ask a question that is so simple, that seems to be so unnecessary, because we can certainly admit that among literate people we would at least have some minimal agreement about what is being said here, allowing us then to embroider upon this statement, to take positions, discuss, interpret and so on. But it seems that in the case of this text, this is very difficult to establish.\(^{85}\)

The most rigorous explications, however, de Man’s included, omit the last paragraph, or else mention it very briefly, thus taking leave of Benjamin’s argument at a crucial moment. In addition, there is the problem of approaching the text in translation. The English translation by Zohn is the standard, however, it does not always accord with Benjamin’s text, so that our interpretation of Benjamin is not only at a remove, but erroneous.\(^{86}\) Perhaps in recognition of some

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86 Carol Jacobs and Paul de Man both critique the English translator, Harry Zohn, and his various choices, particularly his rendering of Benjamin’s phrase: ‘…just as fragments are part of a vessel (wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes),’ p. 78 [*GS 4.1*, p. 18]. De Man, following Jacobs, argues that Zohn’s translation omits the word ‘broken’ and such an oversight completely alters the interpretation of Benjamin’s argument. De Man therefore, offers this version: ‘just as fragments are the broken parts of the vessel’. Whereas Zohn’s translation ascribes unity to the vessel, we can now
of these faults, Zohn amends his original translation so that previous omissions reappear, including the phrase: ‘This case demands boundless confidence in the translation.’ And, while Zohn rectifies his former omission, he adds the word ‘case’, which does not exist in the original German, in order to make the subject to which Benjamin refers, clearer in English. Hence, even in the amended translation, the original text is still peppered with additions and clarifications. And, when Benjamin outlines the absolute limit of translatability—unconditional translatability—Zohn amends his translation once more: the two versions are contrasted below:

‘Where a text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be ‘the true language’ in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable.’ (Illuminations)

‘Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly, without any mediating sense, in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine, this text is unconditionally translatable.’ (Selected Writings Vol. 1)

Unconditional translatability then, moves from being, ‘identical with truth or dogma’ which is ‘supposed to be ‘the true language’; to having a ‘literal quality’, that, ‘takes part directly in true language, the truth, or in doctrine.’ The change is striking for two reasons. First, the insertion of the words, ‘supposed to be’ expresses
the translator’s doubt—for there is no question of supposition in the original text. Second, unconditional translatability is downgraded from being identical with truth, to having ‘a literal quality that takes part directly in truth.’ \(^{90}\) If unconditional translatability has a literal quality, then it must also have a non-literal quality that remains outside of truth, left-over or estranged. What are we to make of Benjamin’s argument? It is quite clear that the same thing is not being said, and that each translation frames Benjamin’s argument a little differently.

Such uncertainty warrants a return to the original text—but now as a translator. It may be wise, however, to heed Pannwitz’s warning, that the fault of most translators lies in not allowing their mother tongue to become affected by the other language, to sound and appear other. Let us begin with the last paragraph—the English translation below is from *Illuminations*:\(^{91}\)

There is, however, a stop. It is vouchsafed to Holy Writ alone, in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where a text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be ‘the true language’ in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable. In such cases translations are called for only because of the plurality of languages. Just as, in the original, language and revelation are one without any tension, so the translation must be one with the original in the form of an interlinear version, in which literalness and freedom are united. For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings. The

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\(^{90}\) The term *quality* does not appear in the German text. While it may ‘improve’ the logic of the sentence in English, the word brings with it certain implications of *character, aspect, disposition, skill* or *accomplishment*. The ‘literal quality’ that ‘takes part directly in… truth’, sounds clear, but is it really? How could we discriminate between a literal quality, and a non-literal quality? And what does it mean to understand unconditional translatability as a (literal) quality, aspect or accomplishment?

\(^{91}\) Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, *Illuminations*, p. 82.
interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation. 92

Another translation is possible:

But there is a halt. It is guaranteed by none other than the holy text, in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where the text immediately, without mediating meaning, in its literality belongs to true language, truth or dogma, it is unconditionally translatable. Admittedly, no longer for its own sake—but solely for the sake of languages. In contrast to the holy text, such unbounded confidence in translation is demanded, so that just as language and revelation are tensionless in the holy text; so in the translation, literalness and freedom must unite in the form of an interlinear version. Thus to some degree all great texts contain their virtual translation between the lines, but to the highest degree the holy. The interlinear version of the holy text is the archetype or ideal of all translation.93

With this translation, at once both more exact and more inexact, it now becomes possible to address the text, even though, paradoxically, once the English translation

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93 I am indebted to Dr. Thomas Schneider for his comments and suggestions regarding my translation of Benjamin’s last paragraph.
is *like German*, it requires another translation, to become like English, or at least, like English which is also something else.

### 4.2 The Limit of Translatability

There is a limit to translation. Benjamin calls it a halt or stop, and it is the holy text. This is the *ultima ratio* of truth, where meaning and language are one. The holy text belongs to true language, truth or dogma, and as such it is unconditionally translatable. Thus, the holy text is both the limit of translation, and the condition of the possibility of all translation.

Unconditional translatability is the end of all translation, but what of translatability as it is manifest in the work? Translatability is a measure of the work’s capacity for translation, and Benjamin argues that a degree of translatability is an essential feature of certain works. We might say that such works are *conditionally translatable*. In them, the flow of language and truth (revelation) is not direct, but mediated. However, in the case of the Holy text, translatability is not a question of degree—for the holy text is beyond measurement. As the limit of translation, the holy text transcends even its own capacity to be translated. The holy text is thus *a priori* and absolute. In its literality it *belongs* to true language: as each letter belongs to a word. ⁹⁴ Its belonging is expressed in three ways. First, embodying the ideal identity of meaning and expression to which all languages strive, the Holy text is prior to all languages, the condition of their possibility. Second, the Holy text is identical to truth and is the condition of the possibility of all meaning and meaninglessness. And if a translation of the holy text is called for, it is only for the sake of languages. ⁹⁵ Third, therefore, having perfect translatability,

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⁹⁴ *Wörtlichkeit* literally means likeness to the word (word-likeness). Here, it is translated as ‘literalness’, and this idea expresses the perfect co-mingledness of meaning and expression in the Holy text. The idea of the Holy text is the ideal form of the truth: its perfect translation. See Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, *Illuminations*, p. 82 (GS 4.1, p. 21).

⁹⁵ For Benjamin, the existence of multiple languages legitimates the concept of pure language. And this relation is enacted in translation. How? In every translation pure language shows itself as that
the Holy text is the condition of the possibility of the [improper, incomplete, imperfect] translatability of all other texts.

So then, if translation is a form, then the holy text must be its ideal form. But this is misleading. The holy text is absolutely formless, as the expressionless truth. Only formlessness allows for the condition of the possibility of form. Having no form, the holy text’s ideal form must be translated. And Benjamin argues that the ideal form of translation takes the shape of the interlinear version.96 The interlinear version of the bible should not be taken as a metaphor—for it is a real form that points to an ideal form—formlessness. We are familiar with the interlinear version of the bible, or parallel text, as a book that translates the bible into multiple languages: each word in the original Hebrew (or Greek) is followed by literal translations into Latin, English, German, French, Chinese, etc. Literal translation is the prototype or ideal of all translation, because it symbolises and enacts the literality of the holy text, where meaning and expression are identical. In a way, the interlinear version is the holy text’s manifest Gesetz; the law of (perfect) translatability, that is manifest between the lines.97

So then, translation is a form, and the ideal form, towards which all translations strive is the interlinear version of the holy text: the literal, multi-lingual translation of the word of God. As the eye follows each word of the interlinear version of the bible, in all languages, one is still no closer to the word of God.


96 Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 82 (GS 4.1, p. 21).

97 Benjamin’s concept of the interlinear version of the Holy text is both real and ideal. Real, because the interlinear version of the Holy text exists: we can open the book and follow its form of literal translation on the page before us. Ideal, because, as Benjamin writes, ‘all great texts carry their potential translation between the lines (zwischen den Zeilen).’ (ibid). This idea sounds mysterious and secretive, however, its structure is similar to Benjamin’s idea of the ‘echo’. For Benjamin, every name carries an echo that communicates something beyond the name itself. Some critics, including Beatrice Hanssen, see the echo as a remnant of the divine word of god, which cannot be revealed to humankind (not until the world is perfected and restored) except in a broken, imperfect and fragmented way. Hence, the echo communicates its ‘spiritual contents... in language.’ See Hanssen, ‘Language and mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s work’, The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 58-64. See also Gershom Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin and his Angel’, On Walter Benjamin, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) p. 84.
Although the translations are as literally cast as Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles, they reveal the abyss—the immense gulf between truth and language, mortal and immortal. This is a highly contradictory moment: the ideal form of translation, the interlinear version of the holy text, is not ideal at all, it is real. Thus, truth has no translation—it is perfectly translatable and perfectly untranslatable, or as Benjamin would say: the unconditionally translatable is equally unconditionally untranslated—for true language remains unknowable, revealed as concealed. And only the form of the interlinear version demonstrates the absolute difference between words and the word of God. The interlinear version therefore, is the true archetype of translation; its form is not unity, but the fractured tower of Babel.

Just before the last paragraph ends, Benjamin writes: ‘to some degree, all great texts contain their virtual translation between the lines, but to the highest degree the holy.’ Virtual translation is the work’s ideal formlessness, its unconditional translatability, and for this reason the ‘great text’ has a power that is manifest both in the work and beyond it. The degree of a work’s power is relative. The power being the enactment of a Wandlung und Erneuerung (transformation and renewal) of language, or what Gasché calls the act of denaturing language. Language is always removed from being merely

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98 Discussing the ruinous perfection of Hölderlin’s literal translations of Sophocles, Benjamin writes: ‘in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.’ Benjamin enacts his own mise en abyme soon afterwards, when he says that the condition of the possibility of translation is ‘guaranteed (gewährt) by none other than the holy text.’ But this guarantee is no guarantee at all: for the holy text is already a translation. The holy text is written in the languages of humankind; it is not the expressionless language of God. So then, if the act of translation guarantees translation, we are surely left in the bottomless pit of language.

99 Great works, according to Benjamin, have a higher degree of translatability, and he concludes: ‘this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings.’ (ibid. pp. 81-82 [GS 4.1, pp. 20-21]). What does this mean? Great works are great not just because we declare them to be great—but because such works revivify and transform their language to such a degree that they approach the limit or stop of all translation. We can imagine a poem for instance, that is so dense it seems to escape the bonds of ‘meaning’ and instead communicates what Benjamin calls, ‘the detours of its unfolding.’

100 Rodolphe Gasché argues that language is always already ‘denatured’ or ‘other’ than itself. Words therefore, do not communicate their intended objects, but their own ability to be communicative (what Benjamin names communicability). See Gasché, ‘Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Language,’ Benjamin’s Ground: New
instrumental, or ‘natural’. Neither a tool of communication, nor a neutral sign for things, or concepts—it communicates its own communicability, that is, its power to name, suggest, allude, indicate, or convey nothing at all. And this is not to say that great works are closer to incomprehensibility, and thus to God, but that they carry within them a manifestation of concealed truth—which, although it resists revelation, remains absolutely translatable.

The holy text is the ideal concept of truth; and the very end or halt of translation. An ideal concept, the holy text necessarily withdraws upon approach—for it cannot materially function without an intermediary: the interlinear version of the holy text. Truth therefore, evades being translated, except as an echo, or ‘breath’; as God appears to Moses as a breath of wind upon his back. It is no wonder then, that Benjamin warns that an ‘unbounded confidence in translation is demanded.’ Nevertheless, the proper name of the limit (of the limit) of translation, is the holy text, and after this name is given, the essay draws to an end. Of course, there is no name of names, no stop to the names for the limit of translation, and Benjamin uses different names throughout his essay to indicate the ideal, including pure language, true language, and the holy text. Thus, no name can signify an essence, just as no name can correspond to God: who, when asked

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101 Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 82 (GS 4.1, p. 21). In the last paragraph, Benjamin calls the limit of translation ‘ein Halt’. Although it is generally translated as stop or limit, Carol Jacobs rightly translates it as halt (while pointing out that the verb Halten in German also means to hold). See Jacobs, ‘The Monstrosity of Translation’, MLN, vol. 90, 1975, p. 765.

102 Benjamin, SW v. 1, p. 262 (GS 4.1, p. 21).

103 Why is the name function as the limit of translation? Hent de Vries (following Derrida) gives the example of the name of God, which is: ‘both a proper name and the index—the name—for the untranslatability of every proper name.’ See de Vries, ‘Anti-Babel: The ‘Mystical Postulate’ in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida’, MLN, vol. 107, no. 3, 1992, p. 459.

104 The name does not express the truth: herein lies its inadequacy. The inadequacy of the name is demonstrated in the Torah. The name of God (YHVH) is never written in full. YHVH comes from the Hebrew root to be (Hayeh, from the letters Heh-Yod-Heh) and signifies a being that is yet to come; whose presence is incomplete, or withheld). Additionally, vowel marks indicate an alternate pronunciation of YHVH (so that the ‘true’ phonetic sound is never in danger of being voiced). Such measures protect the name (Ha-Shem) from defilement, falsehood and profanation, and ensure that the name remains ineffable (Shem HaMetorash), Lev. 24:16. See Ephraim Urbach, ‘The Power of the Divine Name,’ The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) pp. 124-134.
how people shall recognise him, responds, ‘Ahyh asher ahyh (I will be what I will be).’

In the last paragraph, Benjamin names the limit of all translation, the interlinear form of the holy text, and all translatability, ‘the holy text’, but he does not name the limit of the task. What shall we call the essence of the task? How can we know it? Indeed, the task is raised as a question in the title of the Benjamin’s essay, but its essence remains unanswered, unmentioned, between the lines. For this reason alone, ‘the task’ demands translation.

105 See Exodus 3:14.
Chapter Five

The Question of the Task

5.1 The Task of the Translator

What is the task of the translator? The question relates both to the translator and to the performance of translation. For Benjamin, the translator is the closest to the philosopher-genius, a figure characterised by a ‘yearning’ for that language of truth manifest in translation.106 The translation withholds the revelation of truth, or perfection—for attaining this unity would signal the end of all language and all forms of relation.107 Nevertheless, this failing is not for want of a fitting muse. 108 Rather, the problem is structural: expression is not essence, the signifier is not the signified (as Magritte writes beneath the image of a pipe, Ceçi n’est pas une pipe). 109 Neither the philosopher nor the translator escape the limits of real languages. Still, they are as equally alike in their yearning for truth, as they are in their structural approach to the task at hand—either through the difference of languages (translation) or through criticism and interpretation (philosophy). Indeed, translation and philosophy appear happily aligned. But what of poetry?

For Benjamin, the task of the poet is the exception: poetry is original, and translation has access to originality only at a remove—through the relation of two languages. As de Man writes:

107 Whereas philosophy is concerned with the relation between language and truth, translation documents the relation between languages and truth.
108 For Benjamin, philosophy and translation are not divinely inspired: ‘There is no muse of philosophy, nor is there one of translation.’ They are united, however, by a ‘yearning’ for the language of truth. idem. (GS 4.1, p. 16).
109 Magritte’s painting, La trahison des Images (The Treachery of Images) is well suited to Benjamin’s concept of translation—which deals in the ‘treachery’ of words.
Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated. That is not the case for the poet: poetry is certainly not paraphrase, clarification, or interpretation, a copy in that sense; and that is already the first difference.110

So then, poetry does not relate ‘from language to language’; it relates to an extralinguistic meaning that corresponds to Benjamin’s concept of the ‘pure poetized’—the ideal or absolute task of poetry.111 At the same time, however, poetry relates to its ideal linguistically. It cannot do otherwise, because poetry is a relation of language to language. Poetry’s extralinguistic meaning therefore, is manifest in the depths of poetic language. The extent to which a poem relates to extralinguistic meaning lies in its degree of translatability. And this means the degree to which the poem supplements, extends and transforms language. Like translation, poetry transforms and renews language, but it does so by virtue of its extraordinarily linguistic nature, using puns, allusions, homonyms, metre, metaphor, etc., to reflect the gulf between language and extralinguistic meaning, word and thing. Thus poetry, like translation, is already ‘paraphrase, copy, commentary and clarification’, because the poem reflects language reflecting itself. And if Benjamin argues that the task of poetry is an exception, then it is because poetry is an original translation. But poetry’s originality stems from its ‘temporality’—the poem always comes first.

5.2 The (German) Language Forest

Nevertheless, Benjamin argues that translation is a form of its own, and thus, ‘The task of the translator… may be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated as the

task of the poet.'¹¹² As forms of their own, translation and poetry have distinct tasks. And while the differences are still attached to ideas of originality/copy, form/transformation, language/languages, the primary difference between them is intentional. Translation intends ‘language as such’, its totality, whereas poetry intends the inner ‘nature’ of language. And each necessitates a different perspective. To illustrate, Benjamin employs the metaphor of ‘the language forest’—while the poet stands in its centre, the translator remains ‘outside facing the wooded ridge.’¹¹³ Benjamin’s metaphors are not only metaphors: the forest of language carries allusions to the natural world, but one which is also ‘translated’—for Bergwald does not mean only forest, but ‘mountain forest’. The poet does not stand in the middle of a rainforest or a swamp, but in the middle of a mountain forest that peaks over the surrounding landscape. The figure of the poet in the forest, and the forest itself, is uniquely German: it is no surprise then, that Bergwald der Sprache evokes a specifically German landscape—one immortalised by the Grimm brothers, Rilke, Heine and Hölderlin.

So then, poetry is the centre of language, a mountainous wilderness, wherein the poet attends to the minutiae of language, its foliage and shadows, what Benjamin calls ‘its specific linguistic aspecual contexts.’¹¹⁴ Translation is the periphery of languages, the border of the forest, and there the translator awakens the intended effect—‘the echo’—of the original language, in the language of translation. Such distinct perspectives, however, are complicated by the forest itself. The poet, enclosed by the mountainous forest, looks inwards, for he cannot see far out. The translator, at the forest-edge, faces both inwards and outwards: towards the poet in the mountainous wilderness, and out towards the ideal horizon of all languages—true language. And if the translator surveys the forest from two directions, then it is because the edge of the forest is no-man’s land, a placeless place. The language forest demarcates a difference in perspective and intention. For Benjamin, poetry is ‘spontaneous, primary and graphic’—the poet stands in the

¹¹³ idem.
¹¹⁴ idem.
middle of language, and intends pure language through the language of names, which are ‘the innermost nature of language itself.’ Translation, however, is ‘derivative, ultimate, ideational’—for the translator reveals the artifice of nature, the foreignness in the original work, and the untranslatability of the name. The translator’s intention then, ‘the task par excellence of translation’, is to denature, or denaturalise language.\(^{116}\)

With the introduction of the language forest, the distinction between poetry and translation grows less clear. Benjamin argues that the poet’s task is original and prior, and the translator’s task is derivative and dependant on the original work—but even this basic demarcation is threatened by the law of translatability, which is the condition of the possibility of all languages and all translation. Without this law, there would be no language forest, no navigating and no getting lost. And the distinctions between the task of the poet and the task of the translator are inessential; for there is only one essential distinction—the law of translatability (‘the task’)—and this they share.

Regardless of whether a translator ever comes along, the task (of the translator) continues ad infinitum, because it is the a priori of translation, its original form. Although Benjamin does not discuss the ‘essence’ of the task, he refers to the task constantly, via the ‘measure of Übersetzbarkeit, or translatability. Translatability relates to the task in two ways: first, as the law of the original work, it is legislates the possibility of translation and its labour. Second, it is the condition of the possibility of translation—and presumably the task of translation itself. But is translatability Benjamin’s answer to the question: what is the essence of the task? Certainly translatability constitutes the task, whether it is performed or not. But the essence of the task is left unanswered. The question is raised in the title: ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.’ As we can see, at issue is not Übersetzbarkeit but something else—die Aufgabe. This word and its possessive relation to des

\(^{115}\) Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man’, _SW v.1_, p. 65 (GS 2.1, p. 144).

Übersetzers (of the translator) is the question that remains untranslated. Nevertheless, if translation depends on the presence of the original work, then does the task of the translator also depend on the task of the poet?

5.3 The Poetic Task

Benjamin argues that languages, in their very plurality, intend pure language. However, even in a mono-lingual forest, with no borders, and no end, we would still be no closer to true language. This is because the condition of the possibility of true language is neither multi-lingualism nor mono-lingualism: it is difference itself. The translator juggles the difference of languages, the poet juggles the differences within a language. It is no surprise then, that the law of original difference: translatability governs them both.

In a later essay on Hölderlin, Benjamin attempts to establish the poetic task, which is the condition of the evaluation of the poem. The poetic task is similar in structure to the concept of translatability. Benjamin writes:

The poetic task, as the preliminary condition of the evaluation of the poem, is to be established. This evaluation cannot be guided by the way in which the poet has fulfilled his task; rather, the seriousness and greatness of the task itself determine the evaluation. For the task is derived from the poem itself. The task is also to be understood as the precondition of the poem, as the intellectual-demonstrative structure of the world to which the poem bears witness. This task, this precondition, shall be understood here as the ultimate basis accessible to analysis.117

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117 Benjamin, ‘Two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’, SW v.1, p. 18 (GS 2.1, p. 105); translation modified, my emphasis.
The seriousness and greatness of the task itself, is a necessary precondition for the evaluation of any poem—it is the immeasurable-measure of the poetic task. The qualities of the poetic task bear no relation to the poet’s ‘worldview’ or personality—but derive solely from the poem. And indeed, Benjamin characterises the poetic task, ‘the poetized’, as a ‘sphere’ that encloses the truth of the poem. But what is the truth of the poem? For Benjamin, it is the objectivity of the poet’s creation, which arises from the ‘fulfilment of the respective artistic task.’\(^{118}\) Poetic truth is manifest in three ways: a) as the precondition of the poem, b) as the poetized in the poem, and c) in the act of creating the poem, for this is the poet’s own fulfilment of the artistic task. Indeed, Benjamin argues that artistic task is not voluntary, but necessary—for the task carries the truth of all creation, and he quotes Novalis: ‘Every work of art has in and of itself an a priori ideal, a necessity for being in the world.’\(^{119}\) The necessity for being in the world is the burden of all creation. It is no wonder then, that the poetic task is burdened by qualities of seriousness and greatness. The poetic task is manifest in the poem as the poetized, which is the coming together of the geistig and the anshaulich, in a particular configuration. Benjamin calls the poetized, ‘the inner form of the poetic creation.’ This inner form is what we know as the poem’s Gesetz, the law of translatability. In other words, the poetic task is doubly manifest, as the poetized and the law of translatability—and this simultaneous manifestation of unity and difference complicates and deepens Benjamin’s concept of the task, and its relation to poetry and translation.

5.4 Translating the Title

So then, what is it that Benjamin calls the task? The question no longer asks after the translator, or the poet—for it appears that their task is shared, in the sense that they each strive towards the fulfilment and expression of truth, but this truth is itself

\(^{118}\) ibid. p. 19 (p. 105); translation modified.

\(^{119}\) idem.
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inexpressible. Thus, we are still left with the (unwritten) question of the essay’s title: not only, what is the Task of the Translator? But also, what is the task of the task?

Benjamin’s title, ‘The Task of the Translator’ is a phrase in the subjective-genitive, that is, it speaks of the belonging of the task (object) to the translator (subject). However, it is also objective-genitive, and speaks just as much of the belonging of the translator (object) to the task (subject). The latter interpretation gives a wholly different reading—for it asks, what is the task of, or what of the task? The grammatical ambiguity of Benjamin’s title is called an amphibology, a case in which two interpretations are equally true. If we take the title to be objective-genitive, then the task is the subject of our enquiry. The more common reading, however, takes the subject to be the translator and consequently the task is overlooked and the role of the translator, overstated. Let us assume the first interpretation, and claim that at issue throughout the essay is not the translator, but the task.

Benjamin, except to comment on a distinction between the task of poetry and translation, restricts his discussion of the task as such, to the greater historical question of life and survival. As we know, life is not biological, but historical or even poetic: for it means the purposive striving towards the representation of essence. The struggle to represent life’s essence is the condition of the possibility of any expression or representation at all. Indeed, this struggle to represent essence, is itself a kind of essence, because striving not only gives form to life—but the form of the struggle is life, insofar as striving is the prerequisite of life (history). Thus, if the struggle to represent essence brings essence to life, to poetry for example, then it is because life is the struggle to represent essence.

Although the question of the task as such is buried in Benjamin’s title, it is clear that its movement is historical and purposive; long before the poet or the translator, the task or law is to express truth or essence. In a later essay, Benjamin argues that, ‘the task is always life…. [I]n the poetized, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution.’120 The poetic task is therefore the way in

which the poem shapes and transforms life. Unity of life—that ideal expression of truth—is not open to being ‘felt’ or ‘intuited’ by the poet; it can only be striven towards, translated. Indeed, Benjamin warns against those ‘feeblest of artistic achievements that refer to the immediate feeling of life; whereas the strongest, with respect to their truth, refer to a sphere related to the mythic: the poetized.’

A poem’s relation to the mythic sphere may be judged by the work’s translatability. The poet’s ‘warmth of heart’, sentimentality, or higher feeling is immaterial, as Benjamin writes: ‘The more the poet tries to convert without transformation the unity of life into a unity of art, the more he proves himself a bungler.’ What matters then, is the transformation of form—this is the only task of the poet and the translator: to transform the unity of life.

As totalities, the unity of life and the unity of the art-work are ‘wholly ungraspable.’ This means that life as such, and the life of the art work as such, are only accessible at all insofar as they are translatable. Translatability therefore, is the condition of the possibility of the expression of life, even though the expression of life is impossible, because life’s unity is knowable only in translation, in fractures. The task of the poet is to transform the unity of life into the poem, and this is a task that has no end—for the task is no task at all once it is completed. And Benjamin calls the poet who does not strive for the transformation of life, a bungler. The

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121 The poetic task governs the relation between the unity of life (truth, or the mythic realm) and the poem. This relation determines not only the task of the individual poem but also its solution (the poem’s form, or the way in which the poem translates life’s unity). ibid. p. 19 (pp. 106–7).
122 ibid. p. 20 (p. 107).
123 Benjamin, ‘Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’, p. 20 (GS 2.1 p. 107); translation modified.
124 idem. (p. 108).
125 The infinite or incomplete task is, I think, the central concern of Benjamin’s work, and a motif that even influences his form of writing. As to the influence on his work, we must turn to Benjamin himself, who writes: ‘That which is original… needs to be recognised as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something unfinished.’ See Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, trans. John Osbourne (London: Verso, 1988) pp. 45–45 (GS 1.1, p. 226); my emphasis. Discussing the influence of incompleteness on Benjamin’s ‘philosophical form’, his friend Adorno writes: ‘his (Benjamin’s) whole life was indebted to Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis for the conception of the fragment as a philosophical form that—precisely because it is fractured and incomplete—retains something of the force of the universal that evaporates in all-inclusive project. That Benjamin’s work remained fragmentary is thus not simply to be ascribed to his adverse fate; rather, it is implicit from the start in the structure of his thought, in his fundamental idea.’ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Introduction to Benjamin’s Schriften’, On Walter Benjamin, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) p. 6.
bungler refuses both life and the survival of life, or what Benjamin calls respectively poetry and translation. Just as Benjamin assigns the poet and the translator with different qualities, he assigns their task and end goal with different names: *translatability* is the translator’s business and the Holy text its final end; *the poetized* is the poet’s business, and the unity of life—‘the poetized of poems’—its final end.\(^{126}\)

*The poetized of poems* is another of Benjamin’s amphibologies. We may read either: the poetized belongs to poems; or poems belong to the poetized. However, since the poetized is a relation between *life* and *the poem*, it matters little in which direction the possession takes place—only that life is the poem’s ungraspable origin; the beginning and end of all creation. Life, through the mediating sphere of the poetized, takes on an interlinear form in the poem—for life is the poem’s ‘inner form, as artistic task.’\(^{127}\) Of course, the revelation of the unity of life is, as Benjamin writes, ‘a purely methodological, ideal goal.’\(^{128}\) And the poet’s ceaseless striving for the disclosure of life, is a sign of the task’s essential incompleteness. Even the ideal, methodological goal of the absolute task would only ever be discloseable as absolutely incomplete.

So then, the overlooked question of Benjamin’s title asks, *what is the essence of the task?* The essence of the task, its absolute totality, is undiscloseable. But is undiscloseability the task of the task? Or might there be a more literal translation of its essence, that stems from aufgeben, to give up, abandon, surrender, sacrifice? For Benjamin, the absolute task precedes everything: the poet, the translator, the performance of poetry and translation. Thus, the absolute task takes the form of pure power or potential: that which is the condition of the possibility of representation, documentation, transformation, legislation, that which first gives and give up, may burden, demand, strive, express, translate. So then, the *Aufgabe* is

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\(^{127}\) *idem.* (p. 108).

\(^{128}\) *ibid.* pp. 20–21 (p. 108).
already given up in language, for example, in the original poem’s translatability, hence Benjamin writes, ‘the task is derived from the poem itself’.129

But can we deduce the essence of the task from the poem? To consider this question of essence, it is necessary to return to the literal German word, Aufgabe, to give and to give-up. The very word for task expresses its strife. Here, one can’t help but think of the task as that which can’t stop giving up its labour, so that the translator might complain (that is, if the task could be addressed to him): ‘Whether it is a man or a horse is no longer important, if only the burden is removed from the back.’130 The structure of the task therefore, is infinite: because its law is never fully given, to be recognised, received or exchanged.131 Indeed, the gift (if the task is a gift) must be unrecognisable, disguised, concealed, if it is to remain incomplete. And the incompleteness of the idea of the gift and of giving, returns us to the Benjamin’s earlier inversion of nature and history. For what is it that gives originally? Certainly not nature—for the origin, as Benjamin understands it, is history, an idea which is later taken up by Derrida, who writes:

The gift, if there is any, must go against nature, or occur without nature; it must break off at the same blow, at the same instant with all originality, with all originary authenticity.132

Without nature then, the task of the task, die Aufgabe der Aufgabe, signifies the giving up of the giving up (of translatability). This essence of giving up is enacted

129 ibid. p. 18 (GS 2.1, p. 105). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argues that, for Benjamin, the task of poetry is to bear witness, to testify. Furthermore, because the poetic task is derived from the poem, this notion of testimony is poetry’s pre-requisite and obligation; what he comes to call ‘poetry’s courage.’ See Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘Poetry’s Courage’, Walter Benjamin and Romanticism, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hansen (London: Continuum, 2002) pp. 163–179.


131 Derrida argues that the idea of the gift is impossible; and presents the giver and receiver with a double bind—for once a gift is given, it is no longer a gift. It can only be a gift, for as long as it is withheld from the receiver. As Derrida writes, ‘Let us go to the limit: The truth of the gift (its being or appearing as such, its as such insofar as it guides the intentional signification or meaning-to-say) suffices to annul the gift. The truth of the gift is equivalent to the non-gift or to the non truth of the gift.’ See Derrida’s Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) pp. 26–7.

132 ibid. p. 162.
historically, in the work of art, the poem and the translation—none of which are ‘intended for an audience or receiver.’¹³³ Their intentionality is void, addressed to no-one—their expression gives up their ability to transform, forge and renew. No work is *natural*: neither the work of art, nor the poem is the thing (nature)—it is its *unnatural* or artificial presentation. As soon as we look upon nature, it is already ‘denatured’. Likewise, the moment the art work aspires to copy ‘nature’, it must conceal itself, in order to appear natural: art as artless or artifice. The task is guilty of this original artifice and its own appearance as *task* must also be concealed in order for the poem to be itself. As it is manifest then, in the poem or the art-work, the task opens the historical, reflective and symbolic within the poem. In other words, the task opens up poetry in the poem, and translatability in the translation. Benjamin employs amphibologies that may be read backwards and forwards, with increasing doubt: ‘the poetry of the poem’ (a term from Schlegel and Novalis), ‘the task of the translator’, ‘the concept of criticism’. All such phrases show the ambiguity and confusion at the heart of human languages. The task of the task remains unnamed by Benjamin: is it therefore unnameable? And if it is unnameable, is it because the task (like nature) is mute? And could such muteness be violated by a name? For Benjamin, to be named, ‘from the hundred languages of man, in which the name has already withered…remains an intimation of mourning.’ The act of naming therefore, sounds the original lament of nature, the sorrow of speechlessness, for ‘Nature mourns… because she is mute.’¹³⁴ And when nature’s muteness is wrung into human speech, the words are burdened with the mournful effect of translation, what Benjamin calls ‘overnaming’:

Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed. There


¹³⁴ Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, *SW v. 1*, p. 73 (GS 2.1, p. 155).
is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as “overnaming”—the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness.\(^\text{135}\)

Deliberate muteness of the thing as it recoils from human language. How can we know the task, when it is variously called: ‘translatability’, ‘the poetized’, ‘life’ or ‘survival’? Or when its limit is called: ‘the absolute task’, ‘the holy text’, ‘pure language’, ‘true language’, ‘truth’? All names must stop short of the thing itself, just as the Aufgabe stops short of being the task.

Nevertheless, the essence of Aufgabe (as power or potential that gives and gives up continuously, without limit or end) is only recognisable in the name, i.e. in language. Naming therefore, expresses a thing’s name-ability, but not the thing. Benjamin attributes this problem to humanity’s original fall: ‘the language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation—so many translations, so many languages—once man has fallen from the paradiasiacal state that knew only one language.’\(^\text{136}\) Translation, as the power of naming pays its debt to knowledge, showing: a) the linguistic confusion between word and thing (thus the impossibility of expressing the thing) and; b) the difference between languages (thus the impossibility of correspondence or exchange). And if one’s relation to human language is inauthentic and incomplete, then it is because the task is too. The Aufgabe then, not only demonstrates the gulf between one language and another: but also points toward its own mute essence, to the absolute gulf prior to language—for this is the original nothing, the non-communicable—that allows for the possibility of ‘naming’ anything at all.\(^\text{137}\)

Now, if it appears that we are taking Aufgabe so seriously, then it is because we are translating the task’s proper name—for it ‘gives itself up’, or rather, ‘it mourns’ in German. And even though Aufgabe is not an English or French burden

\(^{135}\) ibid.  
\(^{136}\) Benjamin, SW v. 1, pp. 70–71 (GS 2.1, p. 152).  
\(^{137}\) ibid. pp. 72–74 (pp. 154–57).
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(its ‘essence’ is forged in the mountainous language forest) it is nonetheless already named. Thus, even to German ears, die Aufgabe is already a translation.

5.5 Die Aufgabe der Aufgabe (The Task of the Task)

Benjamin introduces the concept of the eternal task in a 1917 letter to Gerard Scholem: ‘I recently came upon a topic that might have something in it for me as a dissertation: the concept of the “eternal task.”’\textsuperscript{138} However, the task does not belong to itself either—for its ownmost essence is an infinite abandoning (giving up of the giving up). Thus, we cannot think of the essence of the task, what Rainer Nägele calls the abyss, or the ground of Benjamin’s thought—for ‘to speak of it is meaningless.’\textsuperscript{139} Rather, we can only know the task by name, that is, by its linguistic and allegorical relation to us. But even the name goes beyond our knowledge, because in the finite name is the infinite name—the infinite task—and this infinity overtakes (or has already overtaken) us. Just as the poet stands passively waiting to be seized by poetry, so the translator surrenders himself completely before the task.\textsuperscript{140} Indeed, our relation to language, striving, truth, history—all of this is meaningless in the face of the infinite, unending task. And the more Benjamin names various relations—the kinship of languages, life and survival, content and language, the translator and the poet—the more he indicates that there is no relation, only the gift of non-relating (language) where ‘distance is the ground of …coherence.’\textsuperscript{141}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Anita Clej argues that the experience of modernity is already a translation: ‘experience can only designate itself as translation, which provokes the deep melancholy of the modernist.’ Clej, ‘The Debt of the Translator’, Symploke, 5.1 (1997), pp. 7-26.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
So then, the task ‘seizes hold of the living’, and rules the translator and the poet equally. In seizing the living, the task expresses the power of human naming; that is, the ability of language to transform life. Properly understood, the act of transforming, of shifting and re-framing, is the beginning of reflection and ‘originality’. Indeed, the task of translation is, ironically, the most original—for it shows that originality is illusory; its aura is guaranteed by the law of translatability (as derived from the poem). Thus, even though the poem is temporally prior to translation, and appears primary, immediate and graphic; translation is essentially prior. And poetry is only original, insofar as it is translation. As the poet Valery writes: ‘Writing anything at all… is a work of translation, exactly comparable to that of transmuting a text from one language to another… (the poet is a) peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into the “language of the gods,” and his inner labour consists less of seeking words for his ideas than of seeking ideas for his words and paramount rhythms.’\(^{142}\) To ask how we might read poetry as translation however, requires thinking in reverse. We must understand that the poet who stands in the centre of the language forest, may not be at home, in fact he is just as likely to be lost—for it is at ‘home’ that the familiar shows itself as most alien and unfamiliar, and this is what Freud calls das Unheimliche (literally, the unhomely, or uncanny).\(^{143}\) Not even the poet’s native language can escape its own quality of strangeness; for it too communicates the expressionless and the unfathomable of language itself. The poet who differs from the translator only in name, translates the expressionless, gives form where this is none. All poetry then, contains an echo of the Unheimliche—the absolutely unfamiliar and the absolutely untranslatable—and this is the echo of the task of the task.


Perhaps it is now fitting to turn to Les Murray whose collection, *Translations from the Natural World*, invites reconsideration—for Murray may yet be the first poet to write literally as a translator, always in translation. Murray is not merely a translator of languages however, but a translator of mute nature. Thus, in Murray, we may read a lament at the gift of language—for although the poet names nature, he remains at a divide, in exile from the babble of animals on the one hand, and the silence of the gods on the other hand. Yet, Murray shows us that the task of the poet must be understood, first and foremost, as the task of the translator, where ‘All creation becomes for him *script* that must be deciphered though the code is unknown’…and Murray, like Benjamin, immerses ‘himself in reality as in a palimpsest.’

Part Two

Translations from the Human World

and this each human knows:
how ever close our touch
or intimate our speech,
silences, spaces reach
most deep, and will not close
—Judith Wright.145

Chapter Six

The Question of the Human World

Home is the first
and final poem
and every poem between
has this mum home seam
—Les Murray.146

Les Murray’s *Translations from the Natural World* is a collection of poems that promise to translate nature; and in so doing, to show that nature is only accessible insofar as it is already translated. But what does it mean to translate the natural world? And further, what does it mean to approach poems as (if they are) *translations*? In fact, in order to understand Murray’s idea of nature and the natural world, it is necessary to turn to the collection itself, which presents two subjects or ‘worlds’ both interlinked: the natural and the human. Here, we will focus on Murray’s translation of the human. Thus, the question of poetry as translation will be approached through the frame of the human ‘world’, that is, through the poet’s emphasis on language and translation.

Within Murray’s *Translations*, there are three numbered sections, however, only the middle section is titled: ‘Presence: Translations from the Natural world’.147 The untitled sections are each composed of four poems (or translations) of the

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147 Section II bears the book’s title, ‘Translations from the Natural World’, but with one additional qualifier: ‘Presence’. Because presence is linked by a colon to the rest of the phrase, neither is subsumptive of the other. In other words, the concept of presence must be understood in relation to the concept of translation. Unfortunately, this relation is lost in Murray scholarship. The concept of translation is either omitted or it is subsumed under presence, as if translation were not an issue for Murray. This is, I think, a serious mis-translation of the poet’s work.
human and human language. Structurally, these sections form a frame or ‘home seam’ around the centrepiece of the collection: the natural world. Murray includes one foreign language translation of a poem entitled, ‘Ultima Ratio’, by Friedrich Georg Jünger.\footnote{Friedrich G. Jünger is better known as the brother of Ernst Jünger, a novelist who remains a controversial figure in Germany. Although Ernst Jünger distanced himself from Nazism and claimed to live out the National Socialist reign in a state of ‘inner emigration’, he is remembered primarily in relation to war and conservation—both as a soldier and author of novels on the heroism of war, such as ‘In Stahlgewittern’ (Storm of Steel), and as a journalist of radical, right-wing views. During the 1920s and 1930s Jünger published articles including, ‘Über Nationalismus und Judenfrage’ (On Nationalism and the Jewish Question) and ‘Die Mobilmachung des Deutschen’ (The Mobilisation of the Germans). Jünger’s literary and political influence on German letters is explored in Elliott Y. Neaman’s, A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the politics of Literature after Nazism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). See also Thomas Nevin’s, Ernst Jünger and Germany: Into the Abyss, 1914-1945 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).} This is curious choice—for Jünger is considered a minor poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and remains the subject of few critical studies. Of course, Murray’s inclusion of the Jünger translation not only begs a reconsideration of Jünger the poet, but of Murray the translator—for the question of translation has not yet been raised in relation to Murray.

Indeed, Murray scholarship is primarily directed towards themes of sacrifice and community, religion and politics as well as ideas of Australia. Despite being overlooked, translation is an essential question for Murray: not simply because it figures as the \textit{leitmotif} of this collection, or because Murray worked as a foreign language translator, or because he has translated German poets, Aboriginal song-cycles and myths, and various paintings, but rather, because translation takes on a far more fundamental and original aspect: it is Murray’s \textit{ars poetica}.\footnote{Although beyond the scope of this thesis, other aspects of translation in Murray’s work invite further commentary and critique. I am thinking, for instance, of a comparative study of Murray’s translations of German poets (Heinrich Heine, Matthias Claudius, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Friedrich G. Jünger that appear respectively in the following collections: \textit{Subhuman Redneck Poems}, \textit{Fredy Neptune} and \textit{Translations from the Natural World}). In addition, Murray’s translation and displacement of Aboriginal forms would be compelling. I am thinking particularly of the following poems: ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, ‘The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains’ and ‘The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song-Cycle’ (a translation of the Arnhem Land poem, ‘The Moon Bone Song’). Murray’s ‘translations’ of paintings could also be discussed—in relation to his book, \textit{The Full Dress: An encounter with National Gallery of Australia}, Melbourne: National Gallery of Australia, 2002.}
6.1 Murray, the Translator

So then, before we approach Murray’s translations, we must ask: what kind of translator is Murray? Does he follow the traditional view of translation as mimetic—a copy, or likeness of the original work that transfers meaning from one language to another? Does Murray claim, alongside Luther and Dryden, that translation is a form of poetic conquest, best left in the hands of the elite—that is, the few whose genius equals the genius of the poet? Or, does Murray adhere to Benjamin’s concept of translation—an act that is not based on likeness, but on a more original difference; as we know, Benjamin maintains that one cannot translate the ‘meaning’ of the original poem, for meaning cannot be conveyed in language. Thus, translation can only translate the impossibility of meaning. Here, the translator proceeds literally, word by word, taking as his model the interlinear version of the bible. The effect is a translation that demonstrates its own inability to convey meaning—its own failure or brokenness—and in so doing, translation shows that this failure was already in the poem. Thus poetry and translation are equally broken; they each manifest the meaningless and expressionless truth, and even this monstrosity, as Carol Jacobs calls it, cannot be understood or grasped in language.150

Most scholars of Les Murray would be hard-pressed to agree that his work is like Walter Benjamin’s. In Translations, however, Murray strives to translate nature, and thus to express the ineffable—an impossible task—and one that could never be fully grasped, or completed. If we cannot know what nature means, then it is because we cannot translate the truth of nature—the animals do not speak, plants and stones do not express themselves to us. But such a task is possible as impossible. Nature can be translated, insofar as we give nature names—but as soon as we name nature, we only cover over her truth (her silence). Murray is aware of this paradox: his nature poems are full of games, puns, jokes, a knowing wink—and

this reflexivity can be so extreme, that one experiences language as if in infinite regress: an echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. English, as it is spoken by the animals, is so baroque, compressed and dense, that it resembles “Nature”: on the one hand, it is recognisable as our own language, and on the other hand, it is unrecognisable, completely foreign, another world.

In *Translations* then, Murray takes Benjamin’s concept of translation a step further. Translation is not only ‘more original’ than poetry, but the law of translation itself—translatability, or ‘the task’—is not only given in the plurality of languages, but in the silence of nature. What does this mean? Being mute, nature enacts the inexpressibility of truth—its own lack of language, its aphasia, documents and witnesses the gap between language and meaning on the one hand, and nature/experience and meaning on the other hand. Nature’s silence (which is not truly silent, for it speaks via the names we have given it) demonstrates that the impossibility of grasping truth in language is equal to the impossibility of grasping truth in nature. In other words, the essence of nature is not natural, but knowable only insofar as it is translatable, that is, named. Because the silence of nature is also named, this silence too, recalls to humans the task of translation, as surely as the plurality of languages does. Mute nature therefore, points to the unceasing debt that we, as ‘namers’ and translators, must pay in words. And Murray, in translating from the natural world, pays his debt as a translator, by enacting the impossibility of his task. When nature is named and spoken, it becomes other than itself—for the nature of nature is ungraspable, an ideal concept. So it is that the translation of nature, or of language, only frames a more original denaturing, which Benjamin calls varyingly, the secretive, the mysterious, the poetic, and the abyss.

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151 Benjamin’s early essay on language, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, foregrounds his later essay on translation. In the first essay, Benjamin provides an account of the ‘fall’ of humankind from paradise; a fall that has inescapable linguistic affects. Whereas nature ‘falls’ into silence; man ‘falls’ into different languages. Our human expulsion from paradise is, according to Benjamin, repeated in the performance of translation, which shows the impossibility of unifying languages. Thus, in translation, we are separated from a) true language, or ‘God’ and b) from the ‘silence’ of nature. See Benjamin, *SW* v. 1, pp. 62–74 (‘Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen’, *GS* 2.1, pp. 140–157).
6.2 The Otherworld of Translation

Murray himself is keenly aware of the reverberations and transformations that occur in the act of translating. His concept of poetry’s ‘otherworld’ signifies as much—for it is not only an imaginary refuge for poetry, an ideal restitution of the vernacular and creative word, but a concept of poetry’s world or form as fundamentally other. We should not forget that the word, otherworld, belongs to poetry; even as it belongs to the people. Indeed, Murray’s notion of ‘The People’s Otherworld’, can only be understood via poetry: ‘Humans’ Murray writes, ‘are not rational, but poetic.’ Thus, our relation to the world is metaphorical, translative, a form of poetry.

Just as the otherworld belongs to poetry, so poetry belongs to the otherworld. Indeed, the otherworld functions as poetry’s original law—its inner form or idyll, and is akin to Benjamin’s notion of translatability. If the otherworld is not a ‘mere place’, nor a ‘mere poem’, then it is because is the otherworld functions as a law; allowing the poem to be and become poetic. Thus to some degree, every poem translates the otherworld.

So then, poetry’s otherworld is the law of place; the idea of poetry’s (proper) place, one that Murray might even associate with the word aplace (into place), a

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154 An Idyll describes a poetic form whose theme is the picturesque or pastoral. Murray’s poems, ‘The Idyll Wheel’ and ‘The Preface to the Idyll Wheel’, demonstrate his playful use of the term. First, ‘The Preface to the Idyll Wheel’ appears after ‘The Idyll Wheel’; and one can’t be sure how far Murray’s irony stretches. Second, the translation of what constitutes the pastoral shifts from poem to poem. The first poem is a traditional rendering of the pastoral-form: whose verse celebrates both the idyll ‘form’ of the pastoral poem and the idyll ‘farm’ and its Hesiod-like works and days. The second poem, ‘The Preface to the Idyll Wheel’, takes this idea further. Here, we find a poem within a poem. The narrator writes an ‘idyll’ about his desire to write a whole suite of ‘idylls’ that document a year on the farm. In the movement from one ‘idyll’ to the other, Murray reminds us that the word idyll comes from ‘eidos’ (form). Thus, farm and form are intertwined not only in the pastoral, but in the form or ‘look’ of poetry. See Murray’s Dog Fox Field (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990) pp. 7, 14–15.
word he recalls in his poem, ‘In Murray’s Dictionary.’ Thus, the poem goes into place, it forms and becomes poetry, insofar as the poem’s law, its poetic ‘otherworld’, is the condition of the possibility of poetry, and poetic form. However, even leaving aside the notion of place, otherworld leads us to a more essential discussion of the word ‘other’. Other-world means both a) other than this world, and b) other than world (i.e. a world that is not a world; a ground without ground, a void or abyss). And for Murray, this experience of absolute otherness is the truth of poetry: in whose form we experience an ambiguous, unknowable relation, where the impossible appears possible as a ‘summoning’, or as an eerie, wakeful dream:

And that otherworld incongruence
spindling faintly through the day,
heightening thought, blanking it,
silvering, beckoning away

The poem’s translation of the otherworld into the world of ‘daylight reason’ produces a moment of incongruence; much like the performance of translation, where infinite difference is revealed ‘in the cracks’ between languages. Benjamin demonstrates difference in translation, by giving the example of the translator who must follow the words of the original poem, as if they were fragments of a broken vase. In piecing the shards together, the translator does not produce a likeness of the original, but instead a likeness of its original difference. In the case of the vase, the original unity is shown to be made of cracks. Thus, unity itself is a form of

155 Murray, ‘In Murray’s Dictionary’, Dog Fox Field, p. 74. The word aplace means ‘going to ground physically’ (and mentally), and Martin Leer argues that Murray’s use of the word refers to a chiastic integration of place and mind; which leads to ‘regeneration’. See Leer, ‘This Country is my Mind’, The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays, eds. Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001) p. 23–24. I would argue, however, that aplace also suggests the becoming of place, that is, before a place is a place. This idea of incomplete transformation, means that any integration (of body and landscape) must also remain unfinished.

156 Murray, ‘The Dialectic of Dreams’, The People’s Otherworld (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1983) p. 65. The revised version of the poem is quoted.
difference.\textsuperscript{157} And, for Murray, the incongruence that we feel as a poetic experience, is the act of translation; and we may take this idea quite literally. In translation, language is extended and renewed, shifted and displaced—an act that equally displaces the ‘namer’ (man). Murray describes the poetic experience, making reference to Freud, as a fusion of two modes of consciousness: the waking life and the dreaming life. However, for Murray this fusion occurs in poetry, and not the subconscious—for it is in contemplating poetry that the two modes oscillate, neither separating, nor fully unifying, as Murray writes: ‘\textit{We can’t get to the end of it, somehow, though we may affect to… We don’t exhaust the aesthetic experience; it exhausts us’}.\textsuperscript{158} The unending nature of the aesthetic experience is a manifestation of the unending task; what Benjamin calls absolute translatability. In Murray, however, it is ‘the otherworld’. But even the otherworld’s truth (as ‘place’, ‘experience’ or ‘reverie’) cannot be fully grasped—for it is an ideal concept (the condition of the possibility of otherness/ other-worldliness), and its real manifestation is the experience of translation, of otherness \textit{in language}.

However, nowhere is the experience of otherness, or otherworldliness as extreme as in \textit{Translations}. Murray enacts a number of displacements (structural, thematic and formal). First, he sets up a divide between worlds: the human and the natural. Nature is cordoned off; one must approach her otherness through a separate section, or frame. Through this structural division, Murray demonstrates that the natural world is not only beyond our grasp, but that nature itself is unnatural. Indeed, our relation to nature is always mediated: we are at once part of the natural world as human beings and animals, and at once apart.\textsuperscript{159} Second, Murray demonstrates the experience of otherness thematically. His human translations focus on what might be called anthropocentric conceits: home,
property, hearth, love, whereas his natural translations launch into an ‘otherworld’; a realm whose sheer difference appears inappropriate, excessive, beyond all conceit. Third, Murray shows the experience of otherness formally—on the one hand, his translations of the human world appear in Murray’s usual poetic form, where his argot is, as he calls it, ‘loose-limbed’ and sprawling; thoroughly vernacular. On the other hand, his translations of nature are palpably foreign: not just in conceit (their focus lies exclusively on the ‘being’ of natural things) but in every word—indeed, it seems as if language itself is transformed—as poetry is pushed so far from itself and its historical form, or mask, that it appears to snap, break, shock. Of Murray’s Translations, Robert Crawford writes that the poems: ‘...give the impression of a rendering from another language which leaves us a little outside human speech. As readers, we are being required to cope with translation; we are also being translated.’160

And yet, Murray’s translations from nature merely enact, in the most extreme way, what his poems have always done, namely, rendering foreign our own mother tongue, so that we approach it as a stranger would—somewhat speechless, uncertain of our relation to the world. Thus, when Murray attempts to divide the human and the natural world, whether structurally, thematically, or poetically, it is the divide itself that crumbles. Indeed, the ‘aesthetic experience’ of the natural world is merely a translation of our own human otherness. And translation is human; an experience of being human. For it is not poiesis or making that determines human creation, but translation. Thus, ‘otherness’ underscores Murray’s human translations, too.

In fact, the otherworldly nature of the human must be emphasised, because to read Murray’s human translations, is to imagine that one is at home. The word ‘home’ occurs frequently, as well as ideas of home: of country, property, travelling, arrival. The first stanza of Murray’s poem, ‘Home Suite’ (a homonym for Home Sweet….) ‘Home is the first and final poem and every poem between has this mum

home seam’, now sounds uncanny—for we are not at home in poetry, but always at some remove, always in translation.

So then, let us turn to Murray’s eight translations of the human world, for these poems not only frame and enrich the collection, but expand Murray’s notion of poetry’s otherworld, as founded not on presence or presences, but rather, on translation. With this in mind, we will begin by addressing Murray’s act of naming poetry, ‘translation’.

6.3 Translation is Poetry

Murray’s translation of Jünger’s poem, ‘Ultima Ratio’, is the only foreign language translation in Translations. It appears in the first section of the book, almost hidden, that is, sandwiched between his own poems, so that the traditional separation of poetry and translation falls away, disappears. And yet, as hidden, ‘Ultima Ratio’ announces itself as a translation, as do all of Murray’s ‘poems’. The poet therefore, does not seek to cover over the original poem, nor block its light, but rather, to question something more essential: what is the difference between a poem and a translation? This question reverberates in two ways: a) is there a distinction between their tasks, their performance in language, their place in history, their purpose or goal? or b) are they in fact alike, related?

In Translations, Murray demonstrates their likeness: these poems are translations, and thus, the poet is a translator. Calling poetry by another name, Murray recalls the foreign nature of poetry that no one poem can grasp. And this foreign nature of poetry is its ungraspable essence—what Murray calls the otherworld, and Benjamin, the mysterious or secretive (Geheimnisvolle). In renaming poetry, Murray displaces its identity, or shows that such an identity was multiple and ambiguous all along. In Translations, poetry is not poetry: for poetry

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is translation, and vice versa. The two names come in and out of focus, but refuse to unify, thus showing the infinite fracture between name and thing, word and essence, just as Benjamin’s own acts of renaming (pure language, the true language, the holy text, absolute translatability) reveal the impossibility of a name to give up a thing’s essence.

At the same time, however, Murray’s re-naming points to poetry’s more essential nature, that is, to the poet and the translator’s shared task, to their (failed) striving for expression—for doesn’t the poet break through his language, just as the translator, to paraphrase Benjamin, follows (folgen) the original (as if following) the shards of a broken vessel? And even further, aren’t poems condemned to history, just like translations, and therefore prone to being forgotten, neglected, surpassed by another poem over time? In other words, isn’t the ‘life’ that Benjamin attributes to poetry, inseparable from the ‘survival’ that he attributes to translation? For we could not deny translation ‘life’ nor poetry ‘survival’. And Benjamin himself knows this: for he is clear to point out that translation itself (the condition of the possibility of translating anything at all) cannot be forgotten, even if no translator were to appear, or no poem ever translated. In the same way, poetry itself, is always recalled, remembered, revived, restored—for its survival does not depend on a poet appearing, nor on a poem being written, but rather on the absolute concept of poetry itself, what Benjamin calls the greater life of history or ‘God’s remembrance.’

So then, Murray, in demonstrating the inter-relatedness of poetry and translation, their Zweideutigkeit, goes even further to ask: what if there is no essential difference between the two? And even if poetry is understood as the origin of translation, as the most authentic and therefore, the most truthful, then Benjamin himself reminds us that this aura of originality is, ironically, bestowed upon the poem by the poem’s translatability. In other words, poetry is only original, insofar as it is first translatable. Thus, the concept of translation is essentially prior to

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162 ibid. p. 78 (GS 4.1, p. 18).
163 Translatability is an ideal concept: it exists regardless of the existence of man, and regardless of the existence of material translations. ibid. p. 70 (GS 4.1, p. 10).
poetry. But poetry is not merely a handmaiden of translation, rather, poetry is translation—that is, the poem, in order to be poetic is simultaneously something else, simultaneously a translation. The identities of poetry and translation are neither transparent nor clear, indeed, they are duplicitous, secretive, foreign—for, as Murray shows us, each may take on the other’s name.

No wonder then, that when he writes of his time as a translator at the Institute in his book, *Ethic Radio*, Murray compares the work to a cover, a recourse for ‘decent spies’:

> It was a job like Australia: peace and cover,  
> a recourse for exiles, poets, decent spies,  
> for plotters who meant to rise from the dead with their circle.\(^{164}\)

The title of the poem from which these lines come, ‘Employment for the Castes in Abeyance’,\(^{165}\) sounds a tone of defiance, which suggests that there exists an employment beyond the Institute: translation for translation’s sake. And yet, until such time, the castes of exiles, poets and decent spies are kept in abeyance, but given ‘fair pay, clean work.. to keep the forebrain supple.’ When Murray leaves the Institute, it is with a sense of wistful triumph—for not only has science failed:

> Machine translation never happened:  
> language defeated it. We are a language species

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\(^{165}\) The poem’s title itself is worthy of study: historically, *abeyance* was used in legal circles to mean a state of waiting or expectation of the law, in cases where there was no claimant or owner. The law is thus said to be held in abeyance; for no lawful judgement can be made. Murray’s use of the word is interesting, and I think, bears some resemblance to Benjamin’s notion of incompleteness. For Murray, the translator is in a state of permanent abeyance—the task of the translator is infinite and unending as language itself. (Abeyance is old French, from *abeance*, of condition and *abeer*, *abaher*, to gape or aspire after, à to + *beer*, *baer*, *bader* (bader) to open the mouth widely. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
No longer employed, Murray writes, *dead-pan*: ‘In the midst of life, we are in employment.’ The ‘we’ of the poem, which includes the audience, cannot leave off translation, for ‘we are a language species.’ At the same time, however, this employment is of a particular type. It is ‘a job like Australia’, and it comes with certain expectations and rules—for the translator’s agreement is at best an interpretation, an understanding.166

In the midst of life, we are in employment. Or: we are in the midst of life, in employment. It is a job that we cannot refuse or give up; a job that we don’t even fully understand, and whose parameters are neither laid out nor explained. But even so, there are particulars: a sense of translating from and to, an address, or ‘conversation’, as Hans Gadamer describes it.167 For the Australian translator, it is unavoidable that the job is ‘like Australia.’ Historically, Australia’s geographic isolation, coupled with its antipodean ‘strangeness’ and promising beginning as a penal colony, lent its subjects a fraught and self-conscious manner, an overwhelming doubt. it is obvious that no poet has or will ever escape being employed as a translator. As Judith Wright remarks: ‘We are, and always have been, two people in one—a race of Europeans exiled from their own mainstream of development, yet carrying on that stream within themselves, and a race different in themselves because their environment and their influences are different.’168 This ‘double aspect’ of Australia, as Wright calls it, demands constant translation between two inverse histories, continents, and races—although Wright does not expound here upon the implications of the double aspect from a vantage point other than that of ‘the European’.

Race has already come in then, for this is the other battle of poetry and translation—a relating to language and languages as if to a pattern of skin and blood

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167 ibid. p. 388.
and ties. And race is no less palpable in Benjamin’s metaphor of the poet who stands in the centre of the ‘Bergwald der Sprache’; a forest that automatically precludes all non-German poets, but particularly, all non-European poets. The higher and purer air of the mountain forests is no accident, for it cannot help but bring to mind the lower and filthier air of the flatlands or plains—those places where the poet does not stand. What does this all mean for the Australian poet (a term that still means ‘European’)? On the one hand, there is Western Europe, almost imaginary in its distance, hence all the more symbolic; and on the other hand, Australia, which is almost incomprehensible in its closeness, but all the more elusive if interpreted according to a Eurocentric sensibility. Historically, the battle appears to be about place. For the Australian, difference is executed from horizon to horizon: the gum trees, the bush, the sharp light, the bird-sounds, the marsupials, the gorges, the dry and unrelenting interior, the sheer distance from one place to any other place. But place itself does not reveal difference, it is a category of sights and smells, a menagerie like any other. Furthermore, such difference is no longer different for the Australian poet—who faces the same gum trees, the light, the big dry, every day—for the bush too is a language forest, and just as symbolic as Benjamin’s language forest, and thus, no less subject to claims of romanticism or a negative romanticism—although the bush is perhaps only recently accorded a status of the ‘sublime’.

So then, this difference that makes no difference (and yet, makes all the difference in the world) covers itself up at the moment it speaks. The poet’s mother tongue, English, or Strine, tends to revert to irony or elusiveness, to cloud the reflection of its European roots, a reflection that only seems to emphasise the two-hundred years of Antipodean floundering—a wrinkling of culture and civilisation. This moment of self-reflection is Wright’s notion of Australia’s enforced double aspect. The poet therefore, speaks as a translator, with a double tongue, a split identity, and an uncertainty that appears as a stutter in its own language. In his poem on translation, a kind of early ars poetica, Murray writes:

169 Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 77 (GS 4.1, p. 16).
I was Western Europe. *Beiträge, reviste, dissertaties, rapports*, turned English under my one-fingered touch.  

Here, the Australian poet begins, *I was Western Europe*. One imagines that Murray will tell us what he, the poet, has become; what Australian poetry has become. But there is no answer. The origin of Australian poetry—Western Europe—is lost to us, and Murray emphasises this distance in a tapping of words: *Beiträge, reviste, dissertaties, rapports*—none of which ‘turn English’ under Murray’s ‘one fingered touch.’ Left foreign, the words operate as pure sound in Murray’s poem; a hammer of code that mimics the typing of the last stanza:

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seek, travel and print, seek-left-right-travel-and-bang
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as the Chinese typewriter went which I saw working when I was a translator at the Institute.

If the origin of Australian poetry is lost to us, then so is its identity, its currency now. Here, Murray’s inclusion of the Chinese typewriter in the final line of the poem is important. Despite appearances, the phrase does not indicate an anti-European dawn, nor the heralding of a new Sinesian poetry, but rather, it demands to be taken literally (just as Benjamin’s example of the interlinear version of the bible is to be interpreted *literally*; as an object that exists). In its literality then, the Chinese typewriter functions as a machine; a ‘translation’ of classical Chinese ideographic writing. The typewriter features two-thousand keys laid out on a ‘tray’, all representing traditional characters; beneath which are trays that feature several thousand more keys. The typewriter is an exhibit, and its performance is slow, as Murray shows by hyphenating the typed line: *seek-left-right-travel-and-

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bang, which forces the earlier rhythm to a shunt. But the slowness of the Chinese typewriter is made up for by its life, its continuing operation: it ‘went’, it was seen ‘working’. It survives. The translator’s earlier description of his employment as, ‘Teacup-and-Remington-days’, are no-longer. Thus, the Chinese typewriter introduces a new complexity to life at the Institute; but its appearance augers a general threat; that of science:

The trade was uneasy about computers, back then:
if they could be taught not to render, say, out of sight
out of mind as invisible lunatic

they might supersede us—not
because they’d be better. More on principle.

On principle, technology ‘might supersede us’, because the law of technology requires supersession, in the name of progress. And this means that the Chinese typewriter itself is doomed to fail: in time, it will be superseded by another machine, another attempt at translation; one day it will no longer be ‘seen working.’ The Chinese typewriter single-handedly underscores the sense of aspiration and failure inherent in science, and indeed, in every human translation. Despite its thousands of keys, the Chinese typewriter cannot adequately translate its own language; only its complexity. And this is true of the translator, and of translation too.

6.4 The Ultima Ratio: F.G. Jünger and the Limits of Humanity

Murray’s inclusion of Jünger’s ‘Ultima Ratio’ is the only foreign language translation in Translations, and it appears in a section devoted to translating the human world. As a ‘traditional’ translation, one immediately recognises that there is
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Helen Lambert

an original poem upon which it is based, and to which it might be compared. ‘Ultima Ratio’ suggests a prior ‘Ultima Ratio’, and in between the two texts, lie the many choices of the translator, which establish his task. In addition, one can see that ‘Ultima Ratio’ speaks of translation in relation to ‘the human’ and ‘the human world’, and thus, it is concerned with the question of the polis, and of politics. 

With so many issues at stake, Murray’s ‘Ultima Ratio’ must be read with great care and in concert with Jünger’s original poem.

Let us begin with the title—a Latin term that requires translation. Ratio means reckoning, account, relation, method, reason, cause; and ultimus: furthest, most distant, extreme, last, end. Ultima ratio may be translated as ‘final reason’, ‘ultimate cause’, or ‘final measure’. But the term itself is a translation. Indeed, ultima ratio is a Scholastic translation from the Greek. For Aristotle, there are four causes, aitia: substance, matter, origin of change, and end. These causes are irreducible, and all four must come together in order to understand being. However, the four Greek causes must be re-interpreted and translated by the Scholastics in order to accord with the Christian, monotheistic view of creation. To this end, all four causes are subsumed into one final cause or end; a being that constitutes the beginning and end of all being. And this ‘final cause’ for Aquinas is the ultima ratio, ‘the metaphysical concept of God’.

As the very title, ‘Ultima Ratio’ leads us to the question of translation, let us turn to the poem itself, which does not appear in Translations:

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171 We have already raised some of the political and ethical issues involved in translation, for instance, the ways in which mimetic translation and literal translation confront the notion of foreignness or difference. Of course, the same questions of politics and ethics must now be extended to translations of the human versus nature.


Wie der Titanenwitz
Hinweg nun siedet,
Wie alles rostig wird,
Was er geschmiedet.

Sie hofften törich toll,
Das es gelänge.
Nun brechen überall
Blech und Gestänge.

Der Uniform liegt umher
In rohen Haufen.
Geduld! Auch dieser Rest
Wird sich verlaufen.

Sie schaffen stets ja mit,
Was sie vernichtet,
Und fallen mit der Last,
Die sie errichtet.

Here is Murray’s translation:

Like vapour, the titanic scheme
Is dissipated,
Everything grows rusty now
That they created.

They hoped to make their craze
The lasting Plan,
Now it falls apart everywhere,
Sheet steel and span.

Raw chaos lies heaped up
On wide display.
Be patient. Even the fag-ends
Will crumble away.

Everything they made contained
What brought their fall
And the great burden they were
Crushes them all.

Jünger’s *ultima ratio* then, is a critique of the very idea of an ultimate cause, and its historical and political mis-translation. In the Enlightenment, *ultima ratio* is no longer understood as God, but as ultimate reason, and humans therefore, take the place of God. So then, Jünger’s poem announces the beginning of a world in which a) the gods have disappeared, and b) the Nazi reign, a human creation, has fallen; indeed, been utterly destroyed. And Murray’s translation of Jünger may also be read as another translation of *ultima ratio*, and another critique. Let us turn to the ‘scene of translation.’

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176 Anton Richter claims that ‘Ultima Ratio’ is caustically titled—for the end of reason is located in Jünger’s Germany, whose fall after the Nazi reign is a ‘Titanic joke’ (*Titanenwitz*), and a source of national Schadenfreude. But the causticity of the joke goes well beyond this particular place, or time, to the ultimate origin of human destruction—creativity. As Jünger writes: ‘Sie schaffen stets ja mit,/ was sie vernichten./ Und fallen mit der Last,/ Die sie errichtet.’ (Everything they made/ contained what brought their fall/ And the great burden that they were/crushes them all). Human creation, in other words, contains the seed of its destruction.

6.5 The Translator’s Choice

I decided to translate it (‘Ultima Ratio’) to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. It had, of course, been written in 1945 on the fall of the Nazis, but I thought that in spirit it very well fitted the crash of the next totalitarian nightmare—Les Murray.178

Murray’s translation of ‘Ultima Ratio’ is not strictly literal, although there are always losses and gains in any translation, no matter how the translator proceeds. And because the difference between languages is infinite—even if we could list all of the losses and gains, all the additions and the subtractions, we will be no closer to understanding the poem or the translation; we would only be engaging in our own interpretation or translation.179 Regardless, the translator’s choices, as far as we can unfold them, are themselves important—for they reveal the translator’s struggle to unify the abyss between two languages; sometimes by omitting a word, sometimes by adding one. Such alterations reveal the immensity of his task; and something of its truth, namely, that the bottomless abyss between languages lies at the origin of language itself. This truth is what Benjamin calls the ausdruckloses und schöpferisches Wort (the expressionless and creative word) that operates within real languages—for every language communicates its own communicability, nothing more.180 And yet, this idea of an ultimate meaninglessness is radical and terrifying for poetry (and not only for poetry). Naturally then, the translator’s alterations

178 Les Murray, in personal correspondence, 4th July, 2005 (quoted with permission of the author).
180 ibid. p. 80 (GS 4.1, p. 19).
work to conceal the appearance of the abyss, and to cover over the foreign in their own language (for fear that it appears meaningless or monstrous). Thus, the translator sets out to ‘improve’ the sound, or ‘add sense’, a task that requires bending the original work, forcing it, or betraying it in some way, so that it seems acceptable or at least legible, in the new language.

So then, what are the losses and gains, as John Sallis calls them, in this translation? We will mention only a few: *Titanenwitz* for example, is translated as *titanic scheme*, rather than *titanic joke* or *titanic wit*. And immediately we lose certain things, like Jünger’s caustic reference to the joke; and to the immensity of the titan’s laughter; and, although it is nonsensical, to the titan’s wit or sense, which reads as a gross extension of the joke. However, we also gain certain things, even if the method of gaining is sometimes questionable. In this case, the word ‘scheme’ is simply not there; and we might begin to ask who is writing the poem. ‘Scheme’ alters the constitution of the Titans; they are not jokers, but schemers; their power is systematic, their violence is not funny: it is banal, institutional, and planned. Throughout his translation then, Murray counters the idea that a) destruction could be interpreted as the random play of innocents; and b) the worst effect of titanic rule might not be mass extermination, exile, or loss, but simply that, as Jünger observes: ‘Everything grows rusty now’ — as if history is only ever a neglected child’s toy. (Of course, such understatement could also be seen to heighten the tragedy of Jünger’s poem). Murray, however, by revealing the underlying scheme of titanic violence, refuses to absolve them of their guilt. They are guilty and they know it. For Murray, the scheme is that which destroys creation; and this idea is raised in key moments of his translation.

In the second stanza, for instance, Murray translates, ‘Sie hofften töricht toll/Daß es gelänge’, as, ‘they hoped to make their craze/the lasting Plan.’ Certainly, the first line comes close—*töricht* suggests fatuity, idiocy or absurdity, and *toll* is akin to ‘mad’ or ‘crazily good’, or even ‘cool’. However, the second line makes no

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182 *Witz* means joke, and also ‘wit’ or intelligence.
mention of ‘the lasting Plan’ (and Murray’s capitalisation of the noun, only emphasises his choice). ‘Daß es gelänge’ means literally, *that it would have succeeded*. What would have been achieved successfully however, is not a lasting plan, but a lasting state of absurdity, folly, the results of *their fatuous madness*, if you will. Murray’s addition of the word ‘plan’ is in accordance with his earlier transposition of ‘scheme’ for ‘wit’. Titanic violence, Murray’s version argues, is a premeditated one, and further, it is perpetrated by more than one Titan: by the group, the mass, ‘the They.’

The naming of group violence is evident in many of Murray’s poems, through the emphasis of capitalised nouns such as ‘Institute’, ‘Culture’, ‘Church’, ‘Gentility’, ‘Ascendancy’, or through one’s victimisation at the hands of such a group.183 In ‘Rock Music’ for instance, Murray (controversially) compares sex with the Nazis, and in his poem ‘A Stage in Gentrification’, he likens ‘Culture’ to an East German plastic bag.184 Here, one is reminded of Jünger’s own direct and undecorated lines:

> Eighty million people were murdered by police  
> in the selfsame terms and spirit which nag  
> and bully and set the atmosphere  
> inside the East German plastic bag.

Murray’s third alteration occurs in the third stanza, when he translates Jünger’s *Der Unform* as ‘raw chaos’. And, even if we were to agree that there is a quality of rawness or ‘chaos’ to formlessness; this gain takes away from *Der Unform*’s very abstractness, its unsentimental announcement of a form that is no

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183 Nominal capitalisation is frequently used in Murray’s poems (however, not so frequently that it appears nostalgic for English when it did so, or for German, which still does). Murray’s capitalisation is not only used *to name* certain groups or institutions, but to add emphasis to a word, such as ‘Earth’, ‘Home’, ‘Nature’, ‘Borders’, ‘Death’. When an English noun is capitalised, it emulates a proper noun; and one treats the word differently, with a degree of formality that is usually attributed to Proper Names.

longer. Because Murray effects changes throughout this stanza, let us focus only on the most significant one: namely, his translation of: ‘Geduld! Auch dieser Rest/Wird sich verlaufen’, as: ‘Be patient. Even the fag-ends/Will crumble away.’ Here, Murray takes away the exclamatory, Patience! (Geduld!), replacing it with the statement, ‘Be patient.’ Fag-ends is Murray’s vernacular interpretation of the German noun, Der Rest (remains). The word is surprising; ‘fag-end’ is a last bit of a cloth, or rope and the Oxford Dictionary describes it as being ‘often of courser texture than the rest’, while also attributing the word to meaning, ‘the last part or remnant of something; after the best has been used.’ While not a poor choice in the context of Jünger’s poem, the word speaks over and beyond the idea of remains. From the start, fag-ends announces itself as something ‘course’, not the best, something therefore, whose fate as a left over, a poor remainder, is already obvious. The last line, Murray translates as ‘Will crumble away’, and although it makes better ‘sense’ in English, it has a somewhat different rendering in German. ‘Wird sich verlaufen’ is reflexive; it means to lose itself; for the verb refers back to the remnants, or fag-ends, that will also lose themselves in time; that is, lose their identity (to themselves) as fag-ends. To crumble away is one way of putting this, but Murray’s gain in sense, is a loss in reflexivity. Indeed, ‘crumble’ does not double up upon itself, hence, it is not conscious of its own loss; it merely ‘crumbles away.’

The final alteration occurs in the fourth and final stanza. Here, Murray may be charged not with the supplanting of words (for this can hardly be avoided in any translation), nor the addition of a word to render ‘better sense’, but with changing the poet’s tense; and thus, changing our relation to time. The final stanza alternates between present and perfect tense: ‘Everything they make contains/what they destroyed…’ The first line introduces a sense of urgent, unfolding action and the second line concludes the action, so suddenly, it is as if a door has been slammed. The technique forms an elegant pattern, but its effect is jarring—as the tempo

185 Note that the prefix ‘un’ is usually a negation of the noun, verb or adverb that follows; hence, unform means something like not-form or formless.
changes, so does our frame of history. At first, one senses that the Titans have not yet departed, that their actions are in ‘present-time’, and that this time, this ‘now’, is at issue. But the sudden shift to perfect tense reveals that ‘now’ is no longer ‘now’: it is already then; and we must reflect upon it as a completed action, as something historical. Jünger’s vacillation of present-perfect tense demonstrates that we are constantly separated from direct action and from ‘history as it really was’, by our very reflection upon it, and this reflection is a function of language. So when Murray flips Jünger’s pattern around, he offers a different interpretation of time; of what we should be ‘experiencing’, and a different translation of history.

Murray renders the first three lines in perfect tense; and only shifts to the present tense in the final line. His emphasis on completed action, imparts an historical finality to the poem—indeed, it seems to puts an end to the titanic reign—for their actions are not in our present view, but grow ever more distant:

Everything they made contained
What brought their fall
And the great burden they were
Crushes them all.

The titans are at bay, that is, until the final line. Here, Murray’s sudden shift to the present tense is surprising. If Jünger’s stanza is marked by a vacillating sense of time and history, then Murray’s is marked by the introduction of history as the great burden that is ‘now’—when we were thinking it was back ‘then’. This shock strikes almost viscerally: ‘Crushes them all’. Crush makes a sound like crash—it is almost onomatopoeic. And, added to the irruption of history, that seems to flood into language, is another punishment: the act of crushing them all. The punishment remains with us, because the act is in the present tense, and thus forever incomplete as crushing. Although the crushing is self inflicted (a result of the Titan’s actions,

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187 It is as if history as ‘then’ cannot keep to its proper place, but comes crashing through into the present tense, the ‘now’.
their plans, their excesses), the word carries with it a sense of retribution; of just
desserts. Who is crushing them? Not just everything that they made, the buildings
and rubble, but, ‘the burden that they were’—as it is told by history. History comes
to the fore as a force; and Murray’s departure from Jünger’s own last line (‘What
they erected’) could not be more striking. In Murray, we witness a crushing that
may one day crush us. Thus, the cycle of destruction, in one way or another,
continues.

If Murray’s version refuses to absolve the Titans of their violence and guilt,
then he equally refuses to leave the origin of such violence unexplained. For
Murray, violence, like history, is schematic; its actions are not random or
anonymous, but authored, contemplated and planned. In this vein, history may be
viewed as a series of violent compositions; of human ‘poemes’—that threaten us
with a constant danger, as Benjamin warns, ‘…even the dead will not be safe from
the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.’

Indeed, Murray’s translation of ‘Ultima Ratio’ is a critique of all finite
systems: whether totalitarian, fascist or technological, but particularly of the
Enlightenment whose ideological translation of ultima ratio, means human reason
is elevated to the level of final cause, or God. This, Murray writes, leads to a state
where, ‘we envisage felicity and even health in terms not of harmony with exterior
and interior entities, but in terms of presiding over them through the power of
articulate reason….The Enlightenment is a Luciferian poem. Lucifer is the light-
bringer, and even sleeps with the lights on.’

In Jünger’s poem, the critique of the enlightenment is heightened, not by
the image of Lucifer, but via a reference to the titans, who, in Greek myth are

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188 See Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, SW v. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W.
189 Murray’s critique of the Enlightenment is not only evident in his prose writing, but also in his
poetry. Almon argues that Murray responds to the ‘shadow’ of the Enlightenment, by attempting a
poetry of wholespeak; that ‘heals the wounds inflicted by reason’ (Novalis). Bert Almon, ‘Les
Murray’s Critique of the Enlightenment’, Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les
190 Murray, ‘Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment’, Blocks and Tackles (Sydney: Angus &
known for their attempt to overthrow the Gods. Here is a warning, for titanic man—whether aligned to Cronus, castrator of his father and devourer of children; or Hyperion, so often mistaken for the sun; or to Oceanus, Themis or Mnemosyne, who personified the ocean, order and memory—is always doomed. And for Jünger, the titans represent a) the finite goals of progress, technology, material goods and power and b) the character of the worker (der Arbeiter), who labours to amass, collect, exploit and destroy. Jünger’s poem thus serves as a warning—for once the world is deprived of all proportion, harmony and creativity; once man turns away from the gods, the result will be colossal: ‘a repetition of the cataclysm that destroyed the power of the Titans.’

In the shadow of the titans, creativity and destruction take on a different timbre—it is not the violent opposition of Apolline and Dionysiac forces of which Nietzsche writes, nor is it muse-driven or transcendent; rather, it is the banausic struggle of humans against the Gods, insofar as it is a struggle for the finite (totality and control). A creation means something forged within a technological frame—a frame whose ends are power, and whose means are endless. No wonder then, that Jünger, in an article on technology, compares the unending quest for power to a vast foundry, wherein, ‘The fire grows and fills, it increases itself and spreads itself out, the blaze breaks forth everywhere in surges. It is the workplace, wherein the Cyclops work.’ When Jünger compares the workers to the giant Cyclops, he not only draws our attention to their colossal desire; the unceasing, spreading fire of their toil, but to their singular monstrosity: that bulging, monocular eye. To have one eye means to have no alternate view, no depth of field, to focus upon one

192 The Apolline and Dionysian are named after the two Greek Gods, who, for Nietzsche, represent opposing artistic forces. These two forces, ‘which spring from nature itself, without the mediation of the human artist’, are the Apolline, which follows Sculpture, and so creates in the image of dreams, and the Dionysian, that follows music, and so creates non-visually, in ecstasy. Art attempts to bridge these forces, and the struggle between dream and ecstasy, image and music, gives birth to tragedy. See Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music, ed. Michael Tanner, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 1993).
thing—and this one-sidedness is the threat of which Jünger warns, whether it is personified by the worker, who is blinded by the fire of production, or the Titans, who think they can overthrow the Gods. For Jünger, such desire is lawless—out of control—and he warns that the very laws of technology may turn back (like Frankenstein) upon the creator: ‘Mankind is no longer the master of mechanical laws (Gesetzlichkeit), these laws have imprisoned him. These laws master him.’

‘Ultima Ratio’ then, is a warning. Jünger uses mechanical references and metaphors with an almost Cyclopean singularity; indeed, there is no relief from the man-made nature of the devastation. For instance, when referring to the act of creating or making, Jünger forgoes the verb machen (to make), for schaffen (to accomplish) or schmeiden (to forge). Here, forging does not refer to the fabrications of the mind, nor to the subtle arts of conterfeiture, but to the forging of tools, buildings, industries, and cities of ‘steel and span’ (Blech und Gestänger). Similarly, none of the symbols of the nation’s fall are vested in nature or biologic decay. The poet employs man-made metaphors, he speaks of everything going rusty, of the rubble’s sheer mass and accumulation (der Haufen). To heighten the sense of human-forged ruin, Jünger even coins a word: ‘der Unform’. This coinage is almost untranslatable in English—for the word implies a form that has lost its form; that is now unformed. We would not call it chaos, exactly; for this suggests an a priori formless state, ‘the nothing’ before creation; and in the context of the poem, chaos carries romantic, biblical and poetic connotations. The word formless is closer, but it impart the sense of mourning, or history that is implicit in Unform—clearly Der Unform was a form; it retains the residue or reminder of form within its dismantlement. And just as Jünger warns of the self-annihilation inherent in fascism, Murray extends the warning to all totalising systems that legalise and thus ‘administer’ violence.

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Murray’s warning accords with his previous articulation of violence, namely, his theory of ‘poemes’—a coinage Murray gives to creations that have about them an ulterior end or use, and may, if victorious, threaten what we call ‘poems’.196 The literal divide between poems and poemes is almost non-existent—for only an ‘e’ separates one from the other. However, this one excess letter, symbolises the difference between art and a systematic logic taken to its extreme: to the ‘ultima ratio’.197 Because poemes serve a cause or end, they can be said to have an ‘interest’ or a share in something. This quality of interest identifies them as being disinterested; not all there. Indeed, Murray writes that poesy, his earlier term for poems, ‘resembles poetry cut off at the neck.’198 Although they are not always dangerous, poemes may pose the greatest threat of all to poetry, as Murray writes: ‘If poetry now needs to be defended, it is principally against those other creativities of which it was the primal forerunner, and whose vehicles aren’t primarily verbal, though clouds of talk may accompany them. These now threaten to overwhelm literal poetry and bury it. And it also needs to be defended against large poems (poemes) that would capture it and maybe give it a privileged position if only it would serve their ends.’199

The politics of literal poetry then, is at stake—and here, one could well argue that literal translation is too. As Murray writes, ‘I have no truck with “free adaptations” (Nachdichtung) and suchlike frauds. You have the text there and the


197 Given Murray’s ancestral connection to the Oxford English Dictionary (written by Sir. James Murray) it seems fitting to compare his coinage ‘poeme’ with the dictionary’s closest listings: the nonce word ‘poemet’ (a short poem); and ‘poeste’ (an obsolete word for power). The Oxford English Dictionary, CD-Rom version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).


delightful puzzle is to match it exactly in the terms of your own language—that's been the only way I've translated, from foreign to native/mother tongue." Murray uses the word ‘obedience’ with respect to the art of translating, and he uses it again when referring to poetry; a word that recalls Benjamin’s idea of the task, and of the translator’s unforgeable duty to it. With obedience and literality in mind therefore, another translation of ‘Ultima Ratio’ is possible; one which attempts a literal translation of Jünger, following Benjamin's method, where English is made foreign to itself. And where the result, like Hölderlin’s literal rendering of Sophocles, appears monstrous and abyssal:

As the Titan’s-joke
Now seethes away,
As everything becomes rusty
that he forged.

They hoped fatuously mad,
That it would have succeeded.
Now breaks everywhere
steel and rods.

The Uniform lies about
In raw piles.
Patience! Also these remains
will lose themselves.

They create always yes with
what they destroyed,

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200 Les Murray, personal correspondence, 4th July, 2005; quoted with permission from the author. *Nachdichtung* literally means, ‘after poetry’—and refers to a work that takes a poem or composition as its model for adaptation.

201 My translation.
And fall with the burden
that they erected.

Following this literal translation, and in the wake of Jünger and Murray’s critique of the translation of *ultima ratio* from its four-fold, Greek beginning—we are left with the question of what *ultima ratio* means now—that is, what it means to be human, and to translate ‘being human’, in the wake of Fascism and Communism. And Murray ponders, in his defence of poetry, ‘If we accept the notion that humans are fundamentally poetic, rather than rational or irrational, it has some interesting consequences’. But it is here, amidst his translations of the human, that the consequences are caught up the act of translating; for whether of humans or nature, the state of being or presence is not posed ‘directly’, but in translation. Whether via foreign language translation, or the translation of our own mother-tongue, Murray translates not only our otherness to ourselves; but our debt to this ‘other’ which must be forever translated.

Let us turn therefore, to Murray’s translations of the human world, which may appear homely and tame by contrast to ‘Ultima Ratio’, at least on the surface. However, these human translations suggest an alternate translation of the human world, where the human is ‘poetic’—not ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’. Thus, Murray translates ideas ‘proper to the poetic human’: forgoing violence and its administration, for the sheltering aspects of humanity; home, land, travel, family and rituals. In contrast to his critique of the Enlightenment, and its focus on finite ends, here Murray introduces an ‘other’ world for humans, another beginning—not an *ultima ratio*, but an *ultima poiesis*—whose reach is infinite, beyond reason, ungraspable. And in this way, the task of the translator becomes a kind of learning human.

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203 Murray’s emphasis on politics and language is often expressed in his titles. *Learning Human*, the title of his selected poems from 2003, questions the assumption that humanity is *natural* or *familiar*. On the contrary, the title suggests that ‘human’ is a foreign language that continues to be learned. *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, the title of Murray’s 1996 collection, may be read as the poet’s appropriation of his much maligned public persona; a witty response to his critics, or a bleak
6.6 The Home Suite

Any feeling after final
must be home, with idyll–things
—Les Murray.

Murray’s translations of the human world appear on either side of the natural world: as a last foot–hold or grounding before one gets lost in nature. However, either because of their proximity to the natural world, or their slightness in number, the human translations do not make our world appear solid, but makeshift and temporary.

In the first poem, ‘Kimberley Brief’, we are introduced to the continent from above, only we can’t quite see it: the continent’s ‘whole gravel/of infinite dot–painting’ is obscured by cloud. The continent never shows itself to us—for it is just another stop on a tourist bus. As Murray reminds us, the human world is not our world at all; it is passing scenery and he likens our expectations of tourism—its sites, transports and exotic parades of difference—to poetry:

Why tell this in verse? For travelling your reasons can be the prosiest prose. As a tourist though, you come for the poetry.

The brief of the poem—clearly it is not just a brief on the Kimberley but also a brief, a summary, on the nature of being human, is this: you come for the poetry. And from this moment on, Murray translates the poetic pleasures of passing
through. ‘We had sights of more sites’, the narrator writes playfully, as if a tour guide. But history also passes through the poem; first as a landscape of possibility:

The Kimberley was once mooted as a National Home for the Jews, in the late-Thirties. Even then, they felt constrained to refuse. \(^{207}\)

Second, as a landscape of dissipation and uprootedness:

Kind people explained about Development and suicide; which race drank indoors, and which is seen drunk outside.
The lost sounded not dissimilar, whatever their skin.
I saw no squalor. Some houses looked lived around, some in. \(^{208}\)

And third, as a landscape that eludes us, that moves as quickly as tourism. The narrated histories of the Kimberley begin to shift and fade; just as the wider landscape begins ‘dissolving’:

Gaudi palisades spoke of wet-seasons by which a near-destroyed otherworld, that long ago was this world, is dissolving. \(^{209}\)

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\(^{207}\) The use of the word ‘constrained’ might suggest that the Jews were forced to choose Palestine as their homeland; when in fact, their choice of homeland was not so much a question of force, as an expression of freedom—a freedom to follow the law. ‘The Jews’ are mentioned only in relation to their refusal of the Kimberley as a homeland. Thus, it is hard to read ‘Kimberley Brief’ as a poem that celebrates a Jewish Australia. Indeed, the Jews disappear, and are replaced by the image of an ‘Aboriginal kibbutz’; and references to post-missionary Catholicism. The context augurs some questions: are we to read the Aboriginals as Australia’s Jews—a conflation that has obvious problems? Or are we to understand that the ‘Aboriginal kibbutz’, with its catholic props, is the ‘necessary’ translation of Judaism—just as the “new” testament translates the “old”? ibid. p. 4.

\(^{208}\) Murray is attuned to violence of tourism, where the history and truth of a place is often awkwardly smoothed over. Here, ‘Kind people’ must explain the problems of race (‘Development’ and ‘suicide’); even as the narrator insists, ‘I saw no squalor’. This moment is as unsettling as it is ambiguous. The judgement of ‘the kind people’, is also problematic: they see misery and squalor, where the narrator sees only a few houses being lived ‘around and some in’. Is this ‘squalor’? And is this what we should oppose? Or should we take squalor to mean something else, like the loss of culture and history? ibid. p. 5.

\(^{209}\) Murray, ‘Kimberley Brief’, Translations p. 6; my emphasis.
In the midst of this poetic-transformation, the tourist could lose his hold; his dislocation could spread beyond the Kimberley, ever outwards. Murray anticipates this displacement: this is ‘primeval/Australia, where we live’,\textsuperscript{210} he writes, but in locating us, he highlights our separation from primeval Australia, from the ‘where’ of our lives. Thus, our world—the world of the Australian and the human at large—is known as unknown. The poem’s end returns to the obfuscating clouds, and an image of the Kimberley region as a tourist trinket; a splendid door that might have been ‘ripped off’ (stolen, pocketed) if it weren’t for the clouds:

\begin{quote}
But the nacre of cloud had formed over the earth again, above, and the rust and dents were gone that say the Kimberleys are a splendid door ripped off the Gondwanaland car.\textsuperscript{211}
\end{quote}

Then, in ‘North Country Suite’, Murray translates another landscape at hurtling speeds. In this poem, however, the narrator is not a tourist, but an historian, intimately aware of how things were done, and where:

\begin{quote}
The river bridge once had a wheeled tower from which a thick stone table hung; this was when the dead ate midday dinner and smokes were holy, and trees were rung.\textsuperscript{212}
\end{quote}

The changes wrought to the North Country are recorded, simply, in the face of a cousin, whose ‘friendly smile is a progress’,\textsuperscript{213} and in the afternoon surf that ‘still turns realty ventures/over’;\textsuperscript{214} a progress of a very different kind. And here, as the narrator describes it, we are faced with a country ‘gathered at a dangerous crux of

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{idem. my emphasis.}
\textsuperscript{211} \textit{ibid. p. 7.}
\textsuperscript{212} Murray, ‘North Country Suite’, \textit{Translations}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{213} \textit{ibid. p. 11.}
\textsuperscript{214} \textit{ibid. p. 12.}
life—whose people may see in the land either: ‘new rainforest, or an ark of swimming pools.’

Indeed, as the human world unfolds, there is an increase in despair. The earlier delights of tourism and poetry fades, and Murray turns instead to the underlying threats to the country. Murray refers, of course, to Australia, in ‘this post-age of peace.’ Although they are not always tangible, the threats to this post-age of peace afflict any democracy, where violence and force is given up for the social good. In Australia, the social agreement to forgo violence must be continuously monitored and policed—by the populace—whether through smiles, evasion, understatement, measurement or tone. And ironically, it is in public that violence shows itself all the more strongly, as constantly withheld. As Murray writes of two mothers in ‘The Fellow Human’:

Their four-wheeled domains are compound of doors to slam
but only their children do. Drama is for private, for home.
Here, the tone is citizenly equal.

The price of being equal then, is suppression, a citizenly vigilance. One must cordon off the private realm from the public realm. This strict division is maintained from the opposite direction in his poem ‘Home Suite’. Here, the home is totalising and self-sustaining: ‘Home has no neighbours’, the poet writes, ‘They are less strong/than the tree, or the sideboard./All who come back belong.’ Indeed, if violence is allowed expression at home, then so is love. However, home’s love is won at the cost of the neighbour—for home has no need of neighbours, home is too strong. Thus, at home, in private, the relation to the other is foregone. Indeed, the public has no place at home, where there is no citizenly equal, no

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215 *idem.*
216 *idem.*
220 Murray, ‘Home Suite’, *Translations*, p. 57
opposition: ‘to war against home is the longest march.’ But what happens to the home when the neighbour comes knocking?

In ‘Crankshaft’, the family’s private realm is crossed by the narrator, and the transgression appears uncomfortable, it abrades, even though the visit is legitimate—the house is changing hands; being handed over to the narrator. However, although ‘the crankshaft’ is coming loose on the family’s private world, the narrator indicates that the story of the old inhabitants and the old house, is best left private:

I leave their real story
up its private road, where
it abrades and is master.
I’m glad to be not much deeper
than old gossip in it. Say fiction-deep.

And it is here, on the fringes, that the idea of home grows more distant. Indeed, the price of maintaining one’s home, is to live on the fringes of all other homes. It is no wonder then, that Australians fear going up private roads, if it is only to be caught up in a private story; a story that might stick, just as the bob spider’s web in ‘Equinoctial Gales at Hawthornden Castle’ will stick to the Bruce, or the father’s epithalamium to his daughter will stick to the wedding party. Indeed, as Murray shows us, the human world of the post-peace era, is becoming altogether too costly—for this is not a fabled era of peace, but of post-peace: of violence served at home and repudiated in public. And this is why the collection doesn’t end with the human, but must begin a new world of translations—of poems that ‘can’t be read/til you yourself are in it.’

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221 *idem.*
222 Murray, ‘Crankshaft’, *Translations*, p. 64.
223 See Murray’s poems, ‘Equinoctial Gales at Hawthornden Castle’ and ‘The Wedding at Berrico’, *Translations*, pp. 8, 60.
Part Three

Translations from the Natural World

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symbols
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

[Nature is a temple where the living pillars
Sometimes speak in confused languages;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
That observe him with familiar glances]

—Charles Baudelaire.225

Chapter Twelve

The Question of the Natural World

Nature gets around like word
— Les Murray.\(^{226}\)

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language
— Walter Benjamin.\(^{227}\)

Now we have reached the only titled section of the book: ‘Presence: Translations from the Natural World.’ This section forms the bulk of *Translations*, and it marks a radical departure from the surrounding ‘human’ poems. And yet, the two worlds remain connected: we humans cannot enter or leave the natural world, without going via the human world: the two sections are positioned like boundary gates to guard one world from the other, to open or close the doors of nature, or ward off trespass. The human sections not only remind us that nature itself is under threat, or that the frame around nature is human-made, but they also form a symmetry around nature, being comprised of four poems apiece. This outer mirroring anticipates an harmonic centre, and Murray does not disappoint: ‘Presence’ has forty poems and is therefore numerically related to the human world. The harmonic and structural correspondences between the outer and inner sections cannot, however, prepare us for the shock of the natural world. This shock is


\(^{227}\) Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, *SW* v.1, p. 62 (*GS* 2.1, p. 140).
performative: in the shift from the ‘human’ to the ‘natural world’, language is transformed, and as a result, humanity is translated.228

In this way, the two human sections are essential to the collection—they allow for translation to take place *between* the human and the natural world. This ground of openness or exchange is only possible on account of their prior separation; their foreignness. What then, lies between the two worlds? The abyss between humanity and nature—it is this abyss which is translated. Clearly, Murray does not divide the two worlds in order to forge nature into an ‘anthropological machine’, which exists in order to support and maintain the identity and rank of the human, our ‘humanity’.229 Rather, the divide *per se* is ambiguous: it is an effect of language. Thus, we humans remain simultaneously a part of, and apart from nature, and vice versa.

Even if we insist on taking the human and the natural world separately, in their own right, they cannot help but correspond. As Benjamin knows, this is not because they are identical, or even similar, but because they are translations and thus, subject to the law of translatability. The two worlds correspond because they cannot correspond. They are as foreign to each other as any other language. Indeed, the translation of each world translates something else, an additional word(l)d of foreignness: ‘the closer one looks at a word, the more distantly it looks back.’230 Certainly, Murray’s two worlds grow ever more strange and distant, and the separation of the human and natural world is an enactment of the difference of translation.

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228 Robert Crawford emphasises the performative nature of the section entitled “Presence”. However, it is important to note that the two other sections of the book are equally ‘performative’—for the book’s form as a whole is a part of this performance—for the reader moves *between worlds*, as if moving between languages. It is this larger structure which enacts the difference of translation. See Robert Crawford, ‘Les Murray’s “Present Sequence”’, *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray*, ed. Carmel Gaffney (Armidale: Kardoorair Press, 1997) pp. 54–68.


103
12.1 Name and Namelessness

We have got the word and we don’t understand it. It is like too much
—Les Murray.231

As we know, translation is an act of naming that may occur within one language, or across languages. And Murray’s structural divide between the natural and human world is further exacerbated by his use of names. Only one section is named: ‘Presence: Translations from the Natural World’. The human world, comprising of two sections, features no name. One assumes that humanity has no nature; that its history and world is unnameable.

Certainly the phrase, human nature, is a contradiction. Human nature and nature itself is inscribed in language; it is historical. However, history does not save humanity, rather it opens it to other threats: politics, duplicity, violence, ambiguity, suppression. For instance, in Murray’s poem, ‘The Fellow Human’, violence is kept ‘for private’ lest it disturb the Australian façade of peace, equanimity and the idea of ‘citizenly equal’.232 If humanity cannot escape the frame of history, then it can no more escape the historicity of nature. The two frames intersect via the act of translation, which shifts and displaces the life of languages. But are we any closer to understanding why nature bears a name, and humanity does not?

Because the human sections are without a name, they fall under the book’s wider title, ‘Translations from the Natural World’. In other words, humanity has no legitimate ground, or if it does, it is unworthy of its own name. What are the consequences of namelessness? For humans, the lack of a proper name signifies the loss of humanitas and its historical interests: identity, entitlement, ancestry, inheritance, property, society, civility, reason, politics, protection, law. To be

unnamed signifies the beginning of inhumanity: for, with the loss of the name, comes the loss of place, rank and one’s social relation and relate-ability to others. Benjamin calls this state, ‘mere life’ (blosse Leben), and this is later translated by Agamben as bare life; that is, a life that is no longer concerned with its own life.233

12.3 In Nature’s Name

For Murray, however, humanity is not entirely lost, rather, its sovereignty is suspended, or given over to nature. In Translations, we see that humans are subject to the natural world, which alone has a human name. Thus, naming shows itself to be a contradictory and displacing act. On the one hand, the name subjects nature to human knowledge and mastery. On the other hand, in giving the name, humanity is also named and subjugated. Murray’s use of the name therefore, demonstrates that humans are part of the natural world and uniquely severed from it—they are the ‘lords of nature’ and its slaves.234

The severance of the human from nature happens in and through languages, because humans are ‘the language species’.235 As Benjamin notes, however, language is only known to humans through the name; ‘because he speaks in names,


234 Benjamin uses the term ‘Lord of Nature’ (der Herr der Natur) to distinguish and elevate man as the namer or speaker of things. See Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, SW v.1, p. 65 (GS 2.1, p. 144).

man is the speaker of language, and for this very reason its only speaker.\footnote[236]{Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, \textit{SW} \textit{v.1}, p. 65 (\textit{GS 2.1}, p. 144).} Forever inhered in language then, humans have a particular duty and responsibility to words; to giving things names. In the act of naming, which is akin to translation,\footnote[237]{Benjamin’s essay on the essence of language, anticipates his later work on translation: the earlier essay deals with language as such and its relation to things via the name, while the later essay deals specifically on the relation of language as such and its relation to languages. When I say that ‘naming’ is akin to translation, I mean that naming is an act of translation. In his earlier essay, Benjamin posits ‘paradisiacal language’ as the origin of human languages. After the fall of man, human languages are mediate, and convey their separation from paradise, and the truth. And yet, the origin of the name (paradisiacal language) is also the fall, and this act cannot be repaired or overturned. The fall is manifest in the difference of languages, or what Benjamin calls translatability. But to name in language requires not original unity, but original difference. Andrew Benjamin argues that Benjamin’s idea of an original Paradisiacal language subjects his earlier idea of language to an original unity. However, I think that paradisiacal language is an articulation of what Benjamin later calls pure language—and that they are equally un-nameable names of an original difference—of that which is ungraspable and absolutely other: absolute translatability, the final stop of all mediate languages. See Andrew Benjamin’s essay, ‘Walter Benjamin and the Translator’s Task’, \textit{Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A new theory of words} (London: Routledge, 1989) pp. 86–108.} human language is renewed, extended, made different. Names do not disclose a thing’s truth or essence but rather, its truth \textit{in language}—a thing’s absolute name-ability or un-name-ability, if you will. Thus, naming, although it is a distinctly human task (nature does not name), points to the absolute origin of the name—the essential law of language (\textit{das Wesengesetz der Sprache})\footnote[238]{Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, \textit{SW} \textit{v.1}, p 65 (\textit{GS 2.1}, p. 145).}, that is manifest in the name as the ungraspable.\footnote[239]{\textit{idem.}} Thus, when Murray leaves the human sections unnamed, he demonstrates the impossibility of self-reflection: we humans cannot name ourselves, but can only receive our name from another. If we were to name ourselves ‘human’, or our world ‘humanity’, we would betray our unnameability—commit the hubris that makes us human. Thus, the name is always the name of the other. That the poet gives the human world no name, indicates there is another, more essential name for humanity, and this is communicated in the naming of the other—the natural world.

In contrast to the unnamed human world then, nature is entitled, or at least, has a name: ‘Presence: Translations from the Natural World’. The title may be
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ironic, although it is generally taken seriously as a betrayal of the poet’s intentions. These ‘intentions’ are taken to mean the poet’s interest or belief in ‘presence’—but not ‘presence’ understood in relation to the rest of the title: translations, and from the natural world. What does it mean to name the natural world? First, it means that humans are ultimately subject to the natural world. Second, it gives a priority to the natural world; one which we cannot ignore. Third, its title is a virtual mirror of the book’s title; but adds to it a supplement—the name ‘presence’. All of these aspects give to the natural world an original authenticity or entitlement, from which humans seem both a party to, and also excluded.

And in addition to the section’s title, there is its size: nature overwhelms the collection; appears magnified, elevated, and vested of a power that is beyond human fabrication. But this is perhaps Murray’s point—even as nature seems larger than life, the natural world is a translation; it is a human translation of nature. Thus, it demonstrates the survival of humanity, but in an elevated and different form.

In naming the natural world, Murray does not simply name nature or ‘the natural’, but our human relation to nature (and of course to ourselves, as human beings) that is forged in and through language. Therefore, if Murray’s natural translations overwhelm us, it is because he confronts us with the immense and infinite task of translating—of naming things; for it is through the name that, ‘pure language speaks’. Accordingly, Murray’s natural world is beyond our reach, even as it is laid out before us. Nature represents a world of ‘closedness’ (Verschlossenheit), that does not reveal itself to humanity, and remains opposed to

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240 Penelope Nelson reminds us that, ‘Australian vernacular jostles with scholarly argument; moments of sublimity are undercut by irony.’ Murray cannot be entirely severed from his culture, and he is known for his poetic rendering of the Australian vernacular. Nelson argues that Murray’s work may be read as both serious and ironic. This is not as contradictory as it seems: irony is dependant on seriousness—the ironist, who wishes to turn seriousness on its head, to mock its power and violence, must first ape seriousness, in order to appear disingenuous. See Nelson, ‘Irony, Identity and Les Murray’s Poetic Voices’, Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray, ed. Carmel Gaffney (Armidale: Kardoorair Press, 1997) p. 170.

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history. But this withdrawal of nature should not merely be seen as a sign of human redemption—a world that offers renewal or salvation—for this idea of nature also services our ends. Nor is nature’s closedness open to us via the name. Rather, nature withdraws because its language is nameless, and it continues to communicate its namelessness even after it has been named. The silence of nature therefore, continues to speak over and beyond its human name. Benjamin calls nature’s silence an infinite mourning, but to hear the mourning of nature, is to simultaneously recognise the violence of human naming, which attempts to silence nature’s speech. But is naming always an act of force? A violation? Could there be another mode of naming that attempts to let nature’s silence speak? This question leads us to Murray’s translation of the natural world—which attempts not to silence nature, but to translate its difference: to show that nature’s foreignness, its closedness, is more native to the ‘human world’ than we might think.

So it is strange then, that the relation between the human and the natural world, whether through the use of titles or lack thereof, speech or silence, is uniformly overlooked by scholars. And if the idea of the human in Translations is passed over, then it is because the natural world is taken to be the authentic subject of the book’s title, and consequently, the human world is simply ignored (as irrelevant, or as a mistaken addition). However, to take ‘Presence’ as a book unto itself, is to miss the significance of Murray’s task as a translator, and to make the logical mistake of taking the severed part for a whole. Furthermore, it is to

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243 For Murray, the ‘mum home seam’ of the human world is nature. Nature is maternal and provides a world and life for humans, animals and vegetation. But nature is not without risk: its home is chaotic, violent, unprotected and vulnerable to storms and weather. Thus, in nature, one must be prepared to be flung from one’s shelter, to be homeless and bereft. For humanity then, the ‘mum home seam’ of nature is both homely and unhomely. Freud calls this doubled sensation, the ‘unheimlich’ (unhomely, uncanny) where the familiar is not what it seems. See Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. ed. & trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1958) vol. 17, pp. 219–256 (‘Das Unheimliche’, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 12, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1947, pp. 227–268).

244 Steve Matthews does however, raise the relation between politics and the natural world, by pointing out the significance of ‘Ultima Ratio’, a poem that critiques Nazi Germany’s totalising politics; and which Matthews argues, motivates Murray’s turn towards the natural world. See Matthews, *Les Murray* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001) p. 124.
overlook the relation between the human and natural world, both of which are historical and political translations, that occur within human language and *through* translation.
12.3 Translating ‘Presence’—The Otherworld

Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man—not only, as is supposed of the poet—are in nature)
—Walter Benjamin.\(^{245}\)

Things are so wordless
—Les Murray.\(^{246}\)

Nature, according to Benjamin, is the source of ‘the life and language of man.’\(^{247}\) This may appear to be an unusual claim, but only if one presumes that human life and language originate with the human, as a progressive or biologic form of evolution. But, as Benjamin notes, it is not for the sake of human redemption that we turn to nature, but ‘for the sake of her (nature’s) redemption.’\(^{248}\) What is nature’s redemption? It is an assent to be named, in order to be free of the name. By giving itself up to be named, nature becomes the source of man’s life and language. It would be impossible to imagine the existence of human languages without a concurrent language that is nameless. Indeed, if it is man’s task is to translate things into names, then he requires a language that communicates namelessness. And this act of naming is not without violence or force.

For Benjamin, nature’s silence is the residue of ‘pure language’, or ‘God’s creative word’, and this silence only communicates itself in relation to its human

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\(^{245}\) Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, \textit{SW v.1}, p. 72 (\textit{GS 2.1}, p. 155).


\(^{247}\) Benjamin, \textit{SW v.1}, p. 72 (\textit{GS 2.1}, p. 155).

\(^{248}\) \textit{idem.}
name.\textsuperscript{249} So then, although it is necessary for nature to be nameless, in order that man can cognize the world through the name, their relation is nonetheless divisive, melancholic, and communicative of a forceful, linguistic hierarchy. And Benjamin writes, from the vantage point of nature:

But how much more melancholy it is to be named not from the one beautified (seligen) paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered, yet which according to God’s judgement (Spruch), have knowledge of things.\textsuperscript{250}

Thus, nature’s silent withdrawal in the act of being named, constitutes on the one hand, a withdrawal under force, a silence at the moment of violation; and on the other hand, an absolute withdrawal—an enactment of the impossibility of being named at all. Nature, as the source of human language and life, escapes the human intact; and is redeemed by remaining absolutely veiled; nameable as unnameable.

With the unnameability of nature in mind then, let us return to the title: ‘Presence: Translations from the natural world’. Here, Murray demonstrates an acute awareness of the complications and limitations of naming. At first glance, the title seems to address two separate concepts. On the one hand, ‘presence’: that is, the truth of a-linguistic creatures, or things. On the other hand, ‘Translations from the Natural World’, that is, the natural world, insofar as it is understood as a translation. But, the two concepts may also be read together, and this produces a ‘palindromic’ or doubled effect: presence \textit{is} translations from the natural world; and translations from the natural world \textit{is} presence.

The forwards and backwards structure of this title is curious in another respect: it is an uncanny reflection of the book’s title—but with one more word, ‘presence’. This supplementary word alters and extends Murray’s concept of

\textsuperscript{249} ibid. p. 74 (\textit{GS 2.1}, p. 157).
\textsuperscript{250} ibid. p. 73 (p. 155); \textit{translation modified}. 
translation, but particularly as it relates to the natural world. We cannot now read *Translations* without reading ‘presence’. What does this mean? Are the two concepts—translation and presence—the same? Do they correspond, or relate? Or does one concept usurp the other?

Clearly, the word presence is a supplement: it extends the book’s title—and thus indicates a revision, extension, or refinement of the book’s theme. ‘Presence’ then, has ramifications for the interpretation of the entire work; one could even say that this section overtakes the collection, because it transforms and transcends the original title. With this one additional word, Murray demonstrates the irreducible excess that occurs in translation: for at the moment ‘presence’ supplements the former title, it enacts its own translation of what is at stake, what is essential, in the act of translation. Just as a literary translation survives the life of the original poem, so the word ‘Presence’ survives the life of nature, and its translation. Thus, all along, Murray demonstrates that presence is not simply an excess or supplement, but the essence or task of translation.

So then, what might ‘presence’ mean? ‘Presence’ does not simply mean presence: the ‘here and now’, nor does it mean ‘thisness’ (haecceity), nor immediacy—for the word ‘presence’ is already mediated in language; it is known to us via the name, ‘presence’. Thus, although the name strives to express the ‘immediacy’ or ‘unity’ or ‘thisness’ of presence—it falls short, and names what is foreign to ‘presence’, that is, absence, that which is not here and now, that which is not unified. And presence does not mean being present, being here and now, there

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251 As we know, Benjamin’s concept of life as *history* means that life is not determined by nature or biology, but by temporality. This idea is echoed by Heidegger, who argues that the biologic idea of life and nature stem from the Latin *mistranslation* of the Greek terms *ousia* and *zoon*, which mean respectively: ‘the emergent, that which arises’, and ‘life’. See Heidegger’s, ‘Why Poets?’, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 208 (‘Wozu Dichter?’ *Holwege*, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950, p. 274).

252 Almon uses the Scholastics term *haecceity*, or *quidditas* (the ‘thisness’ or ‘whatness’ of a thing) to explain Murray’s notion of presence. The *thisness* of a chair for example, allows it to be recognised as one particular chair among many other chairs. Almon thinks that the Scholastic terms are an articulation of what he calls ‘radiance’, or the ‘reality of sheer being’, that he believes to be manifest in Les Murray’s translations from nature. See Almon’s ‘Fullness of Being in Les Murray’s “Presence: Translations from the Natural World”’, *Antipodes*, vol. 8, no. 2, December 1994, p. 126.
or then; it does not mean essence or existence, *essentia* or *existencia*, or *ousia* — rather, presence signifies its own name-ability as the name, presence.

So then, presence, like every other name, shows the failure of the name to name what it is; to name its essence. Indeed, in every name there is an ‘over precision’ that that is produced in the act of naming, and which Benjamin ascribes to man’s over-naming (*Überbenennung*) of things. Overnaming occurs *in the name*, which also names the gap between the name and the thing being named: ‘The word must communicate *something* (other than itself).’ Overnaming therefore, produces something in addition to the name, that is not native to the thing, but absolutely foreign — for as Benjamin writes, ‘Things have no proper names except in God.’ Thus, presence names the absolute unnameability of presence.

The word ‘presence’ is doubly performative: it names something other than itself, that is, it announces its own lack of presence, and it goes beyond the book’s original title, to re-name what is at stake for Murray: the question of presence. However, presence is only accessible insofar as it is caught up in the act of translation. The question of presence is more aptly a question of *translating* presence. So then, does Murray succeed in translating presence? Or is the translation of presence an impossible task? And, regardless of success or failure, how

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253 The question of presence in the history of philosophy is almost impossible to condense in a meaningful way, however, it cannot be dismissed. Presence is generally understood as the pure essence of being. Regarding a particular being, presence is that which is present ‘here’ and ‘now’. However, presence is a problem insofar as there can be no ‘pure’ essence that can be represented outside of human language. Thus, language does not show us presence, but rather, the absence or deferral of presence. This has enormous consequences: the presence of a thing is not ‘here’ and ‘now’, but mediated through language. Thus, language, imperfect as it is, translates presence—as that which cannot be completely present in time or space. Crawford, in his essay on Murray’s presence section, refers to Derrida’s concept as ‘différence’ (with an ‘e’) — which is presumably a typographical error. See Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence in “Différance”, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) p. 146. See also Robert Crawford’s critique of Derrida, in ‘Les Murray’s “Present Sequence”’, *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray*, ed. Carmel Gaffney (Armidale: Kardoorair Press, 1997) p. 56.


255 *ibid.*, p. 73 (*GS 2.1*, p. 155).

256 However, Murray does not answer the question of presence/being. He merely indicates that presence is the (impossible) goal of the translator.
does the translator proceed: what means does he employ to translate the natural world into human language? What happens to our own mother tongue in this transaction?

12.4 Denatured English

I don’t think Nature speaks English
—Les Murray.257

Murray must translate the otherness of the natural world, and further, he must maintain this otherness within his mother tongue, so that English is rendered strange—for the poet must approach his own language as if it were foreign. Certainly, one could say that the natural world is absolutely foreign. Nature does not speak in names: creatures and plants do not speak (to us); they submit to being named. But Murray does not merely name nature in the scientific sense—he does not merely render them in human speech. Rather, he attempts to name the otherness that is produced in the act of naming—not merely the otherness of nature, but the otherness of humans to ourselves, but of our own human language/s. And it is this otherness that appears to us as an ‘otherworld’.

In the act of naming, there is an equal force that nature extends by refusing correspondence with the name—and this is nature’s redemption, its truth as otherness. Murray takes the otherness of nature in language quite literally: he does not anthropomorphise nature into a vernacular of man. Instead, he turns humans towards nature, by translating our own otherness, as an effect of language. Thus, his task is one of transforming and renewing human language—not by rendering it clear and communicable, but on the contrary, by removing all attempts at ‘communication’, so that we are, when reading these translations, left stranded in

the centre of the language forest. This is the experience of translation that occurs within one’s own language, just as surely it occurs between languages. And in order to translate within one’s own language, Murray employs games, tricks, puns, rhymes, echoes, repetition, doubles, homonyms, onomatopoeia, interior monologues or dialogues, changes in voice, tense, italics—and this is by no way an exhaustive list. All of these techniques attempt to shake off ‘familiar’ language, to rid it of the sensation of meaning, reduction, and communication, in order to get closer to pure language, or what Murray calls presence.

This ‘presence’ is impossible to communicate, deduce or explain—for no translation of presence is ever complete, or complete-able. Thus, translation signifies the irreducibility of human languages: ‘The word’, Murray writes of his childhood discovery of language, ‘was resonant and radiant with meanings.’\textsuperscript{258} Precisely because it cannot be expressed, except as that which is inexpressible, presence remains Murray’s unending task—for, as he puts it, ‘(b)eing outside all poetry is an unreachable void.’\textsuperscript{259}

\textsuperscript{258} Penelope Nelson, \textit{Study Notes on the poetry of Les A. Murray} (Sydney: Methuen Australia, 1978) p. 126.
Chapter Thirteen

Incomplete Presence

13.1 The Fragments of a Broken Vessel

Murray’s translations of presence remain necessarily incomplete and he demonstrates this in a number of ways. First, his ‘presence’ translations are fragmentary compared to the ‘sprawl’ of his human poems: the poetic line is generally shorter, the tense is either restricted to ‘present time’ or features an overlapping of tenses such as: ‘I am lived, I am died’, so that time is not merely a countable series of nows, but points towards an incomplete time—that is unquantifiable. Second, Murray uses alliteration, games and puns, so that the pattern of the English language grows ever more layered, fragmented and compressed, and begs comparisons to Hopkins’ elastic-sounding sprung rhythms:

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.260

Third, Murray translates the otherness of nature, of the non-human, and he does this by questioning the unity and certainty of the human subject. To this end, his use of personal pronouns to speak for animals or things, singly or multiply, disallow

for a fully realised relation. Finally, the poet’s use of doubles, pairs and layers complicates the notion of presence as singular, graspable or complete. Presence is manifest as that which is ungraspable in language—and thus remains as mysterious and fragmentary as Benjamin’s description of the fragments of a broken vessel.\textsuperscript{261}

13.2 Doubles, Layers, Pairs

Murray uses many displacing or estranging devices in his translations of nature, all of which heighten and elevate the non-communicable or poetic within language. The poet’s first displacement occurs with the use of the double or pair, whose duplicate nature disturbs the idea of a unified, poetic ‘I’.

‘Eagle Pair’, Murray’s first translation of ‘presence’, crystallises the world of air and flight—an atmosphere and mode that is beyond our native human dimension. However, the two eagles are not introduced in flight, as we might expect, but in repose:

\begin{quote}
We shell down on the sleeping-branch. All night
the limitless Up digests its meats of light.\textsuperscript{262}
\end{quote}

The eagle pair’s home is not just the sleeping-branch, but the surrounding air—or at least, their movement through it: whether up or down—for the dimensions of Up and Down regulate the eagle pair’s world. At night, above their sleeping-branch, the light is digested by the Up, hence, ‘meat is light, it is power and Up.’ Down is the source of food: ‘our mainstay, the cunningest hunter, is the human road.’ In this way, ‘Up’ and ‘Down’, are accorded an hierarchic value—but this split

\textsuperscript{261} According to Benjamin then, the relation between the original work and the translation is not based upon likeness, but a more original difference, or brokenness (\textit{Gebrochenheit}). To translate justly, the translator must disregard the original form of the poem, and follow the individual words, just as one must follow, according to Benjamin, the vessel’s (already broken) shards. Why? Because the original poem is already a translation, and thus, it is \textit{already} broken and fragmented. Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, \textit{Illuminations}, p. 78 (\textit{GS} 4.1, p. 18).

\textsuperscript{262} Murray, ‘Eagle Pair’, \textit{Translations}, p. 15
is not to be understood as an inscription of the theologic (of the spirit and the flesh). Rather, ‘Up’ is rightful realm of the eagles, their home dimension, whereas, ‘Down is heavy and tangled. Only meat is good there.’

Obviously, ‘Up’ and ‘Down’ also signify a particular motion or direction, but because they are capitalised, they are given the same emphasis that English accords to the naming of place. Thus, ‘Up’ and ‘Down’ may also be read as place, or places; but the eagle’s place is not a firmament of rock or land—their directional landscape is contoured by unseen layers (infra, or thermal), as when Down is inscribed as, ‘the rebound heat ribbing up vertical rivers of air.’

Apart from the spatial translation of the Eagle Pair, into a pairing of place—up versus down, Murray also uses voice to accentuate their non-human subjectivity. The use of the subjective personal pronoun, ‘we’, is the first of many translations that speak from a plural perspective. The singular ‘I’ is not the speaking subject—or at least, the idea of the I is already doubled, into two—‘we’, the eagle pair. But the ‘we’ that addresses us, becomes two things (or perhaps even more). First, ‘we’ is the mating pair who acknowledge: ‘The circle-winged Egg then emerging from long pink and brown.’ And second, ‘we’ relates to another aspect of eagle-subjectivity, the eagle eye—that is, the eagle pair understood as two pairs (of eyes):

Irritably we unshell, into feathers; we lean open and rise
and magnify this meat, then that, with the eyes of our eyes.265

263 Bert Almon argues that the terms ‘Up’ and ‘Down’ emphasise the eagles’ limited, two-dimensional world. Almon, ‘Fullness of Being in Les Murray’s “Presence: Translations from the Natural World”’, Antipodes, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994, p. 124. I am not convinced that up and down indicates ‘limitation’: neither for the eagles, whose ‘experience’ we cannot judge; nor for us humans, for whom the eagle dimension remains utterly foreign. Thus, Murray’s concentration on the vertical, can only expand our understanding of the human world.

264 idem.

265 The phrase, eyes of our eyes, suggests a kind of infinite regression from the material eye to the inner eye of judgement, vision, reflection. See Murray’s, ‘Eagle Pair’, Translations, p. 15.
Doubling is not just a device of place (as up and down) or perspective (the pair of eagles and their two pairs of eyes), but also of form. The translation proceeds by a series of five rhyming couplets. Each line has a double, just as the eagle is paired. The doubling complicates the idea of fixed identity. Even though ‘we’ could be seen as a unity—a single pair—we is also the plural of I. It is more than one, and the voices of the eagle pair must be considered as two ‘I’s as well as one ‘We’. The ‘we’ is not a unity of multiples, however, but the translation of the irreducibility of language, its inability to name the identity of the eagle pair, without also naming something else that is foreign to them.

In ‘Layers of Pregnancy’, Murray continues the theme of the pair, but this time via the female kangaroo and her Joey, and another pair that is yet to come—for the mother is pregnant:

as Rain the father scenting ahead through time
for himself who is all
he can scent, does and expels a blood-clot to climb
wet womb to womb of fur
and implants another in the ruby wall.266

Unlike the eagle world of up and down, the world of the kangaroo is not two-fold, but ‘all fragrant space’. At the same time, this space is divided into two—each line is marked by a caesura, which stops the space, literally, so that the eye must leap over the text, mimicking the kangaroo hop, in order to recapture the world:

to feed between long feet to hop
from short to ungrazed sweet to stop267

267 idem.
The literal space after the caesura not only forces a pause, but divides the line into two—effectively forming two lines within each line. This divide emphasises the continual separation of the kangaroo from her world (as she hops), and her sudden re-engagement with it (when she stops). This jump-cut effect creates a similar effect on the reader, whose experience of time is denatured. To hop means to lose track of regulated poetic time; to separate oneself from the text. To stop means to face the blank space, the necessity of hopping in order to make it to the other side. So then, to hop or to stop? To be or not to be? The question cannot be answered, because the divide (that forces such contemplation) runs down the entire poem, and thus remains part of the text.268

The caesura, like any divide, demarcates identities: there is the mother kangaroo, the Joey at her knee, the developing ‘implant’ in her ‘ruby wall’, and the scent of the father. Just as the divide separates, it also allows for the possibility of relation, desire and coming together. Thus, the use of blank space is both a pairing and a paring: a way of showing more than one identity, joined as offspring, or scent; and a way of separating them. And because the caesura is a negative space, devoid of words, it resonates with the inner world of the kangaroo: her ‘wet womb’ and the birth passage to the mother’s ‘womb of fur’, or pouch. And, if only for a time, it effectively renders us as readers, speechless.

The marsupial ‘layers of pregnancy’, to which the title refers, conjures up the female Kangaroo’s ‘double’ womb, and her almost constant state of pregnancy: the mother may suspend the development of the embryo in her womb, until the Joey is ready to leave her pouch. Or she may suckle two Joeys of different stages simultaneously in her pouch, producing different milk in each teat. But all the while, the female Kangaroo usually has an embryo ‘on hold’, suspended in her womb, until its development and birth are propitious. The marsupial layers of pregnancy highlight the un-layered nature of human-mammalian pregnancy, but

268 The ‘gap’ forms a negative space or chasm in the centre of the poem, that emphasises the density and ‘life’ of the poem.
more importantly, the layers are a translation of identity as simultaneously conjoined and separate, singular and multiple, moving and suspended.

The multi-layered translation of identity, is broached again in the poem, ‘Mother Sea Lion’. Here, the mother is overtaken by her pup, but in such a way that nothing appears to be taken:

My pup has become myself
yet I’m still present.

My breasts have vanished.
My pup has grown them on herself.

Tenderly we rub whiskers.
She, me, both still present.

I plunge, dive deep in the Clench.
My blood erects. Familiar joy.

Coming out, I swim the beach-shingle.
Blood subsides. Yet I enjoy still. 269

In the third stanza, when the mother sea lion proclaims, ‘She, me, both still present’, something happens: mother and pup absent themselves, they become unrecognisable as separate entities. Murray no longer refers to the personal pronouns (she, me), but to a single ‘I’. Who is this ‘I’?

At first glance, the ‘I’ appears to stand for the mother sea lion; after all, the poem is written in her voice and, according to the title, she is the subject of the poem. Further, as the mother, she is the origin of subjectivity—she allows the pup to become her, when she announces: ‘My pup has become myself.’ But the mother

269 Murray, ‘Mother Sea Lion’, Translations, p. 37.
does not subsume her pup; she is herself subsumed: for the phrase may be read in the other direction, ‘my self has become my pup’. And, as the mother gives up her subjectivity, the ‘I’ passes to the pup. One can imagine that it is the pup who declares: ‘I plunge, dive deep into the Clench’\(^{270}\) in order to re-emerge, free, ‘to enjoy still.’ Because the ‘I’ may stand for either mother or pup, it remains ambiguous—it is a disembodied I, the doubling over of mother and pup, she and me, until neither appear recognisable or identifiable.

13.3  The Depersonalised Pronoun

I, she, he, it, you, we, us, they, are all estranging devices in Murray’s presence section. Personal pronouns become depersonalised, and this happens because the subject of each translation is not human. Hence, the ‘I’ cannot be translated into you or I—it is completely other: I is also not I. And yet, the ‘I’ speaks, it is declarative, it insists or demands subjectivity, and thus, in order to read the poem, the reader must take on this mask of otherness as self as other. There is no choice.

Perhaps the most extreme translation of ‘I’ occurs in ‘Shoal’, which takes the ‘I’ for an ‘eye’, a homonymic slip peculiar to English:

Eye-and-eye eye an eye

each. What blinks is I,

unison of the whole shoal. Thinks:

a dark idea circling by—

again the eyes’ I winks.\(^{271}\)

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\(^{270}\) Clench is a tight grip, clasp or clinch. To ‘dive deep into the Clench’ masterfully renders the compression and clinch of the ocean. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

\(^{271}\) The repetition of ‘eye’ and ‘I’ almost sounds nonsensical, until the idea of the I (as the seat of reason, or the inner eye of the soul) takes on a dummy effect. Note also the pun, ‘unison of the whole shoal’ (soul). Murray, ‘Shoal’, *Translations*, p. 22.
This transposition of the I for the eye is a joke, a knowing ‘wink’, but it is also an extended metaphor for the shoal of fish, whose unity is made of many ‘eyes’. As the shoal thinks:

Eye-and-eye near no eye
is no I 272

The I of the shoal is multiple and shifting; it continually forms and reforms, unifies and divides. Shoal derives from the old Saxon, scola (multitude) and the old English scolu (troop, division) and in its verbal form, shoal means to divide. 273 The threat to the life of the shoal is therefore constant—for all multiples may be divided. In the case of the unity of the shoal, the threat comes from itself, its own form of compound being:

the pure always inimical,
compound being even the sheer thing
I suspend I in…

Here, Murray adds multiples to multiples. The I of the shoal is suspended in another ‘I’—the ‘sheer thing’, or body of water which allows the shoal to take form, and to move as a mass. The vastness of water protects the shoal, but also disturbs it: for other things are contained there too, such as the violence of speed and feeding:

all earblades for the eel’s wave-gust,
over crayfishes’ unpressed beading,
for bird-dive boom, redfin’s gaped gong—

272 Murray, ‘Shoal’, Translations, p. 22
At the very moment the shoal is invaded by the bird-dive boom, the clash of elements, the poem stops. It is not an ‘end’ so much, as a translation of endlessness. The em-dash at the end of the poem reflects this state: it stretches out into the body of water, and beyond, indicating that the identity of the shoal is no less containable than the sea water or the ‘unending’ poem.

‘Prehistory of Air’, the poem next to ‘Shoal’, may be read as its companion piece. It appears to continue ‘Shoal’, but it does so by translating an altogether different element: for the air above the ocean is translated, from the bird’s perspective. The bird contemplates the prehistory of air, as a creation myth that stems from the fish. The fish, says the bird, has a sac of air, ‘where fish go when they die.’ The air sac translates the fish’s death, for it will die of air, as the bird knows:

It is the only dryness,
the first air, weird and thin—

but then my beak strikes from there
and the world turns outside in.

The fish’s air sac functions allegorically—as the inscription of the fish’s own death and of a greater life. According to the bird, the air sac is part of the creation myth: it signals the birth of air. Here, Murray does something curious—he translates a non-human creation myth: the human idea of Genesis, is replaced by a pre-historical myth of air (of the kind that humans might have, if they were birds). The strangeness derives in part because it briefly inverts the understanding of history as the mark of the human being, and pre-history as the mark of the animal. As soon as the bird’s creation myth, ‘The Prehistory of Air’, is rendered in human language, however, it becomes historical, for prehistory is only cognizable in relation to history. And whereas history is the giving of names, prehistory is the silence that is prior to names, that is of air.
As we know, for Benjamin life is not biological, but historical, and history precedes nature. Murray acknowledges the precedence of history by translating the pre-history of nature through the historical frame of language. What is at stake is not merely organic life—but its linguistic and historical translation:

yet from their swimming bladder
hatched dry land, sky
and the heron of prehensions.\textsuperscript{274}

Murray’s translation of the bird’s eye view, so to speak, returns in the poem entitled, ‘MEMEME’. Here, the insistent ‘I’ that announces itself in ‘Shoal’, is replaced by the personal pronoun ‘me’.\textsuperscript{275} The ‘me’ translates the altered speed and time of the finch, who waves and oscillates at ‘dew-flash speed’:

…Me me me

a shower of firetail (me me) finches into seed grass
flickers feeding (me) in drabs and red pinches of rhyme.\textsuperscript{276}

Like the shoal’s ‘I’, the ‘me’ has an estranging effect: we cannot recognise it as human, because it is the articulation of a finch. In addition, the repetition of ‘me’ drains the word of meaning. The finch represents pure sound: a babbling, monosyllabic utterance of ‘me me me’, which gives its performance a nonsensical and comical effect.\textsuperscript{277} The ‘me’ of the finch is always in brackets, as a supplement or

\textsuperscript{274} Murray, ‘Prehistory of Air’, \textit{Translations}, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{275} Me is not in the nominative case, but the dative or accusative cases—hence it signifies a relation to oneself as an object. For instance, things happen to ‘me’, against ‘me’ or in spite of ‘me’. Nowadays, ‘me’ does not just indicate a passive relation to oneself, but an all-consuming relation: ‘it’s all about me’. This is the ‘me’ that is famously discussed in Witold Gombrowicz’s \textit{Diary}: ‘Monday: Me. Tuesday: Me. Wednesday: Me. Thursday: Me’. Gombrowicz’s \textit{Diary}, trans. Lillian Vellee, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) p. 3.

\textsuperscript{276} Murray, ‘MEMEME’, \textit{Translations}, p. 38.

doubling of the poetic text. The finch not only interrupts the poem, as a badgering appeal or comic aside, but goes even further, to interrupt its own translation. And the finch’s presence remains elusive as it flits in and out of the narrative. This discontinuity is emphasised by the poet’s reference to time.

‘MEMEME’ begins with the line, ‘Present and still present don’t yet add up to time.’ Certainly, the finch is not ‘present’ in the poem as ‘present’ or ‘still present’, nor can time be understood as a method of counting the appearance or disappearance of the finch. The finch is marked by its pronoun, ‘me’, which is performative, and thus, temporal. The ‘me’ strikes in the poem as a metronome, and yet, it does not continue to keep time, but fades from three beats to one. Thus, the marker of time in the poem, the ‘me’ of the finch, finally disappears. The poem then becomes a disembodied soliloquy on the untranslatability of the finch, and the untranslatability of time:

All present is perfect: an eye on either side
of hard scarlet nipping the sexual biscuits of plants,
their rind and luscious flour. It is a heart-rate of instants,
life with no death, only terror, no results, just prudence—
all vacuumed back up, onto low boughs, by a shift in shimmer,
present and still-present bringing steps that mute crickets’ simmer. 278

In yet another bird poem, ‘Migratory’, the personal pronoun ‘I’ is paired with ‘am’, causing a further sense of displacement. Not only is the reader forced to reckon with an I that is not human, but in addition, to take on the bird’s verbal articulation of being present (here and now). But the bird is not only here in the stationary world of nests and eggs, but also there, in the realm of flight or migration:

I am the nest that comes and goes,
I am the egg that isn’t now,

I am the beach, the food in sand,
the shade with shells and the shade with sticks. 279

The stationary world cannot contain the bird’s world or truth: the bird is not the nest, but ‘the next that comes and goes’. Being in flight is the bird’s truth; its home is migratory. Accordingly, the bird’s relation to place is always off kilter—the pre-migratory landscape is judged to be wrong, a feeling that is registered most acutely in the bird, who posits the wrongfulness within itself:

I am the wrongness of here, when it
is true to fly along the feeling280

Of course, once the bird follows its true, migratory path, it may stop again, and find a place. The bird’s new destination is a correction, and re-inscribes the moral good, as the bird notes: ‘Right feelings of here arrive with me.’ One may imagine that the earlier wrongness that tainted the bird is now paid for in its migration, but this release is only temporary, because the new place is an almost perfect double of the old:

I am the beach, the sand in food,
the shade with sticks and the double kelp shade.281

280 idem.
13.4 Animal Testimonies

To be sure, a sense of displacement occurs when the creature’s voice is expressed via the pronouns ‘I’ or ‘me’. It is as if these pronouns were no longer the exclusive domain of humans, but were in fact, empty shells or masks, through which anything or anyone could speak. The sense of displacement is not limited to the creatures’ use of the singular and personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’, but extends to their use of the plural and anonymous pronoun, ‘we’. This pronoun is notoriously slippery: to whom does ‘we’ refer—a pair, a group, the masses? In modern poetry, the plural voice is rare enough to be considered unfashionable. ‘We’ does not suggest privacy, confession or personal address, but anonymity and threat: for we do not know where ‘we’ begins and ends, who it includes or excludes.

Even so, it is obvious that this pronoun speaks on behalf of a group, and is thus synonymous with the rhetoric of politics. In poetry ‘we’ emphasises the anonymity of the group, its loss of personal identification, as in Giuseppe Ungaretti’s poem, ‘Soldiers’:

> We are as--
>  in autumn
>  on the trees--
>  leaves

So then, it is no surprise that the anonymous voice is used with greatest effect in a) poems about war; where anonymous soldiers represent the senselessness of death, and in b) poems about love; where anonymity protects the identity of the lovers, and thus also preserves the secret of their love.

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In the poem, ‘Pigs’ Murray uses ‘we’ to convey the former—the anonymity of a group caught up in the machine of death. Here, the pigs use the objective personal pronoun, ‘us’, which only emphasises their objectification and powerlessness. Things happen to them; they have no individual rights, no recourse to the law, and no knowledge. They are dumbly shepherded towards the one event that they cannot reverse or control:

Us never knowed like slitting nor hose-biff then.
Nor the terrible sheet-cutting screams up ahead.
The burnt water kicking. This gone-already feeling here in no place with our heads on upside down.\(^{283}\)

The horror of the pigs’ fate indicts ‘us’ humans. The human ‘sheet cutting’ machine, is our creation, and our deployment of technological power over nature. Next to us, the pigs are powerless. This lack of power is heightened by the pigs’ colloquial, ungrammatical expressions: ‘(u)s never knowed’ or ‘(u)s all on sore cement was we’. The pigs suffer the ignominy of domestication: if they could speak under these conditions, Murray suggests, it would be a collective grunt, a snort at their outrageous misfortune. But their human subjection is so complete, that their only possible critique is that of the uneducated and naïve—those who didn’t give a thought to the pattern of their life, until things began to slip: ‘We nosed up good rank in the tunnelled bush./Us all fuckers then. And Big huh?’ The supposed yesteryear power of the pigs is all the more ridiculous, given their end. And here, strains of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem, ‘We Real cool’, may be heard:

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We

\(^{283}\) Murray, ‘Pigs’, Translations, p. 36.
Les Murray and the Task of the Translator

Helen Lambert

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.284

Like Brooks’ portrait of adolescence, the group of pigs are powerful, unthinking and hedonistic. But unlike the pool players, the pigs have no knowledge of death, even as they move speedily towards it.285 Nevertheless, just as they are about to be culled, the pigs experience their lives as a stranger would: they speak of being ‘here in no place’, with ‘our heads on upside down.’ And just as the pigs’ perspective of place and world is inverted, so too is their history, until everything that was once thought to be ‘real’, now appears farcical.

In the midst of this upheaval, with their heads on the cutting block, the pigs beg to ask: did we ever have our own place? Our own life? Of course, these questions ask the same of humans: are we free? Or are we subject to a greater force: capitalism, technology, state violence? To what extent are we complicit with these forces? How much knowledge do we humans conceal from ourselves, in order to avoid conflict and live pleasantly? And what of the fate of the pigs?

Here, Murray does not let us off the hook: we readers must watch the mass of pigs and hear their disgruntlement and confusion as they face being translated into pork. Their once celebrated life of ignorance is darkened by this growing consciousness of their victim-hood and death. The pigs’ consciousness of their own mortality is sudden and palpable, a ‘gone-already feeling’, that they ‘never knowed’ before. The sentencing of the pigs to death is meticulously plotted and carried out,

285 The pronoun ‘we’ translates a collective and anonymous voice.
and yet, gut-wrenchingly so that no human could deny that the pigs suffer.\textsuperscript{286} The slaughterhouse or abattoir is rarely portrayed from the point of view of the animal, and thus, the testimony of the pigs engenders a human shock: not only does the animal speak, but it bears witness to humankind’s industrialization of slaughter. We forget that our farm animals are rendered dead from the beginning. They are ‘live-stock’ and are born, bred, stuffed and butchered for the purposes of trade, profit, consumption. The animal’s stock or value is realized on its death.\textsuperscript{287}

In ‘Cattle Egret’, there is no immediate slaughter in sight. Instead, the poet translates the dynamics of power and rank between a symbiotic pair; the heron and cow. The herons, or cattle egrets live around cattle, in pasturelands, wading grounds and fields. And though the egrets depend on cattle, from their perspective, the cattle are undulating and slow and not quite their trusted peers:

Our sleep-slow compeers, red and dun,

wade in their grazing, and whirring lives

shoal up, splintering, in skitters and dives.

Our quick beaks pincer them…\textsuperscript{288}

Indeed, the ‘we’ of the egrets is conspiratorial; they are in accord that the cattle must be kept in check, and to this end, there must be a pecking order:

we haggle them down

\textsuperscript{286} Human violence against animals cannot be denied; nor can it be denied that animals are sentient beings, suffer. See Derrida’s, ‘The Animal that therefore I am (More to Follow),’ trans. David Wills, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, vol. 28, no. 2, Winter, 2002, pp. 369–418.

\textsuperscript{287} In \textit{Dog Fox Field}, the collection immediately preceding \textit{Translations}, Murray focuses on animal slaughter from the point of view of a group of cows, in ‘The Cows on Killing Day’. In this poem, the group of cows is designated by the pronoun ‘me’ or ‘all me’. Although this pronoun sounds singular; ‘me shivers and falls down/with the terrible, the blood of me, coming out behind an ear’, me refers to the wider group of cows. In this fashion, Murray translates an experience of being that is not individual, but collective: ‘Me, facing every way, spreading out over feed’. See Murray, ‘Cows on Killing Day’, \textit{Dog Fox Field} (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990) pp. 27–28.

\textsuperscript{288} Murray, ‘Cattle Egret’, \textit{Translations}, p. 27.
full of plea, fizz, cark and stridulation.

The onomatopoeic haggling of the egrets brings to mind a fitful, cackling music, what the egret later calls, ‘gravel jitterbug’. ‘Plea, fizz, cark and stridulation’ mimic the sound of the birds, and taken as pure sound, the words signify a voice that isn’t there—a dead voice. For, as Benjamin knows, the animal cannot name in language; its voice is taken over by the human, who translates into letters, as Agamben notes: ‘It is only in dying that the animal voice is, in the letter, destined to enter signifying language as pure intention to signify; and it is only in dying that articulated language can return to the indistinct womb of the voice from which it originated. Poetry is the experience of the letter, but the letter has its place in death: in the death of the voice (onomatopoeia) and the death of language (glossolalia); the two of which coincide in the brief flash of grammata.

Murray’s use of onomatopoeia heightens the egrets’ struggle for survival, by aurally mimicking the fight that gives their life ‘flavour’, but at the same time, the ‘babble’ inscribes the failure of the egrets to be vocalized in language; to be survived, or translated. At end of the poem, the egrets wistfully pronounce: ‘Somewhere may be creatures that grow old.’ This line suggests the possibility of a species that out-foxes evolution, and that Murray therefore, ‘appreciates the struggle of natural selection.’ However, the egrets’ statement also captures something more veiled: their creatural melancholy. The egrets cannot ‘grow old’ as a species—their silence is what Benjamin calls ‘the deep sadness of nature’, which can neither name itself, nor grow old in language.

The egrets’ strident noise draws parallels with the poem, ‘The Octave of Elephants’, another translation of the plural voice, ‘we’. In eight rhyming couplets

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that look like musical staves the ‘we’ speaks for the male and female species together, and yet it is the female voice that uniformly subsumes the male:

We are two species, male and female. Bulls run to our call.
We converse. They weep, and announce, but rarely talk at all.\textsuperscript{293}

The musicality of the poem is achieved in the use of end rhyme, and also in the poem’s form: which translates each couplet as a note within an octave. An octave describes the harmonic relation between two notes of varying pitch (the first and the eighth) and the range of notes that fall within this intervalllic pair. The translation of the elephants as an octave, reduces their world to a scale. It is fitting that the elephants address their creator, ‘Jehovah Brahm’—a name which combines the Hebraic word for God, with the Hindu name for the God of Creation, \textit{Brahm} or \textit{Brahma}. For the elephants, the God of creation has two names, or at the very least, a first and a last name. And we cannot help but hear the distant name of the composer, Johannes Brahms, who, like the elephants, also played the flugelhorn:

Inside the itchy fur of life is the sonorous planet Stone
which we hear and speak through, depending our flugelhorn.

The relation to the earth is one of dependence: the elephants ‘depend’ their flugelhorn trunks towards the earth (planet Stone), in order to ‘hear and speak.’ The earth is an amplifier of their baritone stampede, and also a receiver that imparts a shifting world beyond the elephant’s scale:

Winds barrel, waves shunt shore, earth moans in ever-construction.
being hurried up the sky, against weight, by endless suction.

\textsuperscript{293} Murray, ‘The Octave of Elephants’, \textit{Translations}, p. 32.
The chaos of ‘planet Stone’, is scaled down by the female elephants’ relation to sound and pitch. The female elephants form the ‘we’ of the poem, and their voice contrasts with the silence of the males. The bull elephants’ silence is not an absence of music or harmony, ‘they weep, and announce’; but a lack of speech—they ‘rarely talk at all.’ In their silence, the bulls reflect the withdrawal and closedness of nature, and the expression of a greater solitude:

As presence resembles everything, our bulls reflect its solitude
and we, suckling, blaring, hotly loving, reflect its motherhood.

There is one more distinction of note in the above stanza: between the idea of reflection and resemblance. The bulls reflect the solitude of presence, however, they do not resemble presence. The female elephants reflect the ‘motherhood’ or origin of presence, but again, they do not resemble presence. This careful distinction is not accidental. In the context of the poem, to reflect indicates a mediated relation to presence. Whether male or female, the elephants reflect presence as sound: exercising variations in pitch from ‘seismic baritone’, to ‘weep’, or ‘solitude’. So then, to reflect presence is possible. To resemble presence, however, is impossible—for resemblance means an absolute identity of truth and expression, as the elephants note, ‘presence resembles everything’, it is absolute correspondence. Therefore, the elephants reflect presence, but they do not resemble presence.

In ‘The Octave of Elephants’, Murray shows that the immediacy of presence can no more be grasped in an elephant, than a flugelhorn or a poem. What can be grasped in the poem, however, is the incompleteness of presence—which shows itself as the poetic or mysterious. The unmediated stream of expression and truth, whether we call this pure language or presence, cannot be mediated in human language. Thus, when we say that Murray’s elephants reflect presence, we mean that they reflect the possibility of presence.
13.5 The Masses

There are two remaining translations using the pronoun ‘we’—one which emphasises the strangeness of the group in question (‘Cuttlefish’) and one which emphasises the groups’ commonness (‘The Masses’).

In the poem, ‘Cuttlefish’, ‘we’ is used sparsely, but is no less defamiliarising for the reader. Here, Murray translates the strangeness of cuttlefish. Strange, because cuttlefish are not strictly fish, but molluscs from the class of cephalopods (literally, head-foot). The name cuttlefish is thus misleading, for this is no ordinary fish: the head, when not in camouflage, is recognizable by its mass of waving, foot-like tentacles. It is no wonder then, that the cuttlefish are introduced as creatures from another realm, and the ocean too, is not blue but ‘bloom crystal’:

Spacefarers past living planetfall
on our ever-dive in bloom crystal

Their ability to camouflage surpasses that of the chameleon’s—for cuttlefish can alter their pigment and the texture of their skin at will. Their transformative talents undermine a fixity of identity or selfhood; and are an apt metaphor for the performance of translation. Indeed, the poem itself seems to ‘drip’ from one line to the next, a quality obtained by the frequent use of enjambment:

when about our self kin selves appear
showing, rubber to pulp, we slack from spear,
flower anemone, re-clasp and hang, welling

294 Cephalopod derives from the Greek, κεφαλή head + πούς (ποδ-) foot. The literal idea of head and foot refers to the tentacles coming out of the cuttlefishes’ head. The Latin term for the common cuttlefish, sepia officinalis retains the reference to the cuttlefish’s emission of a sepia tainted fluid, which was extracted and used as a pigment in painting and early typography. The Oxford English Dictionary, CD-ROM Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
while the design of play is jelling
then enfolding space, jet

At the poem’s end, a ‘jag-maw apparition’ of threat appears, which brings on the cuttlefishes final defence, that:

spurts us apart into vague as our colours shrink,
leaving, of our culture, an ectoplasm of ink.

In the last line, the phrase ‘our culture’, is jolting. To be sure, it does not mean our human culture, with its connotations of cultivation (tillage, agrarian development), intellectual development and civilization. But if culture is not ‘ours’, that is, if it names the creaturely life of cuttlefish or any other non-human organism, then what does it mean? The word derives from Latin cultūra (worship, or tending) and refers both to the cultivation of divine worship and the cultivation of the land. Culture is thus etymologically linked to the human tending of the natural world and the divine, and here, Murray tends to the cultivation of both worlds.

Nevertheless, culture is a more general marker for human development and intellectual refinement, and a specific marker for varieties of culture: the particularity of a place, its local customs, language, dress. The phrase, ‘our culture’, thus indicates a particular standard of civilization to which all other cultures may be judged. The movement from one culture to another, weakens the homogeneity of ‘our culture’, and produces culture shock. This is what Murray achieves in the last line—for ‘our culture’ is not recognizably ours. Thus, we are displaced and experience a kind of culture shock.

This shock is one of loss: ‘our culture’ is lost to us, and it is lost to the cuttlefish, too. Indeed, by the time ‘culture’ is mentioned, it is too late: the cuttlefish

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296 idem.

297 Culture shock is the experience of difference. No matter how acclimatized to a new culture we become, we cannot be considered ‘native’; only naturalized. Thus, we become foreigners to both cultures.
have already spurted apart into ‘vague’. It is vagueness, not clarity, which precedes their act of ‘writing’, that is, the spurring of their foe in sepia ink. The ink cloud confuses the enemy—cutting off their sight and darkening their world. This mode of defence, however, is only temporary: it cannot preserve the cuttlefishes’ greater history or culture.

Although ink suggests a world of writing and communication, here it is a blot or veil—a literal form of mystification. Indeed, Murray describes the ink as an ‘ectoplasm’, a word that is associated with spiritual or ghostly emanations. The ink is not meaningful, rather, it is a mark or ‘aura’ of the mysterious: that which we cannot know, and which cannot ‘mean’. Thus, the ink of the cuttlefish remains as unknowable as the poet’s ink—for words, as Benjamin knows, do not communicate meaning, but ‘in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss.’ And Murray too, emphasises the ‘vague’ of language, its withdrawal from meaning, via this group of strange, shape-shifting creatures, who leave nothing but an ‘ectoplasm of ink’.

Compared to the veiled world of the cuttlefish, Murray’s poem, ‘The Masses’ appears to be concerned with openness and spread. Here, the pronoun ‘we’ refers not to the strangeness of the group, but instead to its commonness. The masses refers to grass, whose power lies in its mass and spread. Despite its lowly position—it is the cattle’s cud, the common ground—grass is less a symbol of the demos or vernacular, than of colonisation:

Blindly we invented space from denial of height
and colonisation was the true mass movement.299

And strangely, grass is also a symbol of hope in the de-colonised world. In Whitman’s ‘Leaves of Grass’, the child asks, ‘What is grass?’ To which the poet responds in all manner of ways: it is a symbol of hope in the new world, it is the

‘flag of my disposition’, it is the child of all vegetation, it is ‘the handkerchief from the Lord’, and it promises a new social leveling:

Or I guess it [grass] is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white…

Whitman’s answer, that grass is a ‘uniform hieroglyphic’, does not entirely correspond with Murray’s symbol of grass. Whitman concentrates on images of lightness: grass is known by its ‘leaves’, its ‘curling’, ‘its beautiful, uncut hair’. Murray, however, concentrates on its bulk: grass ‘thickens’, ‘encroaches’, grass is ‘the masses’. Thus, for Murray, grass does not symbolize the hope, abundance and dreams of the new world, rather, grass connotes the hoi polloi: a symbol of local and ‘encroaching’ power. Indeed, he is not concerned with suppressing the masses, or bringing them under political control—for the masses are already sovereign. The sovereignty of the grass is given in part by its name, ‘the masses’, which indicates its countless spread, and in part by its creaturely aspect: grass has ‘bodies’ (not blades, or leaves). Thus embodied, grass is ever-powerful and beyond human rule, even though humans use grass as an emblem of power:

…Tied in fasces,

dead, living, still we rule. No god is bowed to like grass is.

Humans bow to grass, they cannot help it—a glance downwards and grass is recognized; in every field and paddock not overrun by drought, grass is underfoot. Even a dearth of grass signals its continued rule; deprived of rain, the masses of grass ‘makes of our deaths a sun screen.’ Murray’s earlier poem, ‘The Grassfire

301 Fasces refers to the bundles of rods that were an emblem of power in Rome and a tool of punishment.
Stanzas’, shows the dependency of fire upon grass—flames ‘fume out of used-up grass/that’s been walked, since summer, into infinite swirled licks’.302

The grass is a symbol of infinity—and on earth, it signals a mass that continues to spread outwards. Grass thickens by ‘upper grazing’, and fattens ‘under dung’ and grows so fast that it must become sprawl—as the grass concedes, ‘blindly we invented space’. From the perspective of this large green, the air itself appears ‘islanded’ or curtailed:

The masses encroach on all of bare, and grow
down every side of earth, and into shadow.
To fit more bodies, we sprout in two dimensions.
The rest of air–life is islanded in our extensions.303

The grass masses are anonymous, as a mob or plague. Their power derives from their faceless increase across the earth—for they grow in spite of the sun, ‘into shadow’. Their survivability is shown in times of fire. In ‘The Masses’, grass ‘burns to spring innumerable’ (thus, renewing life) and in ‘The Grassfire Stanzas’, grass remains protected beneath the flame:

The green feed that shelters beneath its taller death yearly
is unharmed, under new leaf soot.304

However, as hardy as the grass may seem, Murray takes care to show that it is not simply concerned with its own survival, but that the masses also contribute to the wider recovery of the natural world, as it steps in to ‘calm cataclysm green’. Thus, the masses are moral, they act not merely on whim or in accordance with what

Benjamin calls ‘natural law’, where violence is seen as ‘a product of nature’,\textsuperscript{305} but rather for the well being of others. The power of the masses is ambiguous: it is not simply the power to be violent, but the power to overturn cataclysm, to repair and balance nature’s wrath.

In ‘The Masses’ and preceding poems which use the pronoun ‘we’, Murray translates subjectivity as a mode that is not singular—but multiple—an idea that is difficult to fathom in modern times. The plural subject seems anti-modern; its voice lacks the façade of individuality or subjectivity. Excepting poems on the anonymity of war or the complicity of love, the plural voice sounds unfamiliar in poetry. And here, the sense of the unfamiliar is only heightened: ‘we’ does not reflect upon a group of humans, but upon the lives of the creaturely or vegetative. We have come to expect that the human mark, the ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’, distinguishes humans from animals, as Heidegger writes: ‘Kant once said that man distinguishes himself from animals by the fact that he can say ‘I’!’\textsuperscript{306} Accordingly, when this ‘human’ mark is turned towards non-humans, the reader must stifle his or her ‘automatic’ correspondence of the personal pronoun and the human being, and become willingly depersonalised for a stretch. This experience of linguistic depersonalization is the work of translation, which enacts the difference between and within language/s. As readers, we are not literally translated—for translation is not metempsychosis, and thus, we do not become creatures or trees. However, we do become foreigners in our own tongue, as English is relentlessly extended and renewed until its meaning escapes us, and the letters, just like the masses of grass, extend ‘into shadow.’

\textsuperscript{305} Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, \textit{SW v. 1}, p. 236 (\textit{GS 2.1}, p. 180).

In the poem, ‘Mollusc’, Murray uses the possessive pronoun ‘its’ as a means of classifying the snail—by its various peculiarities of appearance. Unlike the personal pronouns that we have discussed, ‘it’ is already depersonalised. It refers to things and creatures not ‘persons’—we would commonly not use ‘it’ to refer to a human being. But something else occurs in the poet’s repetitive use of ‘its’: the mollusc becomes an object of curiosity, exoticism and scientific observation.

‘Mollusc’ is in the third-person: we do not hear the snail’s ‘inner’ voice, nor we are privy to its unfolding, interior monologue. Instead, we hear the snail's voice through another voice, in translation. Because the snail’s translator is omniscient, the snail sounds all the more like a foreign object that is ‘observed’ from all sides, as Crawford remarks: ‘the language…tends to be that of the hyper-observant outsider. It is scientifically tinged’.

But it is not just science that dazzles or confuses, but the poem’s form, which consists of one long sentence, broken by commas or line breaks, often in the middle of a clause, as if the translator himself was drifting off, only to find his place again and continue with his observations. These observations conflate technical and poetic terms in an ever tighter ‘weave’, so that the poem seem both ‘scientific’ and ‘hallucinatory’:

By its nobship sailing upside down,
by its inner sexes, by the crystalline
pimplings of its shirts, by the sucked-on
lifelong kiss of its toppling motion,
by the viscose optics now extruded
now wizened instantaneously, by the
ridges grating up a food-path, by
the pop shell in its nick of dry,
by excretion, the earthworm coils, the glibbing,
by the gilt slipway, and by pointing
perhaps as far back into time as
ahead, a shore being folded interior,
by boiling on salt, by coming uncut over
a razor’s edge, by hiding the Oligocene
underleaf may this and every snail sense
itself ornament the weave of presence.308

The mollusc’s body is a contrary mixture of softness and hardness: the snail’s ‘sucked-on lifelong kiss’ and ‘viscose optics’ are juxtaposed with its ‘ridges grating up a food path’ and its ‘pop shell’. It is at once, vulnerable and invulnerable, exposed and concealed, as well as being a symbol of the survival of its species over the course of time. But what is the snail’s relation to time and history?

Certainly, the snail’s own time is translated as meandering, if only because the snail itself is distilled via the translator’s list of attributes. Murray emphasises, for example, the ‘glibbing’ slide of the snail, whose wet and temporary trail points, ‘perhaps as far back into time as ahead’. Here, the word ‘perhaps’ is not a slip—it indicates an essential doubtfulness that the nature of time could be revealed through the otherworldly figure of the snail. What can we know of the origin and unfolding of time, through observing the snail?

Science may posit the origin of the mollusc to a particular evolutionary period—the Oligocene—but again, this does not tell us anything about the essence of time or the essence of the snail. The doubtfulness introduced by the word ‘perhaps’ thus extends to science: the snail conceals the Oligocene ‘underleaf’, because scientific measurement cannot uncover the essence of time. Thus, the Oligocene, a word that sounds almost Freudian, leads us nowhere, or rather, it leads us beyond science: for Murray translates the mysteriousness and closedness of time,

its hidden nature, which finds its parallel in the snail that withdraws, as ‘a shore being folded interior’.309

Because the snail conceals the Oligocene, it escapes from its evolutionary origin, and eludes the knowledge of human beings. The translator does not give the snail over to science or humanity: rather he allows the snail to withdraw into itself, where it may, ‘sense itself ornament the weave of presence’.310 Crawford interprets this closing line as the moment of ‘moralising’, a technique common to traditional medieval bestiaries. If there is a moral, it points towards human fallibility and the illusion of scientific progress. However, Crawford concentrates on the difference between ‘presence’ and ‘weave of presence’: the creatures do not ornament presence, but ‘the weave of presence’, that is, they decorate that which is beyond ‘human individualism’—the weave or essence of presence that cannot be fully grasped. What is the weave of presence? Is it the design of God, as attended by his creatures? Or is it a movement that is ever-unfolding, that we can never know? The question is unanswered. At this moment of indeterminacy, however, Crawford reinstates certainty and concludes that the collection is, ‘at its heart religious’:311

Any critique of technology or science is itself open to being denigrated as religious, shamanistic, or steeped in mysticism, as Heidegger comments: ‘The prevailing opinion nowadays is [that it is] as if science alone could provide objective truth. Science is the new religion. Compared to it, any attempt to think of being appears arbitrary and “mystical”.’312 However, the mention of the word ‘weave’ or ‘presence’ is no more a declaration of religion, than an indication that Murray’s translations are a ‘paean of praise…that bonds all life together.’313 In fact, the opposite is true: the poet translates the weave of difference that stands between human life and creaturely life, between language and presence—and this difference

309 idem.
310 idem.
cannot be unravelled or overcome. Thus, as Bataille writes, the poet who encounters the animal, ‘describes nothing that does not slip toward the unknowable.’

Murray’s description of the snail—its hidden Oligocene, its ‘nobship’, ‘glibbing’, ‘gilt slipway’ and ‘pimplings’—all slip towards the unknowable. Benjamin calls this slip by many names: the ungraspable, the mysterious, the secretive; terms that we are now so familiar with and which are, according to Benjamin, manifest in the act of translation—as incompleteness, or the ‘unending task’. Thus, when Murray attends to a mollusc or an eagle, he does not merely simulate medieval bestiaries in order to moralise, thereby reducing the animal or plant to a symbol of human morality. But rather, by imagining the non-human, Murray translates this slip towards the unknowable, and reveals the absolute closedness between the animal and the human.

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Chapter Fourteen

Unnatural Histories

14.1 Evolution, History, Ancestral Memory

The impossible's our summoning dimension—Les Murray.315

Murray employs multiple means of translating what we call the unknowable, or the ungraspable. And this translation of otherness (or otherworldliness) occurs most commonly in the encounter between human languages and nature’s silence. The silence of nature mirrors a greater silence, which Benjamin calls ‘pure language’, but which may also be called the impossible, the mysterious or the poetic.

In his poem ‘That Evolution Proceeds by Charity and Faith’, Murray translates the history of evolution through the procession of an ancient lizard—whose very survival is described as an ‘epoch-lurch’: the lizard moves as if it is aware of its historical path, but has no way of bringing history under its control, and its deportment is thus ringed with an uncontrollable, desperate majesty.316

Not bowing, but a full thrown back upreach
of desperate glorying totter took a fibre-scrabbed
ravenous small lizard out to a hold on the air
beyond possibility.317

316 Almon sees the lizard from the perspective of a ‘fledgling bird’; whereas I see the bird from the perspective of the lizard. However, both interpretations are possible. See Almon’s essay, ‘Fullness of Being in Les Murray’s “Presence: Translations from the Natural World”’, Antipodes, vol. 8, no. 2, December, 1994, p. 126.
What allows the lizard to continue its path? Not evolution, strictly, nor even a God, but the force of something larger than itself, something that overtakes the lizard, as a plot overtakes its characters, and this force is later described as being ‘still plotted there.’ Nevertheless, the force is an eruption of power; one which is not submissive, ‘not bowing’, but rather, a ‘glorying totter’ that holds the lizard ‘on the air/beyond possibility.’ The lizard’s totter into the air signals its confrontation with a new element—and it must adapt and grow wings if it is to survive. Once the lizard is held out ‘on the air’, it hangs over the abyss. From this space, the ‘magic’ of evolution may occur—and Murray translates the lizard’s entry into a new species, the Aves class of feathered, winged birds. Indeed, evolution appears morphic, as it unfolds ‘live’ before our eyes. Of course, this simultaneity is a poetic effect, much like time lapse, but it demonstrates the mysteriousness of the force, or law, that commands endless transformation and change.

The lizard is overtaken by the mysterious force of transformation and history. But how is the lizard historical? First, because it bows to being named and translated, and second, because in being translated it is given life and memory; and this memory goes beyond itself, to the memory of all lizards over time. History is the voice it must harken to, and so the lizard pauses in the poem, ‘as if listing to the far genetic line/confirm the presented new body-idea’ of the bird.

For the lizard then, evolution is an ancestral memory. However, the lizard cannot be sure that its own recollection of ancestral memory is correct. Thus, before proceeding, Murray writes, ‘it will groggily cling/ a few times yet.’ Indeed, the poem’s form also ‘clings’; each stanza juts out as if to demonstrate concretely, the halting steps of the lizard. And by translating evolution as an uncertain, ancestral memory, Murray demonstrates the fragility and doubtfulness of human knowledge. And here we come to the poem’s title: evolution, which must be understood as one way of giving history to nature, cannot proceed in translation except via ‘faith and charity’. These words imply belief, confidence, love, but they also indicate a submissiveness before that which is unknown and ineffable. Faith and charity, not science, describes the mysteriousness of the lizard’s leap ‘beyond
possibility’, and towards a force that is greater than itself—the force of history. This force carries the figure of the absolute, of truth—for as Benjamin knows, truth is historical and history is an incomplete translation of truth.\textsuperscript{318}

### 14.2 Life’s Volume

In ‘Cell DNA’, Murray once again demonstrates the unknowability of life’s origin. Here, the DNA speaks in the first person, as a creature or ‘I’, who attempts to describe its own contents:

I am the singular
in free fall.
I and my doubles
carry it all:

life’s slim volume
spirally bound.
It’s what I’m about,
it’s what I’m around.\textsuperscript{319}

The cell DNA cannot reveal its essence; only its form. And Murray translates the DNA as if it were a book: ‘life’s slim volume’ that is ‘spirally bound’. The contents of this book, however, are impenetrable—not only is it bound in spirals, but its text is elusive: ‘It’s what I’m about,/it’s what I’m around.’ The closer that we get to the DNA cell, the more it resists being known:

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\textsuperscript{318} Benjamin criticises the understanding of ‘truth’ as a ‘timeless universal’. Following Nietzsche, Benjamin asserts that truth is fundamentally and essentially historical. Thus, the absolute is historical. See Adorno, ‘A portrait of Walter Benjamin’, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981) p. 231.

\textsuperscript{319} Murray, ‘Cell DNA’, *Translations*, p. 41.
Presence and hungers
imbue a sap mote
with the world as they spin it.

So then, despite hunger for the knowledge of life’s volume, for its full text to be revealed, the Cell DNA imbues ‘a sap mote’—a trickle, or trifle, that the cell goes on to teach ‘by rote’. The communication of this leaked trifle goes on to command the formation of life, but with one caveat: the DNA’s every command ‘was once a miscue’, hence, the formation of life carries with it a history of bungling, accidents and mutation. The origin of life is not only clouded in mystery, but begins with a mistake that spills from its text, and from which, life takes its cue.

This original blunder is not a constraint, on the contrary, it is liberating. The textual miscue allows the Cell DNA to translate life in a multiplicity of ways, precisely because the original text appears broken and fragmentary. It is at this point in the poem that the Cell DNA ascribes its protean nature to a twin law: ‘Presence and freedom’. These forces manifest themselves in the DNA code as a continual play of difference:

Presence and freedom
...
rewording, re-beading
strains on a strand
making I and I more different
than we could stand.320

The cell DNA, which is compared to the book of life, is originally divided. We are reminded of the shards of Benjamin’s broken vase, which refuse to come together without showing their cracks. The I and I of the DNA code refuse to assimilate or

320 Murray, ‘Cell DNA’, *Translations*, p. 41.
unify—they stand apart and are ‘more different than we could stand.’ In the gap between the two ‘I’s’ one can feel the translator’s frustration in striving for unity or truth, when words reveal a more original difference, that lies at origin of all human languages.

321 Almon notes that genetic duplication is imperfect, and it is this failure of perfection that separates the two ‘I’s’. See Almon’s ‘Fullness of Being in Murray’s “Presence: Translations from the Natural World”’, Antipodes, vol. 8, no. 2, December, 1994, p. 126. This idea of ‘imperfect’ genetic duplication bears obvious parallels to translation.
Chapter Fifteen

Between Nature and Humanity: An Account of Loss

15.1 The Inner-Fox, an Anti-Bestiary

God set you to elaborate by the dictionary-full
when, because they would reveal their every secret,
He took definition from the beasts and gave it to you
—Les Murray.

Any translation of the natural world is intimately connected with the translation of humanity: the one translates the other. And yet, in the attempt to translate nature, the human world is thrust further way from the ‘continent of man’, as man is re-framed in the image of the creature or stranger. In the ‘presence’ section, Murray does not completely forgo the human; rather, he recasts human history through a tableaux of animals, animal voices, and even a stone. Such instances work not so much as fables or bestiaries—but as melancholic account of loss. There are at least four poems which may be read as a set. Let us start with ‘The Gods’.

In the first line of ‘The Gods’, a poem which translates the inner life of the fox, the fox declares, ‘There is no Reynard Fox. Just foxes’. In two terse sentences, the renowned, medieval bestiary of Reynard the fox is dismissed—by a fox, nonetheless, whose negation of the tale critiques the human tendency to reduce the fox, and all foxes, into fable. Certainly, the human characterisation of the fox is not good: Reynard (Reginhard) means hard, or hardened, and so named, the fox becomes a personification of evil, criminality and dissimulation that, presumably, lies at the heart of all men.

The fox of Murray’s poem, however, goes on to present itself in ordinary terms: ‘I am the fox who scents this pole’. But then, something odd occurs: this ordinary, blunt speaking fox is furnished with a soul:

As a kit on gravel, I brow-arched Play? to a human. 
It grabbed to kill, and gave me a soul.

The human attempts to kill the fox, and this murderous intent has consequences. It bestows all the riches of the spirit upon the beast. The fox is given a soul. This soul is invisible, and courses through its body as a form of consciousness and conscience. Because the fox is now half spirit, the bestiary of Reynard the fox is turned on its head. The fox is the one who recognises Reynard in the scent of every approaching human; and warily retreats from the deceptive, murderous ‘dog-human’:

There’s a young false-hoofed dog human coming
and the circling gunshot scent of him

The fox’s soul, whose voice is translated in italics, rejoins:

*Dreams like a whistle crack the spring;*
*a scentless shape I have not been*
*threads the tall legs of deities*
*like Head, and Colour, and Machine.*

In ‘The Gods’, Murray offers a double translation: the fox has two voices, outer and inner; fox and soul. And each voice carries a different inflection: the fox is plain-speaking, wary; the soul is poetic, whispering. In addition, each voice uses different names: whereas the fox calls the human ‘a false-hoofed dog’, the soul calls him a deity. But the human’s deification is hardly an elevating attribute—for the soul
quickly denies ever having been this ‘scentless shape’. Rather, the human as deity is a personification of technology and industry, and its power is not moral, but a mass of hardened attributes like, ‘Head’, ‘Colour’ and ‘Machine’.

Thus admonished by the fox, the human is wrested of the last vestiges of its humanity. Without a soul or a conscience, the human fares worse than Reynard—the human is a bastard; half-dog, half-human, as monstrous as a fabled chimera. ‘The Gods’ can be seen as an anti-bestiary; where the deities are enslaved and the beasts are ensouled. In this reversal, the human cannot hope for edification or protection from the evil shadow of the beast, because the human has become the beast, and has no hope of reversing his fate—even the soul of the fox disowns him, by denying ever having been human.

So then, ‘The Gods’ is translation of human loss, but one for which we cannot fully account. Presumably, human loss means both the loss of the divine (the absence of God, or the Gods), the loss of human innocence, and the loss or closedness of nature. How does this happen? As Benjamin knows, such loss occurs in the medium of human language. In the expression of language, mankind is cut-off from every beast, plant, stone and thing that it describes, just as it is cut-off from the immediacy or absolute expression of truth. So it is that humans in every language, translate a continual and never-ending catalogue of loss: as they strive to express truth, their words fall apart in misunderstandings, blunders, obfuscations—this is the ‘monstrosity of translation’.

But amidst the confusion and profusion of human languages, there is another loss that Murray catalogues, which occurs in the historical agreement of Christianity.

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15.2 The Agreement

If ‘The Gods’ restores the beast to innocence and humanity to a state of perpetual guilt, then ‘Animal Nativity’ may be read as a salve—for it promises forgiveness and a spiritual re-birth. Indeed, Almon describes it as Murray’s one ‘overtly Christian poem’. At the nativity, surrounding the manger, are a stable of animals who ‘translate’ the birth of Christ—as an animal who ‘turned human’:

Swallows flit in the stable as if
a hatchling of their kind,
turned human, cried in the manger
showing the hunger diamond.

However, ‘Animal Nativity’ may be read in another way. The poem begins with a curious line that reminds the reader of that which comes before ‘the agreement’ of Christianity:

The Iliad of peace began
when this girl agreed.

The poem hangs on the notion of the girl’s agreement. Indeed, before Mary agrees to bearing Christ, there is the war of Athens and Jerusalem. In ‘Animal Nativity’, the history Greek civilisation is represented by Homer’s ‘The Iliad’, and Jerusalem is referred to as ‘the old poem’ (the Bible, or ‘Old Testament’). With the birth of Christ, these two origins do not disappear, but are instead translated. And, as in any

326 Almon claims that there is ‘no heavy sectarian message in the poem.’ See Almon’s, ‘Fullness of Being in Murray’s “Presence: Translations from the Natural World”’, Antipodes, vol. 8, no. 2, December, 1994, p. 126.
327 In medieval bestiaries, the diamond is invested with a power that wards off demons. In Murray’s poem, the ‘hunger diamond’ is the symbol of Christ according to the ‘beasts’. Murray, ‘Animal Nativity’, Translations, p. 47.
328 idem.
translation, certain things are gained and certain things are lost. On the one hand, there are the gains of peace and forgiveness, and an assortment of miracles: ‘Now goats in trees, fish in the valley.’ On the other hand, there are losses: the loss of responsibility, judgement and death. But Murray focuses on Christianity’s gain, Christ—his nativity is a re-birth—the promise of covering over the ‘old poem’, with a new beginning:

He who frees from the old poem
turtle-dove and snake
who gets death forgiven
who puts the apple back.\(^{329}\)

If Christ gets death forgiven and puts the apple back, it is at the cost of human responsibility, which figures in both the Greek and Judaic traditions. Once Christ dies for the sins of mankind, then there can be no act that is not potentially subject to forgiveness: for everything is already forgiven. In Christianity therefore, the law of God is no longer set in stone. Humans may be pardoned from moral trespass, and not by those people they have hurt, nor by their own daily striving to stay on the righteous path, but by the priest in confession. In other words, the human is a) no longer strictly subject to the law and b) acts of lawlessness are pardonable. In addition, there is a change of emphasis: whereas Judaism entails following the commandments, and ‘doing what is demanded of you’, Christianity demands faith, and deeds or ethical actions are no longer so important.\(^{330}\) Furthermore, Christians are protected from the finality of death, for Christ is their salvation and vouchsafes eternal life in heaven.

\(^{329}\) idem.

But in this discussion of gains and losses we have escaped the last scene of the nativity. And at the end of the poem, we encounter dogs, who ‘crouch, agog at a crux of presence/remembered as a star’. Of course, the crux of presence is indelibly tied to the image of a cross; but crux is also used figuratively as a conundrum or riddle—‘a textual crux’ for instance, is that which is thoroughly puzzling. So Murray also translates the elusiveness of ‘presence’, as that which remains a problem, a crux, an unfathomable riddle.

15.3  *The Stone: Responsibility and the Law*

The poem, ‘Stone Fruit’ directly follows ‘Animal Nativity’, and here Murray continues his translation of religion and loss. We have seen how Christianity produces certain losses and gains, but in ‘Stone Fruit’, Murray returns to a reading of God that recalls the Judaic idea of law and responsibility. The poem gives voice to the inner stone of the fruit, whose appearance, after being cloaked in the fruit’s softness, is ‘streamy inside, taut with sugar meats’. And yet, the stone imparts the gravitas of an Emperor or a King. After all, the stone is ‘modelled on the sun’, and its finery surpasses all sensory perception:

> I am dressed for eyes by the blind,  
> perfumed, flavoured by the mouthless, by insect-conductors who kill  
> and summon by turns.

The stone’s army of ‘insect-conductors who kill’, testify to the might of the stone. What is the source of the stone’s force? The stone is the bearer of law:


332 An equally valid reading of ‘Stone Fruit’ from a Christian perspective, could posit that the recollection of the laws of the covenant is a translation of the history and difference of Christianity—that is, the remembrance of its historical movement from the ‘Old Testament’ to the ‘New Testament’, and the subsequent weakening of the original laws.

I am compact of laws aligned in all their directions, at behests I tip
over from law to law.\textsuperscript{334}

But what are the laws that the stone tips over? Murray does not offer a decisive
answer. However, the mention of the law and the laws have consequences: the
stone fruit is not simply a translation of organic life; but of human history, of the
possibility of ethics and justice. Indeed, the stone’s appearance signals a moment
that is akin to the uncovering of the stone tablets of law. We are taken by surprise,
partly because we thought the stone was a stone, and partly because the laws are at
first concealed by the fruit’s outer layers, that the stone compares to malodorous
clothing: ‘I’m clothed in luscious/dung but designed to elicit yet richer’. The
elicitation of the ‘yet richer’ is the stone’s promise: to reveal the law.\textsuperscript{335} Still the
stone proclaims:

\begin{quote}
I’m to tell you that there is a future and there are
consequences, and they are not the same, I emerge continually
from the inner world, which you can’t mate with nor eat.\textsuperscript{336}
\end{quote}

The stone holds out two laws: the future and consequences. And further, the stone
insists that these laws are not identical. So then, how can we interpret these laws,
which are already an interpretation of the ten commandments? On the one hand,
we might say that ‘the future’ is the positing of the afterlife—entry to which is
determined by the way one leads one’s life in the here and now, for example,

\textsuperscript{334} Murray, ‘Stone Fruit’, \textit{Translations}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{335} Just as the stone represents the irreducible kernel of the fruit; so it functions figuratively, as the
irreducible origin of time and law. Thus, we may understand what Benjamin is getting at when he
writes that the structure of truth is present as historical; thus it is manifest in the performative, rather
than the abstract: ‘the eternal is more like the frills on a dress than an idea’. Benjamin, ‘On the
\textsuperscript{336} Murray, ‘Stone Fruit’, \textit{Translations}, p. 48.
Les Murray and the Task of the Translator

whether one acts in accordance with various laws and tenants of life. This is the moral law, or what the stone calls ‘consequences’, of following or not following God’s law; and they do not relate to one’s earthly life, but determine one’s afterlife—as heaven or hell.

Nevertheless, it is equally possible to interpret the poem otherwise. In this case, ‘the future’ and ‘consequences’ demand a different understanding of time and ethics. Here the laws are the beginning of the contract that binds humans to one another, and to God. Following the law does not grant salvation in the afterlife, but grants responsibility to this life, the here and now. In this case, the future becomes the time of the law that gives force to the present, that is, to this life. The reinterpretation of the law’s time alters our response to ethics and justice. With no afterlife, the law is inescapable: it is an ever-present force with ever-present consequences: it demands ethical action, justice and responsibility.

This demand of the present, its burden, comes to the fore in Murray’s ‘presence’ section. We have already discussed how the question of presence functions as a task, akin to Benjamin’s notion of the unending or incomplete task. In ‘Stone Fruit’, the law is not abstract or timeless, but ‘present’. When the stone delivers the time of the law, it is not given in the future tense, ‘there will be a future’, but in the present tense, ‘there is a future’. In other words, the future is clearly translated as the present time, or as incomplete presence. Similarly, the consequences of the law do not relate to the future, but to now: ‘there are consequences’. The stone, as it emerges ‘continually from the inner world’, is the manifestation and continuation of the law. However, the law is only manifest in the stone as a fragment or translation, because the law is never revealed, only the law that the law cannot be revealed.

337 The presence of time cannot, however, be fully expressed or experienced, but is manifest as incomplete time.
338 The stone only appears after the fruit is eaten, thus, the stone signals the end of immediate gratification and the beginning of responsibility. Unlike the outer layers of fruit, the stone cannot be reduced to materiality or purpose: it remains pure; that ‘which you can’t mate with or eat.’ This line is quoted, albeit in a slightly different construction, in Murray’s poem, ‘Sunflowers’ and demonstrates the poet’s interest in the relation between the inner and outer world. See Murray’s ‘Sunflowers’, Translations, p. 42.
15.4 Forgetting

The last poem of this thematic suite is Murray’s ‘Deer on the Wet Hills’ whose title is a displacement of Iain Crichton-Smith’s poem, ‘Deer on the High Hills’.\(^{339}\) But Murray’s poem adds a wetness to Crichton-Smith’s landscape of high hills, so that the deers’ footing is no longer assured, and they stay upright only tentatively because of an unknown source of sustenance: ‘love stays hooves on steep’.

Clearly, however, it is not only ‘love’ that stays the deer, but poetry. Murray’s poem transports the deer into the wet hills of language. This transformation, however, is not without loss—for the deer are displaced as soon as they are named. The deer survive in Murray’s poem, but in a different form: for no poem or translation is complete. So it is that the deer, even as they are briefly immortalised, remain lost to us humans; a world apart. But it is not just the loss of deer that is at stake, but the loss of ‘the natural world’, that is, the immediacy of nature and of things themselves. If Murray laments this loss, then it is because it occurs in every poem, and every translation.

In ‘Deer on the Wet Hills’, human language, which mediates the experience of time and space, is contrasted against the figure of deer, whose silence represents an idyll of continuity and presence. For the deer, everything is different. They pass through seasons; but their experience of time carries no weight, because their world is translated as a genesis or continual beginning:

As anywhere beyond the world

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\(^{339}\) Crawford mentions this parallel in ‘Les Murray’s “Present Sequence”’, *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray*, ed. Carmel Gaffney (Armidale: Kardoorair, 1997) p. 54. Crichton-Smith’s poem is a meditation on the otherworldliness of deer. One is reminded of Murray’s own poem, when Crichton-Smith writes that the deer is ‘half-in, half-out this world’ (p. 40), and finally withdraws from the poet and from language: ‘And you, the deer, who walk upon the peaks/are you a world away? A language distant? Such symbols freeze upon my desolate lips’ (p. 45). Ian Crichton-Smith, ‘Deer on the High Hills’, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) pp. 35–46.
it is always the first day.  

The deer’s sense of time and place is skewed; they are ‘beyond the world’ and thus beyond historical time. We are reminded of Murray’s notion of the otherworld: an unknown place, that is utterly foreign. This otherworld is akin to the ‘anywhere beyond’ location of the deer. The human senses are altered: ‘smell replaces colour’, and this silent sense enables the deer to withdraw even further into themselves, so that, as omnipresent narrator writes, ‘these ones, who are loved/as they are red: from within.’

The deer are red and read from within, simply because they are ‘loved’. Just as Murray puns red with read, so we hear the word dear in deer. The deer is loved because in its proper name, we hear dear; the address of a beloved. But the more we hear ‘dear’ or ‘love’, the less we hear deer, and the quadruped animal withdraws further into silence, until we no longer know what it is we love, except the name deer or dear. Murray’s use of punning is free-wheeling and playful, but it also resists the attempt to reduce language and poetry to a system of sensible meaning. Instead, puns have an effect not unlike doubling: the punned word recalls another word—its homonymic twin—which in turn emphasises the difference between the two: for example, red and read, deer and dear. This difference leads us back to the difference of languages, and the gap between translator and translated, the human and deer grows ever distant.

As if to emphasise this difference, Murray continually juxtaposes the words of the narrator against the silence of the deer. When the narrator states, ‘History is unforgiveness’, he refers to the human record of deeds and actions that cannot be erased. History must endure and be endured, because life is historical. This means that the past is a living sentence—it lives on in language and languages, and it cannot be forgiven or taken back.

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341 idem.
But what of the deer? The deer responds to history silently, for its mode is not historical, but apart from us, humans. And the translator intervenes, ‘Terse, as their speech would be.’ If the deer could speak, even their speech would be concise, unadorned. But the deer have no interest in their possible modes of speech, rather, they continue ‘chewing uninterest’ even as ‘anguish flaps one wing.’ Because the deer have no history of their own that is survived in language, they appear free and unburdened. But even so, the narrator goes on to compare these creatures, these ‘dears’, to human language, as if to move them closer to us:

Ones’ nap spooned in licks
like mutual silent sentences,
bulk to mirrored bulk.342

But the likening of the deer to an arbitrary construction of human language, the sentence, only moves the deer further away from humans: for the deer are not simply ‘like sentences’, they are ‘like mutual silent sentences’. Silent sentences are of course impossible—once the word sentence is written, spoken or thought, it communicates a particular order of words, action, time and narration and a thousand other things. The impossibility of silence within human language means that we cannot translate the deers’ silence, except as an impossibility, or something we cannot understand. Thus, the bulk of deer are compared to silent sentences—whose inner words are unknown. Deers mirror their bulk, nothing more, and we can no more understand this outer form, than we could read sentences without knowing any words. But something else is communicated in this word: for bulk also means a dividing ridge or bar. Thus, the deers’ bulk mirrors their divide and separation from human language and humanity.

In this last poem dedicated to an account of human loss, the deer symbolise a human lost innocence and a perspective of time that is otherworldly in its ever newness, its continual beginning. The deer inhabit an idyll of forgetfulness. Their

342 idem.
every action falls away without consequence. Because the deer cannot name themselves and are therefore, neither survived nor recorded in language, they represent the end of history, they are creatures who forgive because they forget. Hence, in the final line of the poem, the narrator notes:

One forgets being male
right after the season.343

In the mating season, the deer are aware only of their desire and sex, but this passes right after the season. Being human, however, means having no off-season. And although humans might forget what it is like to be hungry after they are fed, how an injury once hurt after it has healed, and they might even forget their own names, their memory or lack thereof is not based on its fulfilment by men—rather, as Benjamin writes, memory is a ‘reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God’s remembrance.’344 Thus, in ‘Deer on Wet Hills’, Murray mourns the loss of human ‘presence’; the experience of time that is ever new, and without judgement. It is not so much the forgetting of the deer that is at issue, but the simple fact that in their otherworldly silence, the deer escape from the burden of representation, whether we call this burden the task of poetry or the task of translation.

343 idem.
Chapter Sixteen

The (Australian) Language Forest

16.1 Strine: Australian English

Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the mountain forest of language, but on the outside...—Walter Benjamin.345

All through the ‘Presence’ section, Murray highlights the otherness of nature. He does so, not by describing the differences to the reader, but literally, by transforming and renewing his own language, Australian English, so that it sounds unfamiliar and strange to the native ear. For Benjamin, this process of defamiliarising language—the very hallmark of the poet’s task—is originally ascribed to the translator. After all, it is the translator who must negotiate between two different languages and thus, the question of foreignness is the task at hand. But more importantly, for Benjamin, the translator’s task is not to assimilate the foreign language into one’s own tongue, but to allow it to become foreign. Just as the translator allows foreignness to be translated, so too, does Murray allow Australian English to become powerfully effected and transformed by the foreignness and silence of nature. Thus, in this collection, and throughout his entire body of work, Murray is in the process of translating Australian English.

In the last chapter we saw how Murray’s translation of Jünger’s poem ‘Ultima Ratio’ grapples with the problem of resolving the differences of German and Australian English. In the very first chapter, we saw how Benjamin’s articulation of the task of the translator was furnished by a metaphor of the

345 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 76 (GS 4.1, p. 16); translation modified.
translator as one who stands outside the *Bergwald der Sprache*. literate, this phrase translates as ‘mountain forest of language’, but in the English translation it is simplified to ‘Language Forest’, thus omitting Benjamin’s very specific cultural and poetic rendering of the terrain: the *Berg*. Indeed, if we take Benjamin literally, the word mountain cannot be ignored. Mountain forest signifies a romantic Alpine landscape of soaring peaks that appear insurmountable and summon notions of the sublime.

But what does it mean for a translator to stand outside a different landscape, whose features are not mountainous and thus, who face a different culture and language altogether? We will not completely discard Benjamin’s metaphor: for it willingly or unwillingly names a German-centric landscape. For this reason, ‘*Bergwald der Sprache*’ requires a translation of our own—one that takes into account a different language, a different mythology and a different landscape. Most critics would agree that Murray represents the romantic idea of the ‘Australian poet’: who stands at the edge of what we might call the Australian language forest or the bush. And not just any bush, but a very particular, very local bush that surrounds his property at Bunyah in New South Wales. From this place, which is both ‘real’ and ‘mythological’, Murray translates the particularities and oddities of his language, Australian English.

Australian English carries its own historical conflict—on the one hand, it is English, an imported language that must bend to re-name the continent’s otherworldly features. Often these names are mistranslations of local aboriginal languages—‘Kangaroo’, ‘Koala’, and so on. On the other hand, it is Australian, because it no longer solely relates to England and its Northern realm, but comes to codify a very different place. Thus, the name, Australian English, maintains what Wright calls a ‘double aspect’: it is an English that is not at home in England, and thus remains double-tongued, laconic, ironical. These are the myths.

It is strange that it has taken so long to come to Murray’s translations of the Australian bush. And yet, in the ‘Presence’ section there are very few poems that

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346 *idem*; translation modified.
could be identified as uniquely Australian. Thematically, the poet’s stretch is broad—he presents a diorama of creatures and life forms: the raven, deer, foxes, eagles, a cat, a shoal of fish, sunflowers; forms of nature that are translatable to Europeans and Australians alike. And yet, critics often interpret Murray as a poet of place, and his translation of Australia is regarded as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, depending on whether it is viewed as an act of poetry or an act of nationalism. In ‘Presence’, however, we find poems that regularly go beyond the strictures of place, and that might seem, were it not for Murray’s radical transformation of the English language, to be perfectly translatable. But Murray demonstrates that the Australian language forest is as fractured and slippery as any other language forest, and just as political in its rendering of history.

16.2  Darrambawi’s History of Australia

In ‘Cattle Ancestor’, Murray translates the non-native ancestry of Australian cattle, in a fashion that renders them almost native. He does this humorously and performatively, in a narrative form of long ‘sprawling’ lines, that give the piece a slow, meditative rhythm, in the vein of Murray’s famous poem, ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, except that here, one is reminded of a translation of an Aboriginal story of the dreamtime. The poem begins:

Darrambawi and all his wives, they came feeding from the south east

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back in that first time. Darrambawi is a big red fellow, terrible fierce. He scrapes up dust, singing, whirling his bullroarers in the air: he swings them and they sing out Crack! Crack!349

At first, Darrambawi conjures up a powerful man-beast, ‘a big red fellow’, but the name is a conjunction of two breeds of cattle used in Australia: the Durham and the Baldy. The Durham is an historical breed that the poet notes, are ‘rather obsolete now’. The Baldy, (pronounced Bawli in ‘Strine’) is a nickname for the white headed Herefords that remain a dominant breed.350 The two breeds form a mythological bull, whose mark on the landscape retells the history and development of Australian cattle as a creation story. Darrambawi’s display of virility and force is expressed in his profligate mounting of his many wives, and a near constant galloping rage. As the domestic animals proliferate, they spread out, and confront all in their path:

Kangaroo and emu mobs run away from him, as he tears up their shelters, throwing the people in the air, stamping out their fires.

The bovine violence wreaked upon the native animals is inextricably linked to human violence. Domestic cattle were transported to Australia by the British Empire, just as convicts were transported: for the purposes of labour, drudgery, work. The cattle are driven over the land by humans, and it is human handiwork and ‘creation’ that is acknowledged when Darrambawi refers to his initiate brothers as the ‘Bulluktruk’ (bullock truck):

Darrambawi gathers up his brothers, all making that sad cry mar

mar:

he initiates his brothers, the Bulluktruk. They walk head down in a

349 Murray, ‘Cattle Ancestor’, Translations, p. 25.
line
and make the big blue ranges.\textsuperscript{351}

The cattle train continues, ‘eating up the country’ until their power is threatened by a native resistance that is tipped off by the crow. Darrambawli, not satisfied by his constant hunger for the cows’ \textit{‘kulka’}, a Nyunger language term for hip,\textsuperscript{352} wages war, ‘dotting the whole country’, until all the native animals are frightened away. The effects of the war are such that the animals ‘forget how to speak’, and Darrambawli is deprived of all other sounds:

…There is only one song
for a while. Darrambawli must sing it on his own.

That Murray transcribes the form of the Aboriginal dreaming to render European cattle may be perceived as politically suspicious. One could argue that Murray performs a double displacement of Indigenous culture: not just appropriating an Aboriginal narrative form, but using it to ascribe a dreamtime mythology to European, domestic cattle, who take part in the conquest of Australia. One could also argue, however, that Murray’s appropriation of the dreamtime form is slightly more ambiguous. On the one hand, European hegemony is bullishly restored, but on the other hand, the telling of this violence is not without critique. Darrambawli wins, but at great cost—for he is isolated, alone and abandoned. Gone are the people and their fires, the mob of emus, kangaroos and the water snake. Gone because the cattle and the bulluktruk wage war and stamp-out the people, the animals, the vegetation, the songs, until there is nothing but cattle left. The tragedy of Darrambawli the cattle ancestor tells the tragedy of Australian history: usurpation of land and the attempted annihilation of the Aboriginal people. But this

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{351} Murray, ‘Cattle Ancestor’, \textit{Translations}, p. 25}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{352} \textit{Kulka}, in the Aboriginal Nyunger language, means \textit{hip}. See \textit{Macquarie Aboriginal Words}, eds, Nick Thieberger and William McGregor (New South Wales: Macquarie Library, 1994) p. 178. \textit{Kulka} is also used in various Slavic languages to mean: ‘bullet, ball, or shot’ (\textit{Czech}), ‘bullet’ (\textit{Lithuanian}) and ‘ball’ (\textit{Polish}).}
\end{footnotesize}
destruction is ultimately self-destructive—certainly, it sinks the country into a monoculture, as the poet narrates: ‘There is only one song for a while/Darrambawli must sing it on his own.’

The story of the Cattle Ancestor suggests a time of future restoration—where the lone song of Darrambawli might be supplemented by the songs of returning native plants and animals. Certainly, Murray’s collection is close to music and some of his poems even look like scores, whose letters and blank spaces call out to be played.

16.3 **Ambivalent Unity: The Strangler Fig and The Cockspur Bush**

In the poem, ‘Strangler Fig’ for instance, Murray inserts additional space beneath each line, and this has a number of musical and/or performative effects. First, the blank space slows the tempo of the poem; the eye has to stretch a little further to reach the next line. How slow is the tempo? *Lento? Largamente?* The poem is not scored in musical time. Nonetheless, the space between the text operates as a long rest or lapse of time, and the fig documents its own growth as ‘centennially slowly’. Second, because each line is isolated in blank space, it carries a greater force: we could not ignore any one line in favour of another; they equally demand to be read and heard. Third, the poem’s elongated stretch gives an almost concrete form to the fig tree, and his stretch is in two directions: vertical and horizontal, just as the roots of the fig spread out and down:

I glory centennially slow-

ly in being Guuggumbakh the

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353 Murray, ‘Cattle Ancestor’, *Translations*, p. 25.
354 Murray, ‘Strangler Fig’, *Translations*, p. 17.
strangler fig bird-born to overgrow

the depths of this wasp-leaved stinging-tree

The Strangler fig is not limited to the continent of Australia, but Murray’s is an Australian translation: for he names the fig, Guuggumbakh. In the Aboriginal Kattang language, Guuggumbakh refers to a species of fig in the Hunter region of New South Wales. The strangler fig is ‘bird-born’, as Murray puts it, being spawned from seed dropped by birds in the forest canopy. The fig develops in the crown of a host tree, winds its way down the host’s supporting trunk, as a slowly falling skirt, and implants its roots in the ground. With a vice-grip in the earth, the fig tree redounds, turning back upon the host tree and strangling its trunk with its ‘crystal mode of roots’:

and I complete myself and mighty on

buttresses far up in combat embraces no

rotted traces to the fruiting rain surface I one.

‘I one’, the fig tree proclaims; punning ‘one’ and ‘won’. The fig tree has ‘completed itself’, become ‘one’, and it has also ‘won’: for it has survived and flowered into fruit and taken over the life of its supporting spine, the host tree. Because of Murray’s pun, one and won are heard simultaneously, doubling over each other, until neither word can be taken as the more authentic. The idea of unity that is expressed in the word ‘one’, neither unifies itself, nor wins, but remains ambiguous.

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355 idem.
356 Guuggumbakh is the name of a ‘giant’ species of fig tree in the Hunter region. Thanks to Murray for pointing this out. From private correspondence, September, 2007.
357 Murray, ‘Strangler Fig’, Translations, p. 17
The doubt with which Murray translates the unity of the strangler fig, is repeated in his translation of a tree trunk, entitled ‘Great Bole’. The last lines of this poem recall the fig’s proud statement, ‘I one’. However, as in ‘Strangler Fig’, any sense of articulating a ‘complete’ unity or oneness, is undercut by the poet’s use of puns, which highlight the ambivalence and confusion that communicates itself in language. This ambivalence is what Benjamin calls the communication of the unknown or expressionless (ausdrucklos) in language, and we can recognise something of the unknown in the dense and spell-binding wave of Murray’s closing lines:

…I juice away all
mandibles. Florescence
suns me, bees and would-be’s.
I layer. I blaze presence.

The great bole (or trunk) of the tree speaks in puns throughout the poem, but the above two are striking in the way that they complicate the issue of presence. The first pun, ‘florescence suns me’, refers a) to the flowers whose bloom acts as a sun upon the trunk and b) to the fluorescence of the sun’s light. The second pun, ‘bees and would-be’s’, playfully conjoins the idea of being or essence with the humble ‘bee’. Thus, when the great bole declares: ‘I layer. I blaze presence’, the reader cannot help but hear ‘presents’ in the word ‘presence’, or to link presence with the former pun on bees. The idea of presence keeps slipping away. It is not so much the presence of the great bole that we see before us, as it is the great bole of words that entangle and layer and blaze in multiple ways.

In ‘Cockspur Bush’, Murray translates the shrub that marks rainforest or scrubby watercourse areas from Queensland to New South Wales. The cockspur’s

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358 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Illuminations, p. 80 (GS 4.1, p. 19). For Benjamin, languages are related not because they are structurally or historically ‘alike’—but because they all fail to express meaning.

surface is thorned full of burrs and ‘caries’, but underneath its leaves, it forms a protective shelter for birds:

….I am innerly sung
by thrushes who need fear no eyed skin thing.\(^{360}\)

Of course, there are variations of the Cockspur Bush in other climes. Such a shrub has multiple uses, but no use that could be called its own: the thrush provides its inner song, the cattle prunes it, the butcher birds lace its leaves with lizard bones, and so the bush concludes, ‘I am lived and died in, vine-woven, multiplied.’\(^{361}\)

Other things give animation

Like all of the poems that translate aspects of the Australian landscape, we are less concerned with the symbolic quality of this or that tree or marsupial, than we are with the creaturely and otherworldly effects upon our language. In ‘Cockspur Bush’, as in many of his ‘Presence’ poems, Murray follows Benjamin’s call to break through ‘the decayed barriers of his own language’,\(^{362}\) by punning, rhyming, or altering tense, as when, for instance the bush proclaims, ‘I am lived. I am died’. This pronouncement is made in the first line and sounds rather shocking; as the life and death of the bush had already occurred, and nothing more could be said.

However, the pronouncement is more subtle than it first appears: it shatters the unity of the speaking subject, by disrupting grammatical time. The Cockspur Bush is simultaneously of the present and the past. On the one hand, its life goes on: ‘I am’, it declares. On the other hand, its life is over; recalled as an historical event: ‘I am lived’. The effect of the verb, lived is to displace the subjectivity of the ‘I’. We can see this more clearly when we read the phrase in reverse: ‘lived am I’. The Cockspur Bush does not live; it is lived, and this means it is determined by other creatures and forces. Indeed, as poem proceeds, the ‘I’ refers to itself

\(^{361}\) idem.
objectively and dispassionately as a survivor might: ‘I was two-leafed three times, and grazed,/but then I was stemmed and multiplied.’ The Cockspur Bush is acted upon: other creatures or elements animate its branches or eat its fruits; thrushes may give it song, but as for the essence of Cockspur itself, we can say almost nothing. As the birds, lizards and cattle ornament the bush, they both alter and obscure it, until it becomes an inner bush, like a nest or womb: ‘I am lived and died in/vine-woven, multiplied.’

16.4 Continental Slowness: The Echidna

Murray’s poem ‘Echidna’, another translation of an Australian life-form, draws parallels with his earlier poem on the Kangaroo, ‘Layers of Pregnancy’. In ‘Echidna’, however, Murray does not translate marsupial life (the echidna is a mammal) nor its pregnancy (the echidna has just given birth), but instead, he translates the echidna’s idyll as moving, eating slumber:

Life is fat is sleep. I feast life on and sleep it, 
depth loveself in calm.

Everything in waking life leads to sleep—and it is for sleep that the echidna hunts, eats and teaches her newborn the language of ‘ant ribbon’. Sleep leads the echidna literally by her nose: ‘Corner-footed tongue-scabbard, I am trundling doze/and wherever I put it/is exactly right. Sleep goes there’. Even the form of the poem seems to jolt itself from slumber—with each long line followed by a short line, giving the reader the sensation of nodding off and jerkily returning to wakefulness.

364 Murray’s poem, ‘Layers of Pregnancy’, is included in an earlier section of this chapter. Like most of the poems in _Translations_, it lends itself to multiple readings and interpretations. My decision to omit it from the ‘Australian’ section, is based on the poem’s rather more unique handling of identity and difference.
366 _idem._
If sleep is the mode of the Echidna’s being, then is it also a nod to the evolutionary slowness of the Antipodean continent.\textsuperscript{367} Of this quality, which could be described as a slumbering remoteness, Murray writes: ‘away from the marks of human incursion, it is always the first day. One in which you are as much at home as a hovering native bee, or the wind, or death, or shaded trickling water.’\textsuperscript{368}

\textit{16.5 The Lyre of Australia}

But Murray does not forgo the flipside of this sensation of slumber or silence, or being lost in the home of nature. In his poem ‘Lyre Bird’ he translates our eerie bird of mimicry. The name is worthy of comment: lyrebirds are, of course, named after the lyre—the fan of their tale mimics the instrument’s curved shape. But it is the noise of the lyrebird that begs a closer comparison: its medley of pitch perfect imitations of ‘found sounds’, from chainsaws to kookaburras to ‘she-dingos’, are suggestive of a great mythological sound box, one which is less in the spirit of Orpheus or Apollo, than a laughing jackass. The lyrebird as muse is foregrounded in the work of early Australian poets such as Henry Kendall whose poem, ‘The muse of Australia’, represents the lyrebird as a muse who is ever elusive:

\begin{quote}
A lyre–bird lit on a shimmering space; 
It dazzled mine eyes and I turned from the place,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{367} The speed of historical development of animals and plants in Australia is described somewhat metaphorically as ‘slow’—as if slowness were a national characteristic, or described the ‘feeling of eternity’ (the phrase most likely to be bandied about when surveying the wilderness). But according to Tim Flannery, slowness is the result of a geographically isolated evolutionary period, which, over many millions of years, has produced both a highly diverse and specialised population of animals and plants, and a corresponding slowness in their growth, reproductive rate and metabolism. See Tim Flannery’s, \textit{The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People} (Melbourne: Reed Books, 1994).

And wept in the dark for a glorious face,
And a hand with the Harp of Australia! 369

Roland Robinson’s also pays homage to the bird, in his poem, ‘The Tea-Tree and the Lyre-Bird.’ Here, the lyrebird becomes the poet’s accompanist; who breaks the silence of the Australian bush:

…And when my way
led down through rocks, the lyrebird halted me
with those full rich repeated notes that sprang
out of the darkness and the sound of rain, and he was silent
then but, as I waited, sang
again. Past roots and rocks I went along
rich with that flowering, rich with repeated song. 370

In Murray’s poem, the lyrebird is a trickster, a ‘Liar made of leaf-litter’, but at the same time, his talent for imitation as transformation, makes the bird an ideal muse of the translator:

Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder,
I mew catbird, I saw crosscut, I howl she-dingo, I kink
forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, link
cattlebell with kettle-boil; I rank ducks’ cranky presidium
or simulate a triller like a rill mirrored lyrical to a rim. 371

The dense sound effects of Murray’s translation of the lyrebird, clash and trill into a form of music: where words become purely expressive, as tones or the tint of paint,

and the idea of sensible meaning slips away. Like many poems in the collection, the poem is a sonnet (literally ‘little song’) and the frequent rhymes, alliteration, homonyms and onomatopoeia, compound and transform poetic language into a soundscape, full of ambiguity. This effect is what Robert Crawford aptly describes as otherness in language. Murray ‘rills’ Australian English with a different tone, that ‘sounds like a native speaker struggling to communicate a concept; it reads like translatorese.’

This cacophony of sound, which finds its emblem in the lyrebird, is also the task of the translator; where words take on a literality that is almost creatural. Writing on the phonetic aspects of poetry, particularly rhyme, Benjamin notes, ‘The child recognises by rhyme that it has reached the summit of language, from which it can hear at their source the rushing of all springs. Up there, creaturely existence is at home…’. In Murray’s rendition of the lyrebird, language becomes almost solely performative: the poet mimics the sounds of the bird, and thus moves further towards the creaturely, and further away from an attempt to communicate meaning.

The poem is self-reflexive, playful and tongue in cheek. The lyrebird’s mimicry is mimicked by the poet, and within the poem, it is unclear as to whom is mimicking whom. The poem begins with the word ‘Liar’—but who is this charge directed towards: the original liar: the lyrebird? Or the imitator of the lyrebird: the poet? The charge is as ambiguous as the identities or voices in the poem. For instance, we might associate the third person narrator, who begins by observing the bird as ‘hen sized under froufrou’, with the poet. We might then assume that when the poem switches to the first person, that it is the lyrebird who sings: ‘I ring dim. I alter nothing. Real to real only I sing’. But of course, the ‘I’ is just as much the poet’s own comical imitation of the lyrebird—for it is the poet who takes the

place of this renowned mimic and turns its song into words, and it is his translation of the lyrebird that will ‘intrigue… the next recorder’:

Screaming Woman owl and human talk: eedieAi and uddyunnunoan.
The miming is all of I.  

The real lyrebird has another voice: a series of clicks and whistles sounded between imitations. But this in-between voice is not deemed to be the lyrebird’s characteristic or authentic voice. The authenticity of the lyrebird’s voice lies in its ability to mime; to translate the sounds and noises it hears, and to re-present them, in any order. This performance is all the more convincing when the lyrebird is nowhere to be seen. But for the human listener, the loopy, fragmentary sounding of multiple forest and urban noises can only point to one culprit: the lyrebird. Just as Murray’s translation of the lyrebird points to the poet.

If the lyrebird is the muse of Australian poetry, then it is because poetry is an act of translation; of transforming and renewing Australian English. The lyrebird symbolises an ambiguous or double-voice: authentic as inauthentic. While the lyrebird’s authentic voice is one of mimicry, it is this mime that makes the sounds of the forest appear all the more original. In this way, the lyrebird reminds us of the literal translator, who, by allowing his own tongue to become affected by a foreign language, adds new life to the original. Murray, who approaches poetry as a translator, and whose experience of different languages often irrupts in his own language, here shows us how nature can be more justly approached: not via description, or cognition, but through the literal mimicry of one’s own language, that is, through translation.

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Chapter Seventeen

Literality

17.1 On Monstrosity, Expressionlessness, the Nocturnal Day

I permit myself to be/
neither ignored nor understood
—Les Murray.

The last section of this chapter is devoted to literality—a topic we have already mentioned in relation to Benjamin’s theory of translation. For Benjamin, the prototype or ideal of translation is the interlinear version of the Holy Text. Why this text and not another? There are two rather simple reasons. First, the interlinear version of the Holy Text is an historical example of a literal word by word translation of an original text, into a multitude of languages. One can follow the original lines in Hebrew, and compare the fragmented literal translations that appear below. Second, the interlinear version of the Holy Text has materiality, it exists—hence, it is not an abstract idea, even if it strives to translate the untranslatable word of God.

For Benjamin then, it is word by word, literal translation that constitutes the ideal form of translation. Such an exercise does not attempt to lay claim to the ‘meaning’ or ‘sense’ of the original work as a whole, by altering sentence structures here or cumbersome passages there, so that the translation sounds less monstrous to the native ear. Rather, it is concerned with following each word of the original, and finding its harmonic supplement in the new language. The result is often abyssal or nonsensical—a translation whose ‘meaning plunges from abyss to abyss, and threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language.’

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this abyssal result is more faithful to the original work. This is because a literal approach does not strive to alter the original work in the name of meaning or unity, but rather, it faithfully records the difference that exists between the two languages, and shows, despite the will of the translator, that this difference cannot be unified.\footnote{The monstrosity of literal translation is not confined to a mode of translation—but threatens every language. In other words, literal translation can be no more or less monstrous than the original poem, no more or less monstrous than any human language in relation to the ideal of pure language, or truth.}

We have been talking of the difference between languages. However, by now we know that this difference also exists within a single language, insofar as every single language relates to the ideal of pure language. Even if there was only one human language left in the world, this would be enough to allow for the possibility of translation. Because of the difference that exists within each and every human language, we can say that poetry and translation are related. Both the poet and the translator extend and renew languages, even if they do so from a slightly different perspective—for Benjamin, the poet stands in the middle of the mountain language forest, and the translator negotiates the borders between two languages. But what happens when the poet stands simultaneously in the centre of the language forest and at its edge? When the task of the poet is inseparable from the task of the translator?

This question is at the centre of Murray’s Translations, provoking Crawford to comment that the poems read like translatorese, and provoking this thesis, which attempts to read Murray’s poems as translations, in accordance with their overarching title: Translations from the Natural World. In attempting to translate the impossible—creatures or plants who have no human language, Murray pulls apart his own language as a foreigner might and breaks through its ‘decayed barriers’, until meaning no longer affixes itself to words.

Any of the poems in the collection can be read as ‘literal translations’, and we have pin-pointed a number of ways that Murray goes about defamiliarising Australian English. But to place all of his poems under the heading ‘literality’,
would be redundant—and here, we shall only look at three translations, which in their various ways, illuminate Murray’s task as a literal translator of the natural world.

The first poem, ‘Insect Mating Flight’, features Murray’s trademark compression of onomatopoeic and musical effects, however, here the insects do not sing in the way that the lyrebird ‘rills’ or screams, but intone a literal hum as they mate in a locked-together flight. In Murray’s translation, the action of humming and mating and tumbling appears monstrous, until we recognise that it is a kind of code:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{with our chew eyewords’ whim} \\
\text{moth reed haze racing vane,} \\
\text{butts hum and buoy or, fairer moan,} \\
\text{ex pencil eye fits elf, is gain,} \\
\text{Microbes leap ova neither lung} \\
\text{disdances leery quid threw awed.} \\
\text{Clewings eerie dissent inner cord.}^{378}
\end{align*}
\]

Indeed, one could well imagine an interlinear version of this poem, not in order to ‘crack the code’, or uncover its ‘intended meaning’, but to demonstrate that poetry is always in translation, and that this translation is only one possible interpretation of Murray’s text:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{without you I would swim} \\
\text{my three days race in vain,} \\
\text{but summon boy or, pheromone} \\
\text{expense in life itself, is gain,} \\
\text{Microbes leap over neither long} \\
\text{distances liquid throughout.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[^{378}\text{Murray, ‘Insect Mating Flight’, Translations, p. 18.}\]
Clear wings iridescent in accord.\textsuperscript{379}

If we were to simply interpret Murray’s poem as a game or riddle, then we would be implying that a) poetry is didactic: it has a clear meaning, if only we could uncover it; and b) poetry is entertainment: as a diversionary parlour game or trick. Given that Murray’s poem is open to a number of translations or interpretations, it remains irreducible, in a way that defies the structure of the riddle: for a riddle is only a riddle insofar as it can be solved. ‘Insect Mating Flight’ does not depend on being decoded or unravelled: for it works just as well as a literal translation of Australian English, whose every word turns further away from meaning and thus, draws closer to the expression of the abyssal.

The second poem, ‘From Where We Live on Presence’, is the penultimate poem of the ‘Presence’ Section. Here, Murray translates the human from the beetle’s perspective, before turning back to the beetle:

A human is a comet streamed in language far down time; no other living is like it. Beetlehood itself was my expression.

It was said in fluted burnish, in jaw-tools, spanned running, lidded shields

over an erectile rotor. With no lungs to huff hah! or selah.\textsuperscript{380}

Whereas human life is given form and pulse by a comet of language; the beetle’s life is expressed or ‘said’ by its alien form, that is a composite of mechanical parts: ‘jaw tools’, ‘lidded shields’, ‘erectile motor’. All of these parts form the beetle’s

\textsuperscript{379} This translation does not claim to be the ‘correct’ version. In his own interpretation of the poem, Almon points out that the last line: ‘Clewings eerie dissent inner cord’ is a perfect mirroring of the poem’s opening line, ‘Clear wings iridescent in accord’. See Almon’s, ‘Fullness of Being in Les Murray’s “Presence: Translations from the Natural World”’, \textit{Antipodes}, vol. 8, no. 2, December, 1994, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{380} Murray, ‘From Where We Live on Presence’, \textit{Translations}, p. 53.
grammar, but the beetle is lung-less, and cannot ‘huff hah! or selah!’ Instead, the beetle silently proceeds via ‘clues’. Ironically, these clues are expressed in human language:

…my capsule fourth life went by clues.
I mated once, escaped a spider, ate things cooked in wet fires of decay but for the most part, was. I could not have put myself better, with more lustre, than my presence did. I translate into segments, laminates, cachou eyes, pungent chemistry, cusps. But I remain the true word for me.382

Murray’s translation of the beetle is in the past tense: ‘I could not have put myself better/ …than my presence did’, which makes the ‘presence’ of the beetle inaccessible because it is already absent, recalled as historical. Nevertheless, the beetle insists that its presence expresses its innermost being, its beetle essence, better and with more lustre that the beetle itself could have done. The beetle’s insistence that its own presence is expressive is true: insofar as presence is manifest (as incompleteness) in the act of translation. Because presence cannot be fully expressed in language, the beetle is stuck: how can its lustrous presence be represented? It cannot be made wholly present outside of language—for we humans cannot experience true wordlessness. Thus, the beetle must be translated, for at least in translation, some aspect of presence is manifest: ‘I translate into segments/laminates/cachou eyes…. /But I remain the true word for me.’383

This last statement cannot restore the presence of the beetle to itself—for the ‘I’ of the beetle is not the beetle itself, but its translation. Thus, the true word for the beetle is lost; the pronoun ‘I’ may stand for the beetle, just as a proper name stands

381 Selah is a Hebrew word, and indicates a particular pause or breath in the liturgical text. The use of the word in Murray’s poem also acts as a literal pause or breath before the beetle continues. The Oxford English Dictionary; CD-ROM Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
382 Murray, ‘From Where We Live on Presence’, Translations, p. 53
383 idem.
for a human being, but neither reveal the truth. Even the title of the poem, ‘From Where We Live on Presence’ is ambiguous. The pronoun, ‘we’, may refer to the beetle, the human, or any number of translated creatures and plants in-between. And the idea of place, suggested in the phrase, ‘From Where We Live on Presence,’ is hazy and undisclosed. But this much is clear: Murray expresses the poet’s striving to give expression to life; whether from the perspective of a beetle or a bole. For the beetle, human living is ‘streamed in language far down time.’ Thus, the survival of language means something far greater: the survival of humanity as a whole—even though language appears as inexpressive and fleeting as the tail of a comet.

‘Possum’s Nocturnal Day’, is the final poem of the ‘Presence’ section, and announces an end to Murray’s translations of the otherness of nature and humanity. The possum, or phalanger, is nocturnal—thus, its day is clothed in darkness and represents an inverted world to the human world of light:

I curl up in my charcoal trunk of night
and dream in a welling pictureless encouragement
that tides from far but is in arrival me
and my world…

Murray’s possum speaks in the first person, ‘I’, and all other possums are distinguished by the royal term, ‘Only Ones’. The term, ‘Only Ones’, alludes to the possums’ solitary nature, but also to their specificity and uniqueness. They are the only ones who ‘can alight, parachute, on any bird’s touchdown/….drop through/reality and flicker at tangents clear to its crown’. And yet, while ‘Only Ones’ exclusively designates possum-hood, it is a wonderfully contradictory term: for how could there be more than one ‘Only One’? This is of course Murray’s point: the separation of self and other, of I from you, of oneself from anyone, is an effect of human language.

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385 idem.
So it is then, that the possum can claim in the poem’s final line, ‘nothing is apart enough for language’. This ending is full of lament: for it names the human species’ dilemma. As the language species, humans are closed off from the silence of nature on the one hand, and on the other hand, from the immediacy of truth or pure language. It is the bind of language that gives humans their task, responsibility or burden: to name things, to translate. Because of language, humans are always at a remove from ‘things as they are’, but this distance or apartness gives humanity the promise of truth and restitution, even if this promise cannot be fulfilled, but is manifest in every name as a broken shard, or fragment.

In ‘Possum’s Nocturnal Day’, or indeed, in any of his poems from nature, Murray attempts to translate presence—not because it is possible, but because it is impossible. In so doing, he shows us that the task of translation is not to reduce the world, but to expand it. And this can only be done by striving towards the expression of the impossible: whether we call this truth, presence, or ‘the otherworld’. The results may be difficult and frustrating, not because the poems themselves cause offence, or entertain radical ideas, but because they alter the shape and life of what is thought to be safe and dear and known to us: our mother tongue.

To read Murray’s *Translations* is to experience a performance of literal translation: but here, nature is the foreign language: for it is nature’s silence that humans cannot know. The poet’s attempt to give sound and life to nature has consequences: for Murray, it means letting his native language grow unutterably foreign. For the reader, it means letting-in this foreignness—where eyes ‘go binocular’, ‘blots of shade are abyssal’, smells are words like ‘sodichlor, chaff, calc’, and ‘sheer shear’ is the song of sea currents. Murray’s otherworldly collection follows the spirit of Heraclitus’ fragment: ‘Nature loves to hide (*phusis kruptesthai*)

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386 See the following poems by Murray, ‘Two Dogs’, ‘Yard Horse’ and ‘Spermaceti’, *Translations*, pp. 19, 31, 44.
Murray does not reveal nature as such, but rather, the foreignness that lies as a curtain or slip between nature and humanity.

Nature remains in hiding. However, something of nature’s hiddenness or closedness, its truth as a hiding-place, is refracted in Murray’s Translations, as a kernel or seed of the unknown.

17.2 A few last words: On the Task of Translating Presence

...I saw I failed in talking about presence but succeeded in evoking it! You may well be right that presence can only be got at through translation.

—Les Murray

Murray does not translate the non-human world into human language, so that we may understand ‘things as they are’, or ‘presences’. Even if this is what he intends, or intended, at one time or another, his own translations demonstrate an acute awareness of the impossibility of ever fulfilling this goal. This is not to say that his translations don’t succeed in translating nature’s otherness—that they don’t capture a sense of the closedness of nature, or of the incomprehensible mode of being outside of human language—for all translations translate otherness to a greater or lesser degree.

Indeed, if Murray raises the question of presence in relation to translation, then it is because presence is the translator’s task. Why? Because presence is manifest in human languages, but not completely. When Murray says that he has failed in telling presence, but succeeding in ‘evoking it’, he understands that presence is an incomplete task: it may be called forth or summoned but only in


388 Murray, private correspondence, 28th January, 2006. Quoted with permission of the author.
translation. Thus, presence appears hidden in language: as ‘the poetic’, ‘the mysterious’, ‘the ungraspable’.

Murray raises the question of presence in his poem, ‘Sunflowers’. But his attempt to answer this question only complicates matters:

but what is presence?

The beginning, mirrored everywhere. The true indictment. The end all through the story.  

What is presence? According to Murray, it is the beginning and the end reflected everywhere in ‘the story’. The story has no name, but is recognisable as a creation story, whose telling aims to give humanity certain laws, and to account for certain things, to coax chaos into reason—as in the Aboriginal Dreamtime stories, the *Timeus*, or Genesis.

But at issue is the question of presence. What gives ‘presence’ its force has less to do with the story, than the story’s law. Presence is ‘the true indictment’. Indictment means an accusation, but also a charge, a formal declaration. In jurisprudence, the indictment responds to a criminal violation. But here, indictment suggests a pure charge—whose motivation or legitimisation is inessential, beside the point. It is enough for us to know that presence is the true indictment: a declaration of truth, a charge from above that one cannot throw off, abandon or forget, because it is inscribed and performed in human language. As such, the law of presence is mirrored everywhere, as the fragments of the broken vase, whose pieces are forever being re-arranged by the translator and the poet.

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Conclusion

But this is what the poets believe: that whoever pricks up his ears while lying in the grass or on a lonely slope will divine something about the things that are situated between heaven and earth

—Nietzsche.390

The Failure of the Task

So has Murray literally translated the natural world? Not at all. Although perhaps he has demonstrated the ‘monstrosity’ of anyone who claims to have succeeded in doing so. On the one hand, translation is necessary; on the other hand, it is impossible. Between these two options—Murray attempts to bring to presence their difference. But this too, is a failure: for presence cannot be fully revealed in language. Thus, the failure to express presence is in no way a personal or poetic failing. Failure is raised to the level of the absolute: transcendental failure is the condition of the possibility of translation.

Just think: if Murray could translate presence; if this task could be fulfilled; if the ambiguity of language could be disambiguated; if truth could be expressed immediately, here and now, without mediation—there would be no need for translation, no need for poetry, or any language. This has rather serious consequences: for it would threaten the very essence of ‘humanity’.

When Murray calls humans, ‘the language species’, he understands that human languages distinguish humankind from all other forms of nature. Humans show themselves to be uniquely human, not because they are featherless bipeds with opposable thumbs, but because they name in the many languages of their kind. This is the Adamic act.

To name, however, is not ex nihilo. The power to name is manifest in human languages: if things are nameable, it is because they have ‘name-ability’: the power or law that allows humans to name. So then, naming is only possible in and through human languages. And because human languages are historical—transforming themselves over time—naming is always already an act of translation.

On account of history and the history of languages, the originality of the name is lost to humans: as absolutely other. The original name has no name; it is that which comes before the name: the nameless. And the state of namelessness is anathema to humans, who, as ‘the language species’, cannot escape, give-up, or shirk the responsibility of naming. Thus, humans are forged and survived by their names, by the act of naming.

**The Other of Language**

I have a leaf’s tongue now and speak for stone/And cattle’s bony moods I’ve made my own…—Douglas Stewart.392

We have already shown how the act of naming and translating are essentially the same. It is a mistake to insist that one is more original than the other—that naming is more authentic than translation. Nevertheless, the mistake is often made: the poet is charged with ‘original’ naming, and the translator with ‘copying’ or renaming, in another language. We can see how this mistake occurs. A poet ‘names’ something, and this name appears original, as if it came from nowhere, as when Murray writes of a snake’s heat organ:

\[
\text{Water’s no-burn} \\
\text{Smaller sun lives all dim slowly}
\]

391 Naming is not authentic or singular, but a repetition and displacement of remembered names.  
to predawn invisibility
but self-digesters constantly glow-burn.393

What is the snake’s heat organ? Reading Murray’s poem, one might grow confused. Organ brings to mind the human liver or kidney, or any other instrument: musical or scientific. Murray, however, does not explain the snake’s heat organ in a technical or ‘categorical’ fashion, as say, sensory receptors sunk into pits in the snake’s face. In fact, if it were not for the title of the poem, we might never know that the snake’s organ was the subject of the poem. The poet proceeds indirectly: the organ in question is never described; it is shown in actu, as it monitors increasing or decreasing heat: ‘burn’ and ‘no-burn’; or varying shades of light: ‘all dim’, ‘predawn invisibility’ and ‘glow-burn’.

Still, we may argue, what about the creation of new names as familiar ones are hyphenated?—words like ‘no-burn’, ‘self-digestors’, ‘glow-burn’. Aren’t these new words original? Don’t they invite a series of correspondences that we have not pondered before—and of which we may still ponder? The creation of correspondences, however, are as new tributaries forged in a stream: they move language in new directions, but their source remains the same: the stream (of language).

The poet’s names are not original; they are displacements of other names. Murray gives life to the snake’s heat organ, not because his names come out of nowhere, or are entirely new, but because they alter the expression of the English language. Thus, what occurs is more truthfully an act of ‘translation’, as English is renewed and transformed.

If the poet’s naming is always already an act of translation, what happens to the idea of originality? To be sure, naming cannot exist outside of the history of names specifically and of languages in general: while humans are separable from nature by virtue of their ability to name, such an act cannot be mistaken as original creation. Whether the original creative word lies with God, or with the ideal

393 Murray, ‘Snake’s Heat Organ’, Translations, p. 28.
concept of pure language, it necessarily remains beyond the limits of human comprehension. Thus, the human act of naming, or translating, is not original in this sense.

Nevertheless, naming is not merely derivative, parasitic or second-hand. In naming, language survives and is given new and alien forms. Moreover, through the invocation of names, language shows itself as historical; an echo chamber of displacements, misunderstandings, correspondences and extensions. Language opens itself up to the foreign, mysterious and strange. It is no surprise then, that Benjamin’s model translator is Hölderlin, a poet whose literal translations of Sophocles are considered ‘monstrous’. Instead of making the original text appear unified and harmonious in German, Hölderlin forsakes the fiction of sense, and translating literally, opens the gates of language until they threaten to ‘slam shut’ and ‘enclose the translator with silence.’

The threat of silence then, is the closest the translator comes to originality, where language is at its greatest remove from the construct of meaning, seeming only to express what Benjamin calls, the ‘expressionless and creative word.’ Curiously then, it is the moment of peril within language, where all structures of sense may fall, that serves as the prototype for translation. The task of the translator—which is the task of the poet—is not merely one of failure, but of madness (Blanchot’s word). Furthermore, it is fraught with political danger: the ‘borders’ of a language are constantly under threat from the intrusion of other languages, and finally, from the intrusion of silence.

What then, does this say about the specific task of Les Murray? In translations, Murray does not cower from the threat of that which is other: rather, he opens the gates of language to the foreign, the monstrous and the unknown—for this ‘otherness’ is the truth that both threatens and sustains human language.

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With the question of literal translation in mind, it would be a mistake to claim that Murray’s goal is to present ‘the natural world’ before us, as if language could fall away and reveal the essence of nature, as if the natural world could come to presence in the world. Equally, it is a mistake to claim that Murray’s focus on a particular place—‘the natural world’—further his role as the bard of rural Australia. Both claims forget that the task at hand is not the authentic presentation of nature or presence, nor of the Australian bush, nor of any other myth of the Australian nation. Murray’s task is one of translation. So then, can place be translated?

To be sure, it is a common prejudice in Australia that the authentic task of the poet lies in articulating ‘Australian identity’. This task demands that the poet reflect upon ‘the truth’ of the Australian nation. To question the legitimacy of this focus on identity would constitute an attack on the identity of the nation: it would be un-Australian. So then, although the question of identity per se is rarely broached in public discourse, it expresses the country’s desire for legitimacy, unity, subjectivity and power. This desire for unity continues unabated, in part because the idea of ‘Australia’, its white ‘penal origins’, suggests illegitimacy, disunity, subjugation, and powerlessness. Subsequent events only extend the nation’s original blight, such as: the British declaration of terra nullius, which granted them possession of Australia; attempted genocide of the Aboriginal population; absurdity and ruin in WWI at Gallipoli; Government mandated adoption and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples within white, Christian communities (the ‘Stolen Generation’); the White Australia Policy that restricted, on racial grounds, immigration to

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Australia from the 1850s to 1973; the 2001 ‘Children Overboard’ scandal, in which doctored photos were released by the Government to support their claim that refugees were throwing their children overboard, ‘to drown’—this fabrication was not scandalous enough to sack the government, but rather won them another term in office; the indefinite incarceration of refugees and asylum seekers at Woomera, Port Hedland, Villawood; the 2002 ‘Pacific Solution’, which authorised the off-shore detention of refugees on small islands including Nauru, Christmas Island, and the Cocos Islands. The history of the nation of Australia shows itself to be racist, violent and deeply xenophobic. So then, how can the poet respond to the various blights of the nation?

Perhaps by evasion, omission, despair, or the refusal to write another word (as in the case of Judith Wright). Indeed, such a litany of blights do not flatter the Australian nation; but threaten to spoil it. Perhaps it is not surprising that the question of ‘Australian identity’ is not ascribed to history but to something less troubled, called ‘place’.

Place means: ground, environs, land, space, open space, area, zone, locale. It may denote a particular place: one’s homeland, nation, region, one’s place of belonging or attachment; or an unknown place. And yet, place is ‘pure’; it is a-historical and apolitical. Place is the answer to the question: ‘What is Australia?’ Indeed, if one pursues the matter, how quickly the Australian will explain the specificity of their country or national character, by way of ‘the light’, ‘the dryness’, ‘the interior’, as if such descriptions lent their people a uniqueness; that the air and texture infused their soul. However, these stock phrases address neither the question of identity, nor of place—they are evasions. Certainly, it is nonsensical to claim that Australian identity is equivalent to a certain light, heat or topography. Moreover, it is politically suspect: for one might mistake ‘soil’ for ‘blood’, or claim that one’s place of origin is a measure of one’s character, race, humanity.

Quite obviously then, place is not the answer to the question of identity. It does Australia no benefit to repeat the myth of place, as if place were ‘pure’, unsullied, removed from history. However, place is first and foremost a translation:
place is only a place insofar as it is named, demarcated, identified or separated from some other place. Therefore, the discussion of place, however politically important, is inauthentic and unjust when used as a measure in determining the meaning or essence of the Australian character, identity, nation, or as a means of defining the poet’s task.

Indeed, the idea of place comes to us through the mediation of language. Thus, place as such escapes us: ‘the light’, ‘the dryness’, ‘the interior’, are not present to us in language, except as names, stand-ins, substitutions. As Murray demonstrates, the natural world is a translation, not a place. Or, if we could call it a place, is none we know: for it is not present or perspicuous, but withdrawn, immaterial and otherworldly.

**The Other of Poetry**

Poetry is placeless. Poetry is historically and uniquely concerned with that which is not of the human world, be they Gods and Heroes, spirits, muses, beasts, or the murmurs of nature. However, once the Gods depart, leaving only their shadows, the immortal world no longer holds sway over the human world. Poetry now writes of the absence of Gods and Heroes and of the subsequent withdrawal of divine presence, or the being of beings.\(^{397}\)

The withdrawal of the possibility of imminence, lies at the fore of Murray’s task, insofar as he cannot bring presence to ‘presence’ in language. This failure is transcendental: it is the essence of the translator’s task. Failure therefore, does not wreak Murray’s goal, nor threaten poetry with death—quite the contrary—the failure of translation ensures the survival of poetry (and translation).

In *Translations*, Murray does not seek to reflect nature ‘as it is’, or to use the image of nature to prop up a nation; instead, he proceeds to move ‘things aside in words’,\(^{398}\) to show that nature is always already denatured in language. For Murray, nature is a place of letters; a forest ‘wooded’ by words where, ‘light gutters in our

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398 Levinas, *Proper Names*, p. 131
sight lattice’, splendour is ‘witting as selves all glittering’, and ‘blots of shade are abyssal.’399

Of course, Murray might have translated anything else: the streets of Paris, the journey of a hero, or the daydreams of children. But it is nature that serves as a primary source of otherness: for nature does not speak; but confounds the poet with silence. Faced with the silence of nature, human language speaks overmuch and shows itself to be wild, unruly and overgrown. Despite all attempts then, the essence of nature remains a tangled, foreign wilderness that lies at the heart of all language, and that Murray attempts to translate as literally and justly as he can.400

But what of the translator’s especial task? Murray writes: ‘Only a poem can combat a poem.’401 Ironically, this quote is not original, but a translation of Novalis, who writes (in German), ‘Poetry can be criticized only through poetry.’402 And yet, poetry is always already an act of translation. So another version becomes necessary: ‘Translation can be criticized only through translation’, or to paraphrase Murray: ‘Only translation can combat translation.’

But how can translation fight itself? After all, combat means a fight, battle or controversy between opposing forces. Wherein lies the difference? The essential difference or conflict is not between one translation and another; it is the difference that lies at the origin of language as such—and it is this difference, or brokenness (Gebrochenheit) of which we have been speaking all along. And because difference stands at the origin of language as such, it also permeates real languages: not just as the differences between two, three or one-hundred languages, but also as the differences within a single language. Languages then, are history’s combatants: they

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400 It remains to be seen how Murray’s task as a translator may extend to other themes beyond presence and nature: certainly, a future study might concentrate upon such issues as translation and politics, translation and history, or translation and religion.
oppose one another and themselves. Such opposition is impossible to unify, or complete, without extirpating language itself.

The act of translation shows us this difference most explicitly. Just as a military battle requires a ground or field, a theatre where war may be enacted, the difference of languages requires a scene, wherein one may watch, witness and affect the unceasing flow of language. This ever-changing ‘scene’ is the task of translation—for combat lends languages depth and contour, bafflement and mystery, shock and awe, vigour and survivability.
Bibliography


Les Murray and the Task of the Translator

Helen Lambert


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The Raft

a twelve-tone poem

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

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by

Helen Lambert, BCA

Faculty of Creative Arts
The Raft attempts a ‘translation’ of Schönberg’s twelve-tone theory of musical composition. For dodecaphony, all twelve tones of the octave (rather than the eight tones of the traditional chromatic scale) are sounded before repetition. The result is a new, democratic harmony: each tone is given equal importance, regardless of key. The task of The Raft is to translate (however impossibly) the twelve tones of the musical octave poetically. Interpreting tone as voice—The Raft serialises and permutes twelve voices or tones over twelve moments, in order to move poetry to a harmonic form that is not simply lyrical, epical, or dramatic, but tonal—a raft of voices, each with their own ‘pitch’, and each sounding off in accordance with the rules of twelve tone, for the duration of the work.

The narrative retells the famous story of ‘The Raft of the Medusa’, in which over one-hundred people perished off the coast of Senegal in 1816. The Raft begins as the unlucky ship passengers (those with little money or education) find themselves consigned to a raft built from the remains of the sinking Medusa. Their provisions are running out, and their chance of survival has just been cut.
to A.H. in memory of Berlin.
“Imagine, if you will” he said in his ordinary voice, that I have eaten man
— Joseph Conrad

‘I think you are rafted, and not yourself.’ he continued. ‘Do go back and make up your mind to put up with a few whims’
— Hardy, Jude iv.290.
Characters

Lope………………The ship’s Doctor
Sol………………Army Sergeant
Rope Boy…………Sailor and deck-hand
Ern………………Carpenter, Raft Leader
Ratchett…………Foot soldier
Boyle……………Foot soldier
Wills……………Orphan boy
Norma……………Singer, wife of Chippie
Chippie…………Husband of Norma

Jin………………A young woman
Mon Suet………Cook
Dog……………The ship’s dog
The First Day

Sol
Lope, him with one sandal and one puffed-up foot, I saw him today, an omen of something I thinks, of something not right, get me?
I want offing, want out, I'm being stung by that old ship-doctor's rattling tote of tinctures and death needles, I'm sworn on his swag of tricks.
I am always around, his shadow doing rounds him poking about a busted brain, a body a bit of flesh turned to deck-slop;
For medical reasons he whispers, *they might not be dead*. I know what's dead they're dead, or soon enough. No-one clocks it. The gangrenous ones go green like the earth, Rope Boy sees islets when they're slipped overboard, I don't know. But I know what's what.
All is booty to him with the right trade and tools. No oath can hold out here. No oath. The laws of sea are drawn up in drawing rooms before tea, game is charades, Four words. Second word. First letter. stinks like Hell.
Nothing applies, when there’s nothing but dogs. For instance, them tow boats that left us left fast. I saw the rope being snipped by the ship’s cook, name of Mon Suet fatso to you, crawling over the Captain and a box of sweet cakes so desperate to slice us apart. His steel glinting, the real worm in the fruit. Then nothing. Us men rattled over each other. The raft sinking deep at the edges, feared us right into the middle. We’re suitors, I said, not marines.

Our betrayal is wetter than a kiss. I suit the streets fistie fights small crimes. Norma stops at my one-colour tattoos, always a sign. What’s on yer mind, son, but rank, who won, them pictures of painted ladies yel never know?

Numbers, I say

I’m one-hundred strong, my men outnumber the rest. It’s simple. Here is the fight of the army all surge and ratting and wild, giddy with sea

don’t fall off the sides love, mind your step, mind your feet, mind the logs, mind the gap, mind your ankles don’t snap off.

Norma love.

No-one thinks to scream fire. The rope nooses the sea. Old Gunsmoke is shading my mind, get me, I can’t see.

Only that hulk is flipping its head its tail. Come in spinner. Bet on both, that’s Betrayal. We just lost their backwater, slowly. Then silence, then. Near the edge of the sea the captain’s boats formed a V; the last letter I ever saw.

The sound of them gone was waves lapping and suckling. Lope says he heard wolves licking their paws clean.

Righto. Doctor’s a little strange, see.
Over there, that’s the smoking one we came from the hissing Medusa, death frigate. Some boys didn’t get off. She looks better than us: and room in her yet, and supplies, ropes, rum, look back. The shining reef all around her like a necklace. Look back again, I can’t stop it I see her flash and burn and burn I change my tune. Her mast is bald, smarts up planks, barrels Windows fire into the sea. My eyes burn orange. Ratchett and Boyle are holding their sides as if they was splintering. Leaning into me. Fire rashing around, opening our mouths, Oink Oink, I wheeze.

Listen.

The rope flayed about like a tongue loosened from the aspheads of the Medusa No-one could hack it fraying and wiggling a single cut can stop reason all of us saw von Hundert with his switch back bending down never seen him bend for anything but a coin or a pistol we were monitoring this one that is the dog the boy moaning Norma and her Chippie, the brawny soldiers in singlets the cook the sailors the rope boy the one given to theatre all of us had the fixed gaze of dreams there’s something sharp about madness.

von Hundert’s black hair curtained over his work what a worker Chippie said Norma moaned
one flash
of silver  brings to mind
a photograph  the insistent moon  but see, I peered into the black sea
no light  no record  no deed  the betrayal was the word  followed by the rope

ha ha  von Hundert said, We have abandoned them!
Flagging the other boats  his Münstered hands  quickening the winds  Men, we have abandoned them!
Our hastily hewn raft drags  ahead and behind  in circles our rope head  writhes
And we seek  to shut our eyes against  the mirror  of the sea.

This is the note someone wrote.

Norma
Norma, purse your lips now  that’s nice  wring your hands, sigh, consider your deportment:  straighten back, deep
breath then a shallow breath, okay  now stand like a lady  that’s nice  pose for a second  okay, pat your
bosom, your flowering belly  poom poom,  now, look out  motion to this one, and that one  with your
little pinkie,  work the crowd. They’re roaring, Norma!
Dab your eyelids.  Blow a little kiss.  Feel your dress, it’s sopping wet and sticking to your legs.
okay, don’t panic: un-paste it  go on, but it sticks to your fingers  scales of blue-green taffeta. The audience waves.
Don’t grimace, be nice—

*Chippie holds out his hand.*

*Norma scrunches up her face. Smacks at her legs.*

*Chippie removes his hand.*

Chippie?

*No response*

Chippie, I can’t be like this. Chippie, I can’t. Where’s my hem, Chippie, help me. I can’t find where it ends. Chippie, help, help.

Dumb waves keep getting in the way. Chippie, I can’t be like this. I can’t you know they can’t see me like this. 

*No response.*

Norma tries to unfix her grimace. Nothing. She puts her fingers on her mouth and moves her lips into a smirk.

Chippie?

*No response.*

Chippie?

*No response.*

Chippie, it’s okay, I know you seen her, the one dancing to the rope at six o clock Thinks she can sing, thinks she can do my moves look at her sticking out her ham bones like she was being plated. I know you seen her winding up the soldyars. Fanning them with her can-can, can’t-can’t legs
Chippie? Don’t leave me hem running, you saw her didn’t yar?

**Chippie**

*Chippie closes his eyes. Appears unconscious.*

*Norma waits.*

*Chippie lies still for some minutes.*

*Norma waits.*

*Chippie breathes in deeply.*

*Norma waits.*

*Chippie breathes out.*

*Norma waits.*

*Chippie murmurs:*

You mean that Jin.
Rope Boy
What is there? A barrel of food  no anchor   a flask of wine  no water  no water. One rope, dangling. I am forced to piss into my hands. Next to me face of old Boyle Retch. The steam pisses yellow. Retch. Mouth of Boyle gurgling water. I’m legless somehow  damp hands slip   I’m down worming on my stomach but the waves don’t stop slapping me. I recall it: where is my dog? I say it: where is my dog? Where is my dog? I scream it. I think the sound I hear nothing waves are pummeling me numb. Beating me up How long have I been here. I whistle into the planks. There is pain all over punch and slap one time or another time I recall Johnny name of the bully you’re not normal he minced. You’re eff eff feminy spitting gob in my eye. Laughter. Crowd swell. The Master watches on dry lips my head pounding already feeling the hit stop stop stop Laughter hand of Boyle on my mouth Retch. He takes it off I recall it. Where is my dog? I whine it. Shut it Sailor Ken Oath. Look around ya-where’s anyone? Where’s the effing rope cutter Mon Suet. You and yer effing dog.

Lope
Crawling to the middle going outback. the lapping in my ears hard to hear check my tinctures clink my bottles of snuff. The rope will be used. I suggest we build a sail. Rope boy and Ernest reel it in. No room to move but I must. To order. To order. That Orphan boy taps my heel, my name is wrong, it’s wrong. His little body lathering up years Eleven or ten.

Wills Wills
he cries his voice rings high  Wills, is that right? Or wrong? His tongue bells and catches this throat. I loosen his hold. There’s a good
I mutter. A flurry of men to his side the business is clearly not rope, but hands, fists, thighs. The soldier hams his finger up, Death! Offing! Off you all!
A pile of corpses near the edge. Sea blows them into balloons blue jellyfish. I tip them away from my shoe. Blubbery dead weight. We must stay light. The waves are cutting into the flesh sores river out of legs We must stay dry.
I shovel my hands into the pile Mon Suet assists while the soldier snarls by my men in the pile, my men, he furrows, he staggers, he snarls.
The dead men stone overboard no one cries Give him wine, I yell, pointing at the snarl. Someone moves. For Sol? I check. Yes,

I check, my coat is still white, they call me Doctor.

Mon Suet
I cannot do anything. There is no food. And the soldier is spreading lies about me. That I cut the rope. That I hide the food. That I am a pork barrel. A worm in the fruit. A piggie. A pudding head. But I am here. Not there. I am here. How can I be there and here?
How can I cut the rope? This knife is up my sleeve against troubles. But anyway, it is no boner it's made to pare bulbs and soft fruits, but not I keep busy. Though I have no food, no pots no pans no food, no fire, no serving plates. I must keep busy. That Soldier and his lies, I have to keep alert, no, no, awake. The rope boy is asking about his dog. No, I have not your dog. Here is what passed: the men threw sacks, the women clothes and trinkets, all the things went crashing down her sides. So many rackets and blasts..... A little boy blew on a horn. He was not very good, I think I threw ten barrels over, each weighing a tonne or so. Flour. Potatoes. Sugar. Biscuits. Wine. Rum. They clanked and butted in my ear chop chop am I too fast, too slow? I look at the tonneau. did it meet the sea I try to think but these gaps in my head open like planks what passed right under my nose, I was smelling it: six tow boats circling the barrels like little sharks all that wet powder stink that waistcoat oil indicating pilfer my sweet flour, potato, sugar, biscuits, wine. rum. Each barrel hobbled up make way for the barrels ladies, each boat loaded with fat barrels and I see them pitch toward seabed the ladies covering their eyes but they could not cover their ears and their skin the waves were sort of tickling at their waists. Then shriek sounds the clutching of children and men....I saw luggage thrown overboard Bags curdling in water. Obviously, the barrels got chucked.
And slowly, slowly, the boats rose up to the sun like day flowers no one knows much about night. The men still choose men or….

The rope boy is finding his dog. Wet mangle of fur and bone legs. I slow roast the dog in my mind, a bed of fingerlings or butternut a reduction of Madeira Malmsey. But after… the rope got cut, we buoyed and spun. I saw some silver fish thinner than sardines I saw ribbons of seaweed. I saw immense quantities of sea salt. Then we pass my flagon of wine, my barrel of biscuits. I screech but two men I have not seen are spearing them like piglets they flood we must patch them now I am the keeper I tie the barrels to the corners of the Raft. Bouys belly up. At some time, I pass out crumbs and drips. Biscuits soaked in wine. I drift and chop about, I must stay.

I must remember I must get with it. On the Medusa, I served brisket and boiled bits to soldiers and sailors, infernal mash and stink, below my calling, but still they begged more, more. I was under order to ration, for the Captain must have his table. I made a new menu each night. Ten courses, twelve. Chef's choice. I julienned carrots and French corgettes, deflowered lettuce, destoned fruits, roasted nuts, ham hocks goat I extracted the glaze of currants, dunked honey in mint I crumbled Roquefort crème Brulee battered ox tongue butterflied a frog not to mention that I poached all those pommes. All this
while the Soldiers smeared their lips with juice and slop. Charged the deck. Hooting and wheeling linens in their pants their napkins
Turnered brown destruction I got no thanks. Obviously. What about the pre-fixe, the little fire drinks, the brisket in the fist?
What? What? I never hammed him. Now this soldier is spreading it thick. His pile of men were already gone.
I only kick what’s already kicked in the drunk paralytic and dim driven into the sea by their noses. Those kind. This soldier still has his ears and eyes,
Some men round the edges spinning their carbines winking at Ratchett and Boyle their glittering teeth and tatts.
To me they are rattus rats infesting the rest I spit what scum. In my mind, I am poaching their peepers deep frying their bleepers I am chucking it all to the sharks.
The Second Day

Dog
Sea breath, wheeze wheeze log holes lead to paw slip tin tin tin heart smell Rope whimper stop.

watch watch objects may be closer than they appear frame frame frame the vista is blurring at the edge
Pump pump dizzy then whimper. black. Legs bar up the scene no vista. Skin stink toeing the fur Back off come
slurp the sea shell ears will cup the in-sounds

Little Dog! Little Dog!

Smell Rope, whimper. Stop. GO GO GO. Pads are sticky with wood bits splinters in paw patter on stilts tip

   tip tip flag over. Furring hard. Sea breath, wheeze wheeze. Smell Rope, whimper stop. Ears are caves.
Rope is there.
Paw surfing, tail up, grin. legs bodge whisker, bodge nose No faces.

Little Dog! Little Dog!
Rope! Rope! It’s Dirt It’s sugary licks pissy hands flint breath the cave talks. Surf falls round, wet.
Ern

What a beauty. She holds the rope thanks to that rotten tow rope. I’m glad to be of help. Useful. I’ve always been considered useful. Lope looks to me for a lot of jobs. He could pick others, but he doesn’t. I’m more educated in certain ways. But practical. Keep my head on. Always know how to get out of a tightie. Or how to draw a crowd while I hew, saw and whittle. I’m not military but I get on with the blades, lancets, bayonets. We know the meaning of tools. Not what they’re for, but how they suggest things in yer hands I’m centre when I work.

Rope Boy, Dog, Sol and his sidekicks, even the boy, whatsit, no, he told me his name, it’s still, the mast and the sail get some teary,

get some thinking of the old lady the Medusa and Mon Suet rabbles on about sail boats some picnic. True, a mast brings to mind certain fancies. The west wind comes upon her, she looks all willowy like that yung lass, when the east wind comes upon her she whips out her veil, a shook of white hair. Such fancies while I work. Right below her what tumbling skirts Lope plans a little mount, a soap box in the wastes, he has plans for it to appear religious he wants he says, a little high country in the plains. Never thought of the raft like that. Just planks, poor handiwork. But a mountain, that might get us off. True, the elevation would make good vantage, a place to meet or dry off but I’m not so keen on hosting any sermons with the ragged sore eyes ripping up their linen and denting their chests. Or that Norma and her droning on over some lady of Laux. Had enough of the touched ones, in my time. What saves is silence, learning not to speak. Madness is always loud. Lope’s a mate, he’s alright. I’ll give him this mount, in fact, I’ll make it worthy of the commandments, a leader must be allowed some height.
Jin

Wills, Wills, where is your? Have you no-one? Wills gives me his biscuit he goes looking I gobble it up I lick each finger off the milky paste in my hair sticks and anyway, who cares about his Da, Ma, or Sissy where is where. My skirt is full of it I find a tree log that fits me and drain to damp Wills is still looking he is calling Da I huddle into my cornered spine my driftwood legs log-pillowed I make a pouch of my hands they leather the waves they are turning and turning me to the night where I’m lost—simply unaccounted for—and the sky gets to dimming I’m in my tree the six pointed star I am waiting for but Wills comes back. Where is my? Where is my? His voice bell birding up and up All Gone. I say. No-one is here for you. The boy is sobbing dirt cakes down his pink face. Listen, Listen, Listen he is shaking his pelican legs The sun is slipping under I’m not your Ma. Go on, Get, Shoo Shoo Shoo. Screeching, who can help him. Wills is elbows first booting over legs and arms his wail arrowing over the groans I am waiting for there must be a meeting that boy is willing us under.

Ratchett

The sun stews itself out I reckon right about now the Medusa’s lower parts are wetting to sink in private with her crew of death maidens them boys who lie rocking in the damp skirts of her hulk, holding their milky elbows to ribs, like angels on the fly to God Allah Yhvh they’re up there, beyond sense the return happens
to pious men says Chippie eyeing off Jin. Like shit this rotter of a raft returns us to nothing but the could or the might we’re men for now, like I said, but I reckon we’re baring some other life. That dog won’t go near me all hackles and low growls what have I done, Boyle? Tell me what kind of man is dirt for a dog?

Boyle

Ratshit, Ratshit, all of it. Dog is a bag of blood. A bag of stuff. Sees what we’re up to Jigging our sabres our carbines, our flip knives our rocks. Dog is onto us. Dog rod-eyes our plans. Dog is Ratshit, look how I get to pacing in time with the light. I get to seeing candles out here, sun on sun off, see how my feet turn it on turn it off. They’re all sea mash and salting to burn Threw out me boots. Dog don’t sleep now. There’s no reason to believe anyone will return. Did ya hear Lope preaching about rescue and what not? Get a rat, I’m out facing nowhere, swaggering for my shadows’ tip and turn so I know where I am on this friggin float. Leg over hand over breast over Lilith. No boats. Someone ropes me in to the raft for the night. Calls it safety. Friggin con. Ratshit? Positions keep me sane. Like, I’m for land, or offing. I’m against: the sea, the sun, the wind, the night, yeah, and the importents, the whole bloody lot, but in particular, the lousy no-hopers, the sirens of death, them poets of the bleeding useless, the genius for one, and that Lope with his sandal coming off. I want offing, but I’ll off them first. I get to pacing. The candle’s still flickering its lights. Ratshit?
—Not that I want to start anything, but like, it should be said that us boys, some of us, is boiling for it. Those faggettes, those sea boys in uniform, those profs and stinkfops, they’re more suited for courtship, for dance. Ratshit! they’re starting to work me, they’re picking me scabs. Did ya see them filling our tin cups to the brim, skoll skoll, drink up? They’re lambing us down! I know we’re drunks, but who’s pouring? It’s like this. Tomorrow, ten little soldiers will be let loose on loose planks, loosening the strings. Whadaya reckon, are you in or are you? Ratshit, there’s men, I can’t recall the names of the whole bloody rollick, but there’s red head, there’s brawn, there’s portly, there’s stooping, toothless, there’s tall, there’s ideas out there. Dog ones. We’ll run cunning, old boy. We’ll get the yoof to mow em down. Then, then, listen, we’ll scissor the whole bleedin raft. Sshhhhh! I’m not the one who should let on all of this, but. The splinters, the rivets, the holes, the wet. Don’t forget. Look how I’m getting to pacing, pacing light to my fate. Awright, I’m no poet, no genius, I’m not one of them. Let them bully-loud voices pipe the wind, but Ratshit, the mast is rotten, our officers is dead. We have no orders, the soldier’s right come to fink of it, the raft is a raft

Ratshit?

Hear that? Cracked as glass, a loon yell. Look, it’s up. Ratshit. Mast and rat tail they’re up themselves gawking at that rag
blow wind blow our raft the yacht spend a good weekend driftin’ Ratshit, wanna bet against the bet our ship’s come in. Master up. Let rip. What’s the bet? What’s the bet?

[Chorus] On Leadership and Raft Etiquette

Lope. Here Here, after a vote taken at noon, we are proud to announce that Ern-

Rope Boy. What vote?

Chippie. Whatsat? Who’s Ern?

Ern (appears). As Lope was…(wave) I am yer-

Sol. Traitor!

Boyle. Faggot bag, frotsky, ‘ukin lotty! Ern’s dead. He’s dead.

Ratchett. Vive le Roi!

Mon Suet. Vive le Roi!

Norma (to Wills). Long live the King! The King is Dead.

Wills. But who’s Ern?

Dog (barks).

Jin (points). Ern’s Ern.

Wills. Is he the King?
Boyle. He is not our King.

(The soldiers racket in a huddle).

Lope. Order. Order. Ern is our Raft leader. It is done. (Pause) Now, some of you may have noticed that Ern is lame. Not so! (Pause) His left leg may be dead, it may look ‘off’, but the rest of him is tip top. In the twelve hours, he has shown us all the qualities of a leader—mark his impressive stature, his overcoming of the dead leg, his command of tools. Qualities like these can’t be snuffed at or bought in a shop. So, I’d like to hand you over to our new leader, Ern, who will present to you the rules of conduct on the raft.

Rope Boy. Is this a raft or a bleedin’ Republic?

Mon Suet. Is this a raft or a bleedin’-

Ratchett. Off with his head!

Sol. This is pointless.

Chippie. Whatsat?

Norma (to Wills). It’s a Kingdom.

Wills. Is it our own Kingdom?

Ern. Quiet—please. Er—Hi—just a few points. Do not drink the sea water. Do not use your weapons on any person. Do not jump off the raft. Do not steal food or wine. Do not lie down. Do not stand in your neighbour’s spot. Do not cut the ropes holding the raft. Do not fall into dream. Do not ignore the cries from your neighbour. Do not throw anyone overboard—

Dog (silent).
Sol. Ey, ‘scuse me, King. What about the spread of dirty rumours?

Boyle. Lies. Imputations.

Ratchett. Faggot bags!

Norma. What?

Chippie. They’re talking about that genius on board—

Ern. Genius?

Rope Boy. Some artiste, as I heard it, using the scrap from this sinker to build himself a nice, new raft.

Lope. Fabrication—is that your only charge against this…genius?

Jin. Sounds like a plot. A figment of somebody’s—

Wills. Is somebody building a new raft!

Dog (groans).

Mon Suet. Nonsense! This cannot be true.

Sol. Out of this one. So I’ve heard.

Ratchett. The little bird told him.

Boyle. Who got it from the worm, who got it from the coocooburra—

Ern. Well then. Why don’t you send this genius to me, if he exists.

Chippie. Too right.
Norma. I’ve never met a genius. *(She runs her hands over her matted hair).*

Jin *(mumbles).* That won’t help.

Rope Boy. Only a genius can know a genius.

Wills. My mummy says I’m a genius.

Dog *(sighs).*

Lope. Let Wills be our judge!

Mon Suet. Let brains be our stew!

Boyle. Bloody bags of blood!

Ratchett. Murder! Offing!

Ern. No, wait—he must have a fair trial. Fair go for all—

Sol *(interrupting).* Message from Mon Suet: *I need protection.*

*(The soldiers snigger).*

Chippie. Too right.

Norma. He’s a foreigner. Leave him alone.

Rope Boy. Shut up. Shut up.

Dog *(barks twice).*

Wills—He cut it! He cut it!
Mon Suet (silent).

Lope. Ern saw. It was von Hundert who abandoned us. What motive could Mon Suet have? He’s here! Roasting—and as fateless as us.

Jin. Somebody should confiscate the knives.

Ratchett (reading). Message from Rope Boy: My dog is tasty on a spit, in a blanket, as a casual brisket—

Rope Boy. I never wrote that (looking around for appeal) Dog’s not on the menu.

Sol (reading). Rules on animal sacrifice, blood letting, dog chewing, etc. established in Leviticus.

Boyle. Hear that. The bloody word of God. See, we’re all for reading, here.

(The soldiers snigger).

Jin. Shut up. I’m going to (wave)

Norma. What about disputes? What if someone gets in my spot?

Ern. From now on, everyone must stay in the middle—those who choose to stay on the borders where the water breaks do so at their own risk.

Mon Suet. What about the genius?

Chippie. What genius?

Lope (looking around). Can anybody fish?

Wills. I’d like Dog Wellington please!
Dog *(whimpers).*

**Boyle** *(reading).* Letter in from Chippie: Norma’s a drag. Suggestion to King: off her.

**Ratchett** *(reading).* Confession from Lope: I cut the rope. *(continues)* Okay Okay, Letter from Jin: Wills is irrefutably useless. Suggestion to King: off him-

**Ern.** There will be no offing. The boy is under my protection. Keep away is the policy.

**Chippie.** Whatst?

**Rope Boy.** Piss off.

**Norma.** He’s deaf, he doesn’t know what you said.

**Mon Suet.** Rubbish.

**Lope.** Ern is just trying to say that our form of justice is based on preventing justice from becoming an issue. Just keep away from each other, practice avoidance. You’ll all get access to protection at the discretion of the living-

*(The soldiers roar)*

**Jin.** Who will protect us? Who? Him? Him? *(she points).* What about the knives? Who’s going to collect the weapons and the knives?

**Dog** *(exits).*

**Wills** *(Begins to cry).*

**Sol.** Message to Jin, Tone it down love you sound like a bleedin’ actress. *Vive le roi!*
Ma, it’s dark ‘n’ I can’t find my things ‘n’ the lady over there doesn’t stop ‘n’ I’m lost I didn’t mean to be Ma ‘n’ dirty the waves got me ‘n’ that man next to the lady hit me he hit me ‘n’ I was only patting Dog look he got me ‘n’ look it’s scabbed up already I told him I was just touching the fur ‘n’ he grabbed my shirt tail ‘n’ pulled me in ‘n’ smacked me one two three times ‘n’ his belt burned ‘n’ burned am I whopping you good? he said to me ‘n’ his breath smelt of mackerel tin ‘n’ my skin burned and burned Are you a good boy now? he said to me, yes, I said, I am Ma, aren’t I Ma, I’m scared like Sissy when you lost her in the park ‘n’ she spun around ‘n’ around until the trees started to grab her so she swore it to me ‘n’ she began banging into fat ladies thin ones ‘n’ the grass got her laces twisted up ‘n’ then a man came up to enquire ‘n’ jammed his fingers in her mouth to stop her blubbering that’s what he said remember? Her handkerchief was bloody ‘n’ you washed it ‘n’ no-one saw remember? Ma, I wrote you a letter remember? Every day from the Medusa ship ‘n’ now I can’t find my pen the raft moves about so much I can’t think to stay onboard ‘n’ remember to say hello to Sissy. Ma, it’s almost dark I don’t know where you are you said you would send help when I was in trouble remember? You promised. I’m cold so cold ‘n’ when are you coming ma, please? A foreign lady is screeching in the corner ‘n’ everyone knows that’s the wrong place because the corners sink into the sea so deep she must be mad sitting there ‘n’ she’s always half wet and dangling her dark hair this way ‘n’ that ‘n’ the waves push me to her ‘n’ her eyes are big dark blue blobs of ink she never blinks Ma, she must be an owl or something from the bottom of the garden she doesn’t stop ‘n’ I asked her if she was a foreigner ‘n’ she didn’t answer—so she must be ‘n’ I can’t remember anything of the animals the numbers all the things you taught me. Ma, they float around and around ‘n’ you said they would stay but they don’t ‘n’ besides I didn’t learn for long enough remember? Da wants me to go to sea blue lands ‘n’ you said I would learn knots ‘n’ winds ‘n’ hard work put into going
somewhere ‘n’ now the letters keep moving ‘n’ remember I wrote them to you in a letter? Ma, I’m writing them with my fingers right here on the plank ‘n’ an arm and a half away is the owl lady so you know where I am, remember ma: A is for Ape, B is for Britannia. C is for Charms. D is for Dog. E is for Ever. G is for Good. H is for Hogs. I is for I. J is for Jaunt. K is for Kingly. L is for Lots. M is for More. N is for Nibbles. O is for Offing. P is for Pudding. Q is for Quashing. R is for Rules. S is for Sissy. T is for The. U is for Ugly. V is for Vanishing. W is for Waves. X is for X-d, Y is for Yachting, Z is for Zwecklosigkeit.
Okay now. What’s this? (reads)

Our raft turned and tipped windblown as a hat something, something, something, in an unpredicted storm and more than two hands trying to reach and clasp the blown brim to hair, meaning the wet slippery ocean an improbable head our improbable hands each face somehow worn faceless there is a uniform grimace puck-bitter and un-wormed that complains of a spoilt tea party, the ruined garden or the damned dirt mudding up stockings it’s not a tragedy when things are this close it’s farce.

This hat, this rakish slapdash, does not stay the wind roars and roars with what could only be called hysterical laughter peels of a Sphinx slapping the thighs the beams the raft ha-ing and haw-ing glee shrieks in the morning, glee shrieks at night its captives run back and forth stagger to the vessels in their foreheads show how fast the heart goes and the bodies strewn around like busted umbrellas.

Meanwhile, there is a dog
a young boy  others that come and go  there is a roll call but not  
for the dead  some names don’t get known  for days, some never  
we’re just  
cook, pig, slapper, dish.  
It’s a struggle  to remember anything  the waves slap  slap  
there’s von Hundert  the cut rope  slap slap  the last day on the Medusa is faint and lack-lustre as a someone else’s dream.  
Before being rafted  we watched the hours pass, nothing but staring  
the ocean looked gone  just a thin cover of glass  over sand that was kaleidoscoping  up and up  
and thousands of silver fish tipping the Medusa’s hull  then fanning off  as split mercury  
I found the unfolding disaster  riveting  people chucking their personals over  
cufflinks, hammers, boots  slip slop  everything seemed tragic  and slow  
as if we were acting  with our minds on the end  
Does it matter how I got here  the date and place of my birth?  
No-one knows, but they could if they asked.  
Jin is murmuring  holding some heirloom  the star of  
the maker’s mark  another century  it looks like silver  
her dream is to get under  her veil of hair and ball into her grandmother’s  
hand hammered shape.  She remembers things  like poetry, or the beginning of the admission  of guilt.  
Whose admission?  She never finishes  what she starts  
I try to keep her from dreaming from  going off  but I must keep on it.  
The idea of a new raft  I am adept as any other  at the scams, rescues, theatre  
the drowning public  
the weeping women  orphaned sons.
not so you’d notice, but here, take a look at this. I’d show Ern but there’s no reason to share—no reason to pretend artists and fiddlers ever got on. Ha Ha, as someone once said, we have abandoned them!

Something. Something. Something. A sworn and truthful account. signed, and co-signed—

What’s this?
Norma, wake up! Norma!

*He waves an arm across Norma’s eyes.*

*He looks down at her closed eyelids.*

*He pauses.*


*He spits*

Norma, you saw. You were singing. I heard you. The water was filling me trousers, my shoes slipped off, I couldn’t breathe. And you screamed and screamed.

*Norma coughs.*

*Chippie cups sea water into his hand and offers it to her.*

*The water drips through his fingers.*
Norma, They went mad. Jumping around with swords and blades. Then Ern, or the white coat saw me and pulled at my hand. Got me up. I was blue and choking. You were singing then. They said you sang all night.

**Norma**

Of course I was I was singing of such nice things. Lovely little things. Our lady of Lux made an appearance she was smiling down at me sort of meekly she held out her hands like she was going to lay them on an’ her eyes was streaming like rivers Chip, she was pulling me in to her where it was safe an’ the clouds were lit up and golden like mini-suns and there were fields of bleating lambs, all the ones that had been saved from the chop-

*She starts*

Chip, there’s land! We’re on land!

*No response*

Well, it looks like land. Miles of it. What a trick. Like a painting by …

*She pauses, trying to recall the name of a painter*

…anyway, one of those with the real life persepctifs.

*No response*

Hard to believe you can’t just walk out—there.

*Pause.*
Chip, I'm so thirsty. I must have sung all night.

Chippie?

*No response*

*She is still looking at the water as if it were land. Her voice is flat.*

It's just that our Lady of Lux, I got the feeling that we should make a little offering, a gift, you know, to get in her good books

*She waves her hand around indicating the fellow raft passengers.*

*They lie in a stricken pile, writhing, or gasping.*

Chippie, whaddya think?

*No response.*

What about fer instance, her? The rope dancer.

*No response.*

Chips, I'm telling you, no-one knows her from for all we know I could have dreamed her up. Look, have a look in her face

*Chippie looks. He says nothing.*

Go on, look again.

*She waits.*

Well, don't you recognize me? She could be a phantom of me youth.

*Pause.*

No-one will miss her Chips She's just some fancy some Jin on legs she even sings the songs I used to
wailing on and off with her watery lips. Remember the special one

She hums

I don’t recall it fully but it was something about a fig and her pomegranates some dirt like that. Remember?

No response

Don’t pretend to pretend Chip, I know you do, but hear me this gift, it’s a small down payment no one will notice

there’s no court out here, and we’ll get us in the eternal garden of eternal delights Chip, there’s fields of lilies, I heard that and shining trumpets and winged babies and our own kind all lying on carpets of wool made from the lambkins

I’m talking about being put in the good book, Chippie, on pages made of clouds.

Jin

In the night tree bark sticking my legs are wet indecipherable from raft what holds what holds the water up and then down That cracker with the vocals belching and dragging through waves unwilling as seaweed strings she is crooning I am you you are me dotty old bitch it’s too much last night I saw the piles there were dirty rag faces whole baskets of them so many crushed collars and ties no-one touches them but the heads pop up night balloons or monsters just to hide even wave blankets would do yet nothing holds, cept that old ear wig buzzing out tunes. She poses like a siren smashing our fate in the rocks if only there were rocks
she is crooning  

you are  

we two  

and the third one is lost  

wave upon wave  

the wind cups the words back to surf  

yet last night  

the darkness turned all words to snake hiss  

I saw. I tried to stop looking. But the edges crept in  

the piles  

I thought it was land  

banks of sand  

but when I looked my stomach waved up green  

I made to move but my chin stuck  

the smell of the piles was  

wet rot  

fish heads  

gangrene  

in my throat  

I made to move but there was a man  

hand in my hair  

I unfurled one aged claw  

sticking sticking  
maw of corral  

get it off off then  

Sol was roaring  

his men roaring  

rowing their fists  

the whack of oars  

noses  

skulls  

beaten up flesh  

it all piled up a new steaming stink  

I remember when I don’t have time to remember a dive  

one of those damp ones  
in another time  

with a beady landlady  
tucking secrets away in the eaves  

atop the mantle  

coiled in stinking doilies  

the new pile  

shirts over heads  

soiled  

soil  

how the sea soils  

just the same  

dirt is dirt  

I must forget everything  

Wills was under the arm of Ern who was hiding behind a pile.  

His rubbery lips were moving  

was he praying?  

Not the type  

too wooden  

made for a raft.  

I’ve heard him groan  

shake his lame leg  

scuttle from one patch it job to the next  

That Wills nesting in his shadow  

soldiers warned me about him  

the king  

and Lope wasting his  

bottles of bromide ipecac opiate  

chink chink  
as if  

things could be saved  

there is no use  
in the night  

the doctor bagged a few  

I saw it all  

wind/ 

wave/ 

white coat concealing sabre  

Ern bleating a group of them  

bleating/ 

bleating  

no wool in their eyes  

rational action blues just the same  

white coat opens on sabre/ 

insert in heart/ 

stop/ 

twist/ 

pooling arteries/ 

chambers quartered/ 

next  

insert in windpipe/ 

stop/ 

thrust/ 

stop/ 

snapping neck/ 

snag of/ 

head.  

Next  

insert above belt/ 

stop  

liver
melt/ flail stagger/stop.   I saw how they plan to keep numbers down   Sol roaring his men roaring   no more fingers to count   now the piles the piles number   twenty thirty   Sol’s men must pay for the wine, Mon Suet says,  

with their livery livery blood   stop how did this   what about Ern’s rules   what about what sea law   what could I do I lay there blinking it down   wave /  wave/ battle thrust   wave /thud   I tried to screech   wave /stop it stop it wave /Ern behind Lope behind   only who was not there   wave/   wave/ the night as long as a rope   wave/ I was tree logged  
screening but what is one sound   dotty was singing. She kept singing.   Dog was sleeping   between killings there was the night   no moon   words whispers huddlings   no one trusting no one   Hand to gun gasket sword   Lope claimed there were threats to the leader   dotty sang his words.   terror melee the threats were charging   brumby mad   charging it didn’t matter who got it   Rope Boy charging   Lope charging   Sol charging   Ern screaming off you off you   Then Lope pulling out  
a red rose fist from someone’s side   so bright bright red   his fist dewing blood   the unknown man falling falling.  
Ern sliding his leg to   Lope’s side   Wills dribbling   Counting themselves   a feather of white backs  
crowing what luck   the organs mush mush underfoot   what now   this petal is someone’s tongue or anemone of hair  
a pocket watch   is beating time   I saw I saw.
Wills

Ma, it’s been a whole century ‘n’ I’ve heard nothing from you ‘n’ I’m tired from walking the planks ‘n’ calling ‘n’ calling ‘n’ your name ‘n’ on top of all my eyes hurt from squintin’-out spray ‘n’ salt all day all night ‘n’ stepping on backs fronts ‘n’ the moans from the piles. Yesterday or whenever it was rope boy came to me ‘n’ said I was to go to the man with the bad leg. Ern’ll watch your back, he said, but the man that hit me said and who’s watching Ern’s back? Rope Boy pushed me somewhere ‘n’ then I couldn’t see ‘n’ the raft went shaky ‘n’ black ‘n’ there was smoke ‘n’ ash ‘n’ what looked like fire pink ‘n’ orange ‘n’ colours so hot they burned the face. Ern caught me by the shirt tails ‘n’ carried me away he said it was the fight ‘n’ I smelled food being cooked up. Then I saw the owl lady ‘n’ I said you look like Sissy ‘n’ she didn’t say nothing ‘n’ Norma piped in ‘n’ said that girl’s me deary and the owl made to get up ‘n’ there was no room ‘n’ the corner was sinking again ‘n’ her hair went seaweeding in her face ‘n’ I said you don’t have a character lady, do you? She blinked her blob eyes ‘n’ is that because you’re foreign I said ‘n’ Ern grabbed me and moved me towards him ‘n’ dryness.

Ratchett

—so the night wore on. But who’s countin’. I reckon we did alright wonder how King will sum it up Reckon we’ll have another night of it a bit of flash a bit of ra ra them ones with the touchy stomachs need convincing that the piles as they call em the formerly with us
are not no longer with us. Two days from now they’ll be given to the upper crew they’re already cranking their appetites eh Boyle, convincing themselves that meat’s meat fair’s fair But listen, what are we but someone else’s bleedin pink meal Norma’s always jibbering about it—lambkins she says little lambs and just tell me if that Jin Jin ain’t prime.

Boyle

Ratshit, Ratshit, all of it. Lamb for brains. Who’s been feeding your ears, Ratshit? See what is going on, our dirty flip knives our ragged slit up shirts thumbnails torn off faces blank as three ply friggin coffin lids knock knock that Dog rod-eyed me that’s what he read me, you know, dog to man. His tongue was hanging, tail sort of half mast, looking right through me wink to the wink underneath I found it impressive, Ratshit a bit of magic but still things are troubling me why? well thanks for asking: It’s a nice day. The water’s still. The sun’s stewing our nuggets but that Dog gave me a presentimento that we’re on some list compiled by Doc and that Mon sweetbreath Suet Ratchett how many did we grief last night? It’s not the in and out, but the witnesses whole clouds of witnesses Sol is pacing in a brew of despair not that he’s given to it but Ratshit, our brains are no use to the likes of them I mean to say we’re just strips of brawn advertising certain threats bones holding up our poxy still lives, like easels get
me? You’re too fat too ready with the bayo brain’s a little loose sparky you don’t know when to turn it off.

Dog’s hackling day and night I watch him Ratshit, this rescue stuff, this land-sighting crockery it’s straight outta grimm Ratshit?

No response.

—You know I don’t like to blow me own horn, but like, it should be said that I started it, no the boil last night the whole bloody show was boiled up in my head first, and that nodder, I mean Sol, just waved through all my battle plans formations plots as if he couldn’t give a Ratshit? It’s as if he’s got a touch of the troughs. Trouble being, there’s no real leadership here no-one’s going out on a limb, I don’t hear no trumpets tooting no sea shanties or pretty ditties no flags no bloody lips blowing on me cheek even a nice portrait would do capturing me boiling mind me rough man hands you’d feature in it of course, as a background figar holding a stone you’d be the threat

the menace ticking away. That nodder, I mean Sol should arrange it a man could do with some diversion, whadaya reckon Ratshit? Norma’s too busy feathering her own to give us a wink and Jin, no man could ever fill her up and that genius, whatsit?

I haven’t had the pleasure, for all I know he’s just a vision one of Sol’s embellishments to get the crew all jittery and ghosted up on the idea of a free roamin genius, fabricating things up under their eyes, another raft, fer instance. Imagine. Problem being, them mealy tits, them fagettes don’t know how to handle real quality, Ratshit, their expectations are too low, let’s face it,
they’re a lot of common profis and stinktops. Shhhhhh! I’m not the one who should feed your rat ears but. See how they slump like bleedin day flowers hung over men they don’t even drink the wine just wets their tongue or dampens their wits makes them coddle and circle their bruises. They got shot, last night, the fight got in their eyes and mouths, they think they see reason but the sun’s sweating holes in their eyes, the sand’s sealing them shut they’re off Ratshit, a moralizing clack of tongues history or redemption. As if any of us could be arsed to lend an ear to the upper deck. And Mon Suet, the flamin’ rope slitter is lying around with his hand on his gut stuffed with continental tripe it’s a nice day awright. It’s a nice day, Ratshit.

Ratshit?

No response.

—Be on guard’s my word. Tonight. The one’s that are left—us—we’re boiling for another strike. Doctor and Ern, that slagbag Chippie. The nodders and the coddlers. They’ve gotta go. Gut em. At night see.
The Fourth Day

Ern
All my wits to keep hold of the boy still Wills to be honest, I’m glad to be of help. Glad for the opportunity to display my abilities even in this life and death situation. Deft under pressure I’ve been called A few spoilers though one or two expressions of disenchantment, granted but that’s to be expected out here. Mutinies common as Rope Boy says only Sol and his sidekicks the land rabblers aren’t used to the idea of watery death. Not on their contract Lope has ideas for dealing with recalcitrants. He opens his bag and winks He’s going to let on more no doubt no doubt A good bloke. Always giving the benefit of his experience. Not that it’s vast but it’s varied alright he’s done things you wouldn’t Doctor, I call him sometimes a bloke’s coat gets in the way of his name he’s got no shortage of brains but still he thinks with his feet brings to mind Dog or some swinging ape still a good bloke. All in all I got through, I was surprised but then I always seem to. I’m built that way in the way of some a beacon I remind myself of the warning light blinking above the rocks or the crow cawing Hawk Hawk not that I know more or better but I seem to get early impressions like that genius and before you could say Jin Jin I’m up and at it. Responding. The light woke me the boy in my arms still, he’s quiet I’ve got that effect calming, a balm if you will. The grinding sun pokes over the waves. It’s on time that’s something.
Not that I have a dial myself only Lope has record of time but for the briefest moment the yellow
backed me into myself I was on holidays with a boy I’d forgotten about how it looks the sea from
the sand his laughter playing scales there my old man’s trannie barking out the form of the dogs
the track the smell of bacon crackling in my ears the pork fuzz going through my whole body and I woke, I
woke the cloy of the local Ross on my nose Wills? He’s quiet.
The yellow. There it is, the sea from the sea. Only view for miles. Shouldn’t let myself get dreamy, it’s the start, isn’t it?
Don’t look forward to dreams, Lope says they’re your quickest ticket to Tantalust. Not an idea that I am au
fait with personally but
I mull it over when I get a second. Not much time for mulling though now I’m protecting the boy watching
out for the squint and slumped, his ragged rags. I must admit that’s nasty scarring down my arm from last night
price of being popular I expect, the boy does that make me his father? I’m having a peek at the newest
ones over fifty stacked on each side left, right, front, back who stacked these men? No official word Lope
says, you must give it they’re just sandbags against the surf should wave em. I must admit, the rot and stink
is tangling and rising like triffids in the heat the nose gives you ideas against your will
of hot potting your mate only It’s not quite on, is it? Mon Suet’s tin of wine only enough for we
must make figures, tallies who’s who, what’s what. The fallen heap of soldiers juiced and lolling a sprawl of cats
nothing left but spending their days and nights sleeping waking bothering men a fever they carry. Arms on
their arms. I must assess all claims.
Lists. Tins are rattling Mon Suet’s whine. Lope’s standing by wouldn’t be surprised if he measures with the eye still no wine for Wills, unless I give it. But rationing? In heat that drags your skin off no road, it steams in two seconds. I slurp minefast it’s not right, is it? But Wills is out and I must admit, I need the strength I already have one lame leg, it’s not exactly fair but I shouldn’t start best to focus on results one, my makeshift sail, a bit of a dishrag but something at least, a white hand on the horizon two, I admit it, my platform is a beauty a world above the wave slap and tickle the bloody riots three, Wills? Stop rattling on my tin stop licking his snail tongue sticking to the black metal, daubing it against some fire his skin is turning a little to be honest, if I wasn’t colourblind, I’d say close to puce. Soon people are thronging us complaining sobbing inspecting wrecks disputing measurements searching pockets for lockets, crumbs, marbles I move away stumping my leg at right angles Wills at hand I’ll kick and boot I will, I warn but just to show the boy is my priority life, and then the boy. That’s right. It’s a surprise, but everyone’s bending to me wave rocked green mouths open I’m on the soap box, the boy is quiet, damp-faced the sun boring my eyes yellow, he’s fluttering his thumbs in butterflies. I have to hold him my leg is aching. I put Wills in its nothing space The crowd is jumping little waves foam on my feet I push back the pork fuzz. Wills is making a thin strangled sound I look above the white sail is wrapping around itself, a bit unsure of its surrender slashed Lope says. open mouths. I don’t know, but I must admit we’re drifting Wills but it would pay off to say towards land.
Mon Suet

Burn hot in some infernal kitchen. Some kind of that little worm and his worming friend creeping this way or that way always about my back sniffing as if they had the sense the sun is pounding pudding chop pudding slop I hear it the rays are going in the voices singe and sear spit roast my flesh I move I move the sun spots two little piggys sniggering where are they? How can I see? The rays are raying me Pork it over mon crackling mon creeping suer Some kind of kitchen no pans no pots hot plates my two hands I am pressing them onto my cheek red red welts I am sure of it ironing my cheeks I am in the fat I know it, how do I know it? I close my eyes but the colours are the same nothing new reds turmeric-yellow two pigs on a spit I open my eyes the sun oven is slow cooking the waves simmer and simmer to a rolling boil our skins still on, spots of dirt grit birth defects I would never choose such flesh. I move I move my cheeks are guts turned to brisket. Basted basted salt water, weeds flipping fish. Have I got any the creatures come pawing they pick up my hands tins rattling somewhere in the oven two little worms worming away Pork it, pork it over mon swede chop chop. My little knife my wet hands so much movement required for such little things I cut I cut I am slicing your pork lads Chop chop they snigger Rope slitter they are looking the little knife slides and slides wet fingers I wipe my eyes planks rive apart I am separating pork sausage from blut sausage lads, I am undoing the little knots between pork fresh port the twine loops my fingers plank sausage from plank sausage the worms worm on me. Saboot her Saboother the burning in my ear. The knife slides and slides, twine loops my fingers in a mit lads,
there are movements in the oven  there are things alive  flapping wings  squawk  someone gets me
by the neck  lads, I am being trussed  arms to ribs  don’t truss me, my juice  trickles on my legs  I cannot reach
the planks jiggling under  liberty  bell  the little boy is jumping on my shin
my foot,  Mummy he is calling  Money  my pockets are empty  look little turkey there are two
golden coins see, close your eyes
I can’t see he is screaming  shut it  things are thrown  impossible it is impossible:  articles of clothing  a shoe
burning stones  That’s not your money  someone whispers  a bird in the top rack  is confited  the boy shuts up  fat drips  the sun  turns  on darker heat  there are dead things the oven is full  this is
not my kitchen  not my idea
no kitchen has a sun oven like this,  lads  undo the planks, I am screaming  cut the twine  not my words if no-one hears
I should have stuck it out  on the Medusa, my word  skirt full of coins  and no particular claimants  A shower from the sun  upon a wreck  I would say, but as I said  how can it be that I am tied  and Dog is free.

Lope
Middling to the middle  I am  the only white collar onboard aside from chef  there is clapping in my ears
usual theatre
of knife hide organs wish upon a bone Things must be said: you're in a dirty and unfortunate condition, Mon

Suet scrub up

I suggest we study the effects and condition of the men account for who is and who is not and also not quite To order to order I open the bag prod about the tinctures pincers snuff tins today there must be a list of the saved which may include if it be of remark some variation of the following {to be decided} and the unsaved which may include some variation of the following {to be decided} earnest consultation of course, some consideration must be made as to total benefit net gains loss of rations the question of use what of it I must advise a serious entreaty to the weak who will face the father the sun eye to eye the blind reckoning I am in the middle the measure transductor the only white collar aside chef

I must advise a restive hand upon those who will enter their own image face in the face of the sea they will drag their cracked mirror about in the deep, backs picked and hacked wading for judgment on reflection

finally, if there is time, a special ritual for those who forgo last word and sentiment the cannot
who cannot be accounted for and those who consider the sovereign king [to be decided]

Notes, not in pen notes inked in lips how many how heavy how to administer quick burial

forgo mourning forget not remember A task for the reasonable: round up whoever knows

their name, whereabouts, movements those present on the night of the big sink those present on the night

of the first battle those present yesterday and today and tomorrow those claiming to reap and sow those

willing to plow the living Things must be clarified. I am a healer I check my coat it is white

insignia rationalis inside the doctor’s bag potions gleam the horizons fold promise into squares pulled from a hat

On my rounds there must be a record of this a nurse a matron a muse some shadow of benevolence or malevolence if equality counts a powder is metered

on the finger to the left nostril of it is not sand, although it is white a brief prescription to inhale as one

would welcome dawn from the inner lips the freshest lily or enter fields devoted to white only life could come from the colour

of Blanching expunging wringing denial here, ingest, imbibe this sweet elixir of [contents to be decided] with a

modicum of calcified sawn off deadman’s bone as I see it, everyone in some way is grateful that Sol behind me,

orderly as orderly
I check. Sol’s gloom upon my white. I check.

Round and round and round they call me Doctor.

[Chorus] The Vote
Ern. Order. *(He looks down at the crowd).* Here, here! To-
Lope. Ern, I’d like to begin if you don’t mind.
Dog *(Shifts and groans).*
Ratchett. We want King!
Boyle. KingKingKingKing
Jin. I’m sick. I’m going to be *(wave)*
Rope Boy. Shut up. Shut up.
Sol. Who’s in charge? Quick or I’ll shoot.
Wills *(sobs).*
Norma. Now look what you’ve done, it needs a mother’s touch.
Chippie. Sing, go on love. That’ll bring some cheer.
Mon Suet.
Norma. I know a song
Chippie. Is it a sea ditty?
Jin. It’s a dirge, coming from that (wave) mutton.
Rope Boy. Keep it down.
Dog (yaps).
Lope (rolls eyes).
Boyle. All that trouble we went to…
Ratchett. Not to mention the hole in my boot.
Mon Suet (groans).
Wills (still sobs).
Ern. Men, and other members of the Raft!
Sol. Who speaks?

Mon Suet. The lame duck.
Boyle. He’s onto something.
Ratchett. Imagine all that water going in. The rot. Relentless.
Wills (sniffles).
Norma (begins to warble). Nobody knows the trouble I’ve (wave), nobody knows but
Rope Boy. Shut up. Shut up.
SoL. This is relentless.
Ern. (wave) to Lope who has (wave) few introductory words.
Dог (snорes).
Lope. Men. I am here as your EMERGENCY AUTHORITY
Jin. I’m not standing for this.

Chippie. Lie down. Listen to the blue fins goin’ forwards and back. Let me assist— (he grazes Jin’s fingers).
Ern (clearing his throat). If I may say—
SoL. Who’s conducting this meeting? Speak or I’ll pop one!
Lope (stepping in front of Ern). I am, as I said, your EMERGENCY AUTHORITY. I repeat. THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!
Wills (sobs increase).
Norma (brightly). Sometimes I’m up and sometimes I’m down..
Jin. I hear the sharks—
Rope Boy. It’s just the water pitching.
Mon Suet. A rolling boil.
Ratchett. Flamin’ shame to lose a boot to a hole.
Boyle. A boat to a shoal.
Dog (flops onto Rope’s foot).

Lope. Men, the facts: 1. I am a Doctor. 2. I pronounce who is dead. 3. I can save lives. 4. The cook has informed me that there is no more food. 5. Based on current numbers there is only enough wine for another day. 6. Murder is punishable by death, or as determined by “the Raft’s” best interest. 7. Matters pertaining to “the Raft’s” best interest to be decided by privately conducted, random polls. 8. The daily departed will be given a tasteful sea burial at three. 8. No stealing of provisions. Thieves will be executed. 9. We can survive out here if we lie down, keep calm and drink our own waters or piss as you call it. 10. Do not entertain fantasies of rescue, hope is poisonous. 11. My name is Lope, but it’s best to call me Doctor. 12. Look for nice white coat.

Ratchett. Permission to off him!

Boyle. Permission granted!

Mon Suet. The oven, everyone in the oven!

Wills (sobs loudly).

Rope Boy. Shut it shut it (wave)

Dog—

Ern. (wave) what to do?

Norma (with emotion). Sometimes I’m almost to the ground..

Sol (points rifle towards Rope Boy). Lope’s dead.

Jin (to Chippie) Stop! You’re hurting me—I can’t see what you’re doing under there.
Chippie. I can’t stop, oh, oh my *jinny whinny.*

Rope Boy. I’m not Lope-
Sol *(waving his barrel).* Who’s that? Speak!
Dog *(growls).*
Lope *(steps towards barrel).* I am Lope.
Mon suet. You, Doctor.
Wills *(shrilly).* Mummmeeeee!!! Mummmeeeee-
Ern. Shhh.. shhh. Mummy’s coming (he points to the horizon).
Jin *(moans).* Get away from me-
Ratchett *(winks at Chippie).* Bong jaw, lovebirds!
Chippie. Boxed that tit, eh-rooted around her four corners.
Norma *(crooning).* Yes, you got here before I -
Boyle. Bong on, Pops.

Chippie. Doc. I’d like to thank you for rescuing me from uncertain death last night. *(Smiles at Norma).* You and the wife’s singing were me only hope out there.
Ern. Wait, wait- it was me-
Lope. Now Ern. Let’s bring this meeting to an end. People are burning you must understand.

Mon Suet. People are burning.

Jin (sobs quietly).

Boyle. This man’s got a hole in his boot!

Ratchett. Exposing me delicate inner sole!

Sol (points barrel towards his foot). This is relentless.


Dog.

Norma (belting). Glory Hallelujah!

Wills (squints at horizon).

Lope. Accountability. Reason. Responsibility. I propose a vote. Not everyone deserves to be here. Only those who have shown a true interest in the stakes. It’s a privilege to be on this raft. Think of Noah.

Ern. Excuse me, Lope. But you asked for a few words? Just a gentle prod-

Boyle. It’s King! Show us yer crown.

Ratchett (turns around and bends over).

Rope Boy. Boot ‘im!

Wills. Mummeeee! eeeee!
Sol. This is pointless.
Jin. Help me. *(she appeals to Ern)*
Chippie. You’re asking for it.

**Dog.**

Mon Suet. Pop goes the weasel!

**Norma** *(sings)*. Oh Lord, tell all my friends I’m coming too–

**Lope** *(whispers to Ern).*

Ern—Hands up Who is a raft member? What special qualities, habits, health issues, ailments, etc etc. should they possess?

Look around. On or off? Mussel or Man! Yes or no!

Ratchett. No faggot bags!
Boyle. No slag tits!
Sol. Off you all!
Chippie. Doc, I’d just like to touch your hand if I may–

Jin.

Norma. Did you like my little song Wills?

Mon Suet. Belittling.
Wills *(slumps against Ern’s leg)*. I’m fagged. Pooped!

Rope Boy. We can’t vote on human life—can we? *(He looks around at the blank faces).*

Dog *(jumps off podium)*

Dog
Relief streams yellow ribbons curling out the back hole tail up eyes sunk whiskering for clues stop yellow’s out stop to perk up or lie about? stop wave crash big wet start whimpers shakeshake stop fur’s-up hackling nose on the twitch copy the smell on that-- earthmuck worms frog giz smell of skin flaking bit of shadow coiling recoiling copy that movement shift left shift right nothing wave lap wave ocean snores stop copy the motion on that smell shifts to high up hanging shift up up albatross emit growl sea floods maw salt sopping now what whiskering for clues high up air warbles send alert sharp turn teeth out stop, no shadow brightening drop to planks its dripdrop love tail on like a chopper it’s Rope roll over loll over it’s all over
mouthing through flesh stop the albatross gut cut stop steel goes up stop gum spliced red runs out copy that copy that no road one dog pegged over.

Rope Boy
The only one who drinks of his own fluids Doctor advised against it but there's nothing wrong with salt. Done worse. Worse done. Best not to judge at sea. Bit of faintness at first, get through it and the heart swells the lungs inflate the blood surges the brain does a start up. Dog?

No response.
They say I'm just a boy but I've got seamanship racked up time in the great sea blanket can't sleep with it covering you can't stay dry either sun peels your skin right off white or black the cords you can pull with your hands like oranges can't get tight or loose I've got history being wrecked I know the ropes. Dog?

No response.
Can't see anyone that would know my heart broke doing it but they would have done it first, given the chance. I'm not asleep
haven’t had none of those fancy dreams yet I’m not with the soldiers or the thinking men first ones to be ignored are the sailors we remind them of

Dog?

No response.

Geez I’m cut up no place out here for you no reason is there just a few songs by that old dottery living off her fat she’s alright but this is no place for tunes they get into the ears and weevil the head into sand find yourself humming some sentiment like a silly girl

Dog?

No response.

I’m delaying can’t help it the confessions of a the fur it just opened like fruit kept looking at the paws but they were stiff as like the knobs of an old dresser couldn’t see the moment of it just holding a baby who stopped crying.

Sol

Some of us have had a gutful I have a speech for what’s left of the men Some of us think that there should be a revolution
That’s a bit much. The correct idea is mutiny but that failed too. Men, we’ve seen our best foot soldiers get through.

Some of us would be better off making our own course. The army is known for its tactical juice. Freedom fighters who needs this cursed lumber of planks tripping us up like a gaggle of gags. This is not land. Men, we’ve seen the last of her. But think with me. We are not deprived of our lands end. It’s all there, stretching for Homeric miles right under us. It is true that it’s covered by some pretty dense riff raff, but our mission is to make contact to find the resting place for soldiers of war. Men, we don’t of the sea. We are not wet. We are who we off. We have the right to stay in war. Men, we’ve seen the last of her up here.

We are witnessing the dawn of peace. Floating its jelly limbs in the nowhere. Let them have it, the dreamers and poets of the bleeding useless. But first, there are some fixings to fix. The correct idea is sabotage, but we failed that one too. Mon Suet pipped us at the post. Cut the rope next our throats. He’s only one of them. The enemy never wears uniform. Some of us think we should form battalions and mow the bugs down at night. The correct idea is mass death. A holy war. But two nights of blade to blade combat has left us low. Men, our reserves are extinct. I may end the speech with a little pep talk. One or two ideas for those who choose to raft it. Some of us will choose to stay with the sobs. They will be choosing the most dangerous path of all. To these men, I offer you my heartfelt utmosts.
You are choosing the uniform of the un-uniformed
you will be entering the theatre of the flip flops the Hamleteers
the bleeding absurd
As your commander, I will be one of those who remain
I may stop here, it seems tragic
Those fecks will buy it.
My excuse, that Medusa’s got into me
smoking her way in
charming out my heart
What allegiance holds out here?
Nothing but oily waves
A score of limbos,
Oink Oink, I wheeze.
The Fifth Day

Jin
What is the difference between morning star evening star? that dotty old bitch would turn it to song like anybody portering their tears,

Sun and moon tag each other
Ain’t no doubt about it brother
Day and night, night and day
Chassé croisé, croisé chassé,
Sun’s up, Moon’s down,
Moon’s up, Sun’s down
Ain’t no doubt about it brother
Everybody tags each other…
Since there’s nothing else to do the shots and mauling since they’re soled up there’s only time and no task

I whittle down thoughts blunt them out to distinguish anything is a curse the battles, plots, plans there’s nothing

but empty barks our minds flying into the sun. What happened to the genius? Who cares. There are no geniuses on boats to backward lands. There are no geniuses on rafts—none of us have a thought beyond breath.

Lope came to me for my eyes you saw things he said, killings knock-offs trades

you’re our ticket to cleaning up this raft you can’t pretend you’re not our Janus two heads two faces

your eyes open doors his bottles tinkling greenbrown green music to charm

snakes I heard I heard.

Mon Suet

Darmstadt. I was born in a little town nobody knows it It doesn’t exist. That doesn’t matter none of us have papers

just the rotting terrine of skin little names attached to us like bait stuck to fish I cannot remember why I mention this there is no oral tradition in my family just little fights not punch-ups just not speaking

hiding apples in our bedroom sticking the brown peels in the walls pretending we are not alive we
are not related it was not hard Remembering the streets, little more than horse paths separating squalor from misery I am not nostalgic just a little bit
I followed the sulfur buzzing to somewhere and then another somewhere till the orange ran out and there were fields and no mountains underweight trees spindly crowded but thin as sticks and all the women in coats made from blankets
sometimes they said they were waiting for summer but mostly they didn’t speak I was adept in such a place there was no music, just fiddling about muttering in the teeth it all came later too late for harmony too late for repetition
I was born in a little town it is not important but here I am a natural chef well not a certified chef that nobody knows is their problem I can mousse their innards with my pinky Stuff their haggards with my own haggis made on the premises one cannot underestimate those from places they disown I am not a wanderer till now now I am wondering but nothing is in correct order I cannot present it it’s not like gutting fish it’s not like clocking a hen it’s not like wolfing a dog. Darmstadt was just the beginning they came from there the raft, the army, the fat lady that Jin bitch this is my house I never left it the apple I am eating in secret the peels stuff my laughter I ate it before
I am not lying just a little bit a pinch to offset the lynching the ratchetts and boyles that flinty eyed Jin. Why would I cut the rope? Nobody can tell me. Nobody can take out my Darmstadt.

Ern

Trouble, it’s trouble I feel something in my leg, on top of the deadness frankly, it’s unusual I’m not one for mentioning things, but it’s like a tickle like something’s in there running up and down and sometimes walking about but sometimes it feels more organized like there’s a colony of ants or a hive of worker bees making honey I can’t make heads of it Here, slap the outside--nothing a pig hide like any other busted with a few sores sodapop if you lick it on the rim but inside, there’s a buzz there’s things connecting and moving what I don’t know it’s getting to me I don’t see the sense of having a mystery attached it’s trouble alright frankly, before the leg started to twitch I had focus I was getting known about this haulage as a good bloke people would turn to me in a spot you know, they’d listen like I was saying things they could eat like my words lined their pockets cashed their cows I had a shine to me Norma said a standard like gold but not too flash or yellow she said you’re a brick, a gold brick they’ll use you for building after the world goes plonk I’m certain, you’re it.
I was on a level didn’t matter that my leg was busted that my chin went in from lookin down ladies would say it made me look like a statue on the move but I don’t like to blow on about me all the same

the leg’s been hampering me fact is it’s a real disability fact is got reason to believe there’s expansion internally it’s almost time to spread the word make it official like my feeling that there is a colony in my leg reason to believe it’s outside raft control you know I don’t want to panic the guests but there’s reason to believe a germ got in and it’s germinating germ secrets fact is it’s my duty to find out the size of the threat the risk to the health and safety the sanity the sanitary flow reason to believe the secret’s leaking out through little exit holes appearing to the naked eye as little red sores and the itch of the secret goes on and off in a tap tip tap code flaring orange red calls for a sound man, unflappable in all flaps

I don’t like to go on about it, but its not immodest is it, to say I’m an ordinary bloke from ordinary stock My background is not even traced in a tree or a shrub but I have been chosen to harbour life fact is I may be the source.

[Chorus] The New Office
Lope. Listen up!
Norma. I don’t see why we have to continue with this
Chippie. It’s a good thing.
Ern. As your leader, I will be setting up an office of what shall we call it—suggestions? into the future possibility of life—
Ratchett. He’s off his rocker
Mon suet. Sir, is it here, this life?
Boyle. I vote for a new vote.
Dog.
Wills. I saw a kelpie I did.
Rope Boy. Shut it kid.
Sol. Excellent suggestion King. But suppose we focus on this life. I say let’s have an office to assess dangers, threats, public health, I’m talking about real issues.
Jin. How about an office for minorities.

Chippie. Whatasat?
Ratchett. That’s brazen.
Boyle. Is she milking? Doth her teat overflow?
Dog.
Wills. Kelpie kelpie kelpie
Lope. Thanks for your input Janet.

Jin. It’s Jin.

Norma. How about a little entertainment?

Rope Boy. Not now lady.


Mon suet. Sir. This life. Can we see it?

Dog.

Boyle. What happened to our vote?

Ratchett. Right of every man.

Jin. I have a suggestion

Chippie. Root her once and she’s a feminist.

Norma. Where the bee sucks, there suck I

Rope Boy. She’s off

Wills. I know what I saw all wet n furry n quiverin in the whiskers-

Mon Suet. King, is it a savage land?

Lope. Ern?
Ern. Only I have access to the colony so far, and not even that is assured. But-
Sol. Show of hands, who votes for Toll?

Lope (hand rises). I vote for the health of the Raft-
Chippie (waves). I’m very active in local leadership. The wife will attest. Popular with the ladies.
Mon Suet. I own a horse
Ern. The polls closed yesterday. The leader is decided
Ratchett. Moi.
Boyle. Toi.
Rope Boy. Shut it.
Dog.
Norma (sings mournfully). In a cow slir’s ringer I lie
Wills. it was all furred and red with a little pink tongue
Sol (winks at Jin).
Jin. No, it can’t be. I protest,

Ern. Sol. As it is cast, so you must command.
Ratchett. Vive le Roi.
Jin. The king is dead.
Chippie. What'sat?
Rope Boy. Are we dismissed? Or is there a lesson to be learned?
Dog.
Lope. This is serious.
Boyle (waving out to sea). The old familiar faces! Hello pops! Hello darl…
Wills. -n- then when I looked back there was only the wish bone left-n-
Mon Suet. And will there be many sausages in the new land
Norma (brightening) On the bat's back, do I fly-
Sol. Life is Toll. That's our policy.

Jin. Lovely
Lope. Thanks Sol. What happened to our efforts to fish?
Mon suet (sits down on the podium, wipes his forehead). Sausages.
Chippie. We lost the rope.
Ratchett. Liar. It was cut.
Boyle. That Frenchie got into it with his teeth.
Norma (sings with feeling). Under the blossom hangs the bough...
Ern. There must be something else. There must be something else.
Sol. The office of learned lessons (TOLL) will investigate-
Wills (points). That man ate the puppy.
Rope Boy. Liar! He’s lying.
Dog.

Wills
Mummy, it’s not me, he’s the one lying he pretends all the time like he’s nice but he Mummy his puppy got popped ‘n’ its eyes are all funny ‘n’ red like cherry-rot I saw the puppy get popped Mummy his hand went in ‘n’ there was a sound like backed up toilet ‘n’ puppy’s pink belly got the squirms ‘n’ little babies came out organs ‘n’ suchwhat ‘n’ I saw the heart but it wasn’t nice ‘n’ pink it got all phlegm ‘n’ toilet on it sticky mouth suck ‘n’ then I blinked ‘n’ puppy’s mouth was getting it but puppy was popped already ‘n’ I was whimpering Mummy I couldn’t help it ‘n’ next thing there was puppy’s tongue on the planks ‘n’ cause it’s no wind it didn’t move ‘n’ I looked ‘n’ looked ‘n’ then little puppy tongue was baking but no one saw but me everyone lies around with their eyes on the sky dreaming but they never get woke up ‘n’ then then I saw puppy tongue get plopped in his mouth, Mummy he ate it, he ate it and puppy fur was stinking brine and he put his hand up puppy’s guts and reached for the babies, Mummy I blinked ‘n’ then the babies were coming out of his cheeks all over his face ‘n’ he saw that I saw ‘n’ he kept eating till the babies were plopped up ‘n’ then he ripped the fur off puppy with his knife ‘n’ he’s snorting Mummy ‘n’ swearing but no one’s seeing him cept me ‘n’ puppy’s pop eyes ‘n’ then he throws the fur over the edge but it gets stuck to the planks and the wind picks up ‘n’ the hair blows
around ‘n’ then sticks to the skin and everyone’s got puppy hair ‘n’ they don’t even know they’re all furred up ‘n’ bearded ‘n’ they don’t even feel it ‘n’ then I blinked ‘n’ he’s breaking puppy’s ribs ‘n’ he’s licking the bones ‘n’ his bottom’s up in the air ‘n’ he’s so scared there’s pie crusties on his pants ‘n’ the smell hits me ‘n’ puppy’s eyes are popping at me ‘n’ I rub my eyes but there’s hair on me hands ‘n’ Mummy I can’t no longer see proply.

Lope
Quaint that I feel so relaxed the state is almost delicious compare it to a belly full of ice-cream a family tub of royal eaten on a tarnished silver spoon yes and yes a punnet of musk strawberries, ripe and grainy not quite washed
to order to order there’s Jin call her Jan or Janus she likes it two faced, two headed certain things must be said
if only she’d scrub up wash her face pretend she wasn’t so native so used to falling apart so ripe with unkind reflections can we help it certain things must be said, I won’t cock around
it’s hot, the sun beats me the urges are always pink I whack off under the broken sail
don’t be alarmed it maintains time and drains order or look at my accounts, the bodies I’m preserving
a delicious mound of confection: marshmallows, liquorice sticks, caramel creams sometimes I lie down in the still windless day and my nose goes like Dog’s picking the flowers of the twelve-year-old girl, her pasty mother
with the serious bosom all gone to flap now ha ha I tit her tits I wink at the girl
till I have to whack off it’s reasonable to drain the cock under the broken sail where’s Janus?

The sun beats me she’s foxing her hair all over her tits to order to order
Gentlemen, I am only as white as my coat beyond that, my past is anyone’s and my accounts,
what of my accounts I must distribute them, only not to this bunch they’re all mad even that
woodworking puppet I installed I just clink my bottles
and everyone stands to, salutes me Herr Doktor Professor Lope, we hope! All ten bottles full of
whack.
An endless supply the sick get better or not but all begging for seed begging for it just
wait until Janice wails I’ll whack her up the whack bag direct injection of precious fluids I’ll whack her belly
up
with cream, delicious yes, yes I’ll scoop her out with my licking spoon I’ll drip her
ode
to cologne in the brown bottle to order to order it’s quaint, and
yet
I’ve never had a dream Let’s see.
I check. My coat is white. They call me Doctor.
Dog
Gone. inner nose to inner self cushioned in heat darkness the black light light uncovered Dog. Launch outwards out. There big stiff bag of fur stick of bones

tail and tongue out blue, no foam crime circle washed away eyes rolled only not. Gone.
inner eyes to inner self there, air blood a waving in the wing-shadow Fur bag’s

getting pecked

in

pink, red gorgon pit, inside that fig-bits seeds hamstring milk pops
liverlung all ripe for
picking, pocketing cut, rope, cut hocks down the hatch Gone. that dripping muck that dripping mutt

a victory scentless and soundless Dog. Reaction off Caves, bat caves flapping deaf.

No ultraquavering echoes forms Dog. Bagged but not Senseless but not

Gone. Inner flinch to inner winch paws out pads up leave all minor keys un-pressed
snip, rope, snip on the way to the ivory ribs Dog. Gone. Bets off
Innards to inner reports: all roped to dinner
reports: show cloud some deepening shadow
Dog. Seems embedded.
In times of storm  the outside grows thick heavy    prickling with layers wise men shut up
it’s not worth a wax on    or nothing
but in here the inside flares    with lighting    and undetected    vitals get scorched
the heart goes up in flame    but there aren’t no pictures    of an ordinary ticker
going up
the thunder cracks and rattles in here every rib every cartlidge every ligament
knocking
in the winds blow guts get fist tight    with nothing to fight    the head
butts leagues of air wise men shut up it’s not worth scrubbing on but my mouth opens corse
I’m hungry enough to swallow the universe sandwiched in two plates four winds
the seven seas the four five six seven continents deserts straits salt lakes one great sandy bite
moist with slime manatee spinning hydars just one bite to eat but wise men in
storm
shut up  I am recalling things  prayers  from a green book  cataclysm now  they’re in my head

the asking for  without seeming to  prayers  of the old-fashioned type  clear as if they were put there  on purpose,

I don’t know memory  I didn’t learn  cardinal numbers and proper names,  only the ropes  slips
knots  walking the planks  how to vomit up  colours  conceal gangrene  make your own scabs

Now the green prayers don’t stop  psalming themselves around  the burn off  the heart  hidden places

and each one dear god  figures me into nothing  a press of letters
stuffed in a bottle

to God, to God,  I’m stuffed.

Am I not.  the debris  the inner wreck  the prayers in my head  but look here,  on the outside  who knows.

There are bones in my stomach  I am a curled up  torn up  bottomed out dreck.

But there are diversions: this foundling  note by  Him  this dream, or answer:

*Quote.* Things were possible before  and I won’t mention poetry  but consider that we wrecked that ship
to wrackenruin to sort things out
to get things done
to get rid of those
natures given to
pervery
and from pervery we cleansed the waters of the world
and wordy natures and I won’t mention painting
of wordy words
and wordy natures
but consider this it didn’t prevent certain things.
this raft a driftwood mass
what sculptor thought so lovingly of the base David as prop of
as origin
of
grimm life observe the hand hewn wood and stick
under foot under skirt planting all to it
observe the contemplation in gaps the formless
moveable abyss the idea floating
beyond rock
even
now it strikes me that such reflection
is already rigged
up in someone’s studio
besides, it’s trivial
no painting, poem no tune can touch us

David will sink from the bloat of the dead
the consumption of the mutt St. Lope
Ernesto the Lame the thieves in the night
chewing the leather off belts the veins off hands

it’s trivial, this junket
no one sounds right no way in to it

when there’s no way out

and let’s not forget, before David von Hundert
imagined the old Med’s prow rode over untold fathoms
despite the seaweed and sand

folding over our hands
every one slouched down as if hearing the ringing of unicorns and faint bells below from the sea and under the sea such shallowness sounded

once, twice just fathom it then the split of the boat the hull bunkering in.

von Hundert kept at it a hundred times, the fate of fate
he called

to coat his arms

the split of the boat,

the raft is the division of men
oust him and him,
oust her, a known slattern an open purse

and no straws, dice, or cards

no compass, no map

raft the useless raft

the bleeding left bank

consider that von Hundert

does not shit polyps

or salt von Hundert

does not suffer stench

that draws men to breathe water over air

gurgling and snorting

till wetlung tints them blue.

David, the moment of ruin or hope

is it here?
is it there?
It should be promised
What wonders are lost
there it is,
the wing of a fairy

There should be a sign…
in the waiting
Stamping and shouting
a merchant flag

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the wing of a fairy

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Stamping and shouting
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Ratchett
Couple of thoughts. Stop it, I'm hardly thinking the sun boils my eyes sunny side up two eggs, Boyle
bubbling white tell me if the middles aren't a hatch of stones or chickens What's our
condition? Do we know our slaves. Masters? Mon pudding dangles ropes from his wrists
snake heads, our heads, Boyle what's up?
A couple of thoughts. If you'll allow it. That patriot of ours bears new office. I'm saying, I'm certain that we're in it
somehow, but Boyle, I'm against it. I'm not for the oiling the stoking the sweaty
palm brokering. I'm for offing from the top down. Our leader's turned Pax batty Boyle, he's gone green, he's
leading his donkey over palms like its Sunday he's stricken with toadys from his office of trolls
Boyle, Boyle, look at me, and say: have me eggs hatched? Cause you know I wouldn't lie to me own shadow,
but I'm getting images in Boyle,
species of animals instead of men but they're all singular, pairless the exercise not
being
for the purposes of reproduction. wink wink No Ah, and tell me if that ain't
Chippie the echidna, Jin the hound, Norma hippoing echoes of fat Doc and his death rattle,
the raft's hissing ache Boyle, the interlopers traitors the animal masques in every face
the hatching, the plots, see Boyle, how can a man relax when the big man's dead and the men
beasts.

All’s rotten in the upper deck Ern built for the last supper no chair for the big man or the traitor, no scraps for the painted dog.

Boyle
Steady now, Ratshit, you’re yolking me chain. Beasts and burdens the hatch in your eye, you’re off with the Ratchets
, mad as a flasher gaping the willy when your body’s a mac rack, an’ your head’s gone to whiggery.
Rotshit, reckon the animals are your mind reckon the hole in your boot let em in. Floods beast in yer hole like mons hair backing up the drain waters rivers creeks trickles taps you drip hippos and rattling snakes, vertebrae and jellies a whirling unharpoonable menagerie reckon the animals are rutting around sludge nosing your nodules tampering with your fragile connections still you’re a mate reckon the animals stink ratty too hippo, snake, skunk, numbat gather round, that Sol’s got Doc, Ern, the whole rafting lot rubbing their hands red by his trincular flare. reckon they reckon they’ve found a new man for leading the honourable honour honouring our Sol.
Not even a lie is served so straight, So bent is our Sol.

Up, Down, Left, Right! Beast,
down your sword, your hatchet, your spurs Rotshat don’t give the eye to the sky,
Don’t get the whimsy. here’s what you do: Rope in yer creatures, give em rats, whisper yer dogs, pussify yer cats, shell snails, unsuit penguins, dewing larks,
chicken yer chickens, Ratshit, bwaaaaack bakaaraar baaaaaaack
bakaaraaar.
or your will may be done with. Now let me lie down and have a few winks before that singer starts up again-

Norma
Don’t like me singing they say oh, it’s the dress I know it is Chippie and that jungle jane head on a stick needs a good pricking
a deflation mind you, I don’t need to remind you of the increasing necessity of a gift to make good
just think of it an old fashioned picnic on the Lord’s alter no priests it’s a shame but we’ll just have to wrap her up ourselves I can give her me dress cover her peepholes I can rub her dub dub
and some time after the great stillness it's the dress I know it is Chippie cause I was singing and my mouth got full of this twining black and I thought it was a sea snake a sign from Our Lady thought she was dead mad or bilious but when I put it to the nostrils retch retch and honestly, I was pulling up my dress serge was surging from me throat's front and back I was gagging on cottonstring gingham twill but Chippie, the guff was that bleater's pitching hair spooling and sewing up my air I thought to myself, Norma you've had it all now your gargler is stuffed with you from before a relic of the bad old self I'm like that Rapunzel spewing out her lies golden ladders to the rot I'm telling you Chippie, the songs won't stop till we sink that slag. And another thing--

During the big still, the wind stopped dead and it was like I was on stage, under spotlights and I was sposed to just act silently so I clawed up my fist to my gargler and I tasted of her snakes writhing they were, all ends and beginnings Chippie, I got the dramatics, I really tasted the holy waters the parting of seas
the exodus  the plagues  the blood lettings of the first  born to the prophet in the reeds
and it was like a present  from our Lady  an incantation of pure  Lux  Chippie,  I got
the feeling  that wisdom ain’t sweet  it’s ripe as an s-bend  if I may say. Back to me retching  and twill turned to snakes
turned to words  coming out  wet as me old sinful

Mind you, I can’t be sure
whose throat was  in trill  to the gasping  of  asps  but Chippie  the words
came  from no lyric I know—

Chippie. Can you hear me?

**Sol**

Reports of bilge, lies, rackets, whelping  and whacking off. A Toll survey has identified the sticky white remains,
otherwise known as the whack off, or bedroom snot  in wounds, mouths, hair. The living  and dead found
with significant quantities of hot waggley jism. None of the live respondents could account for the massive snot load.

Other findings. Dog reported gone, likely dead. Owner demands compensation from The Raft for sad loss.

Reports of Dog haunting by seven people. Reports of Dog seen in cloud formations, wave froth and between planks by
three, two, and one person respective. Reports of dreams featuring Dog in the role of a.) Grim Reaper (5%), b) Socrates (4%), c) Dog (1.2%), e) Impregnator of waggle hot jism (81%).

Fears and cheers. Eleven people reported that they were feared by visions. Ten people admitted that they may have dreamed for entire days. Of the ten, no-one could agree on the true span of an ‘entire day’ although three believed a day was made of meat and three veg, and seven believed ‘quite strong’ magnets were involved. Eight people conceded that they could not discriminate between dreams and visions. Hallucination was regarded with disbelief. A man in a white coat declared the word nonsensical and advised caution. Eleven people claimed that they were in a state of eternal meat and three veg wakefulness since abandoning the sinking ship. At least ten privately admitted that their neighbours snored through where they were. Five people said they had never been happier. Two people admitted to coveting Jin, and whacking off when they thought no-one was looking. On a scale from mild to mostest, eight people ‘mildly enjoyed’ Norma’s songs.

Ship Log. Today, a great golden chariot was pulled through the sky by unidentifiable beasts.

Health. Marked increase in diagnoses of Raft Syndrome. Symptoms include: chronic boredom listlessness humming night sweats a feeling of being wet between the ears indignation because no-one had told them waves were boring, clouds were boring, wet was boring their neighbours.
were boring.

    a feeling of being felt up by feelings followed by felty nothingness

Activities. Seven people reacted positively to the idea of a human BBQ with two requests for fat crackling and five for flabby guts on.

The future. None of the twelve surveyed cared one way or another for the question. The clock, dial and cock, were boring and all other time reflecting devices, other than the golden chariot and the state of ‘free drift’ were dismissed, as dull tedious and ‘figging useless’.

A respondent who called himself ‘the King’ said that he had abolished time some time ago.

Leadership. Eleven claimed ‘not to know’ who their Leader was. When their Leader was pointed out, all eleven said that they had never seen the man before. Eight people claimed that leadership was in the hands of the dead, because ‘why else would the Doctor preserve dead bodies and stuff at the sides of the raft?’ Two people believed that the Dog might have something to do with it.

Experience. The majority of respondents (87%) said that they would not trade places with anyone, except their neighbours.

40% said that they would rather sit and dream than bother with toil like fixing the sail, hand spearing fish
through the planks or devising new tools. 35% said they were no longer impressed by the alleged genius on board. 99% said that art was secondary to ‘floating about’. 57% said that were being observed by someone writing notes. When asked to identify the note taker, the majority pointed to their privates. All agreed with the King who said there was no better painting than the sun, but that you could only stare at it for so long because it was too boring and then it made holes of the eyes.

Crime. Most people said that while there was crime aboard the raft, it was not an election issue, until someone worked out how to steal nothing. Momentary sun bite caused a general increase in rape. One claimed being a victim of rape every day up to eight times a day by the same man, and different men. A second respondent claimed that ‘she wished.’ Reports of murder down. Shouts of man overboard on the steady. Weather: Fine.

All Toll survey respondents remain anonymous.

Survey conducted by TOLL (the office of lessons learned).

Chippie

After a while, I reckoned that I’d lost her neglect it was, not that I didn’t have my reasons. I being the focus of continued attacks not to name names but that
The Raft

Helen Lambert

rope dripping fiend whatsit Mon Suet. That porky pie's always at me, tapping my legs with his blunt knife or booting me in the backs of the knees porky's at it from morning star to evening star and if I'm always in a state, with a flush in the old apples it's not because I'm a loinsman the old man's got a condition see, I'm not a swimmer get dizzy jumping over puddles see, she opens me up never told the old lady she's likely to get in a royal flap and then sing about it and apart from my own water shakes I start quivering on about the others I get a bit balmy watching the sun bobbing down into the sea and I confess it burns the edges thinking he's gone for good this time, there's no coming back with the moon or some pulsating star and I have to sit down I do the water sucks and sucks on the sun gorging a little more every day the red rays get weaker weaker, until none meet up anymore—threads and snags and the waves begin lapping up the last feathers of the sun and then the face goes, not so you notice it but when you look back, there's no head no face, no heat just the deep blue movements of that mouth.

I confess burns the whole system thinking the sun's gone cos then I'm gone for
good on her blue tongue That’s where the nameless want me a few laughs

besides, they’ve noticed the old man pump around I can still pork

a few barrels. nail a few paintings tune a few motors The sun’s gone. She’s moving away from

me mouth clamped to bittering me I don’t stay it’s neglect

I offer the oldstyle excuse

of banging up the old lady for old times sake. Keep the jukebox running

But she’s lost I lost her and the sun’s gone and she’s cowing her eyes and it’s dark-
## The Seventh Day

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*The Raft*

Helen Lambert
The Raft

Helen Lambert

Ratchett
Jin
Ern
Dog
Mo’Suet
Lope
Rope
Chippie
Norma
Sol

it ‘n’ pork rooted an artist he’s not it round there are puke me cha

was arrest im he’s in it about so many fur up in the

a here pork it singular seems

em drumstick and pork it rattles still so cozy like like

all that everyone really it tittles alive that’s the old

but traitors reports I mean rash it tattles it lovely that’s office rattles

mumsie was him it it must a first

I saw mumsie crystal what think this lovely is open

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**Jin**

Rancorous, the never ending rank, rank, rot How much longer how much longer is longer how much more is more and how much more eating of this rank rank flesh. Taste it, nothing but off cow and dirty vase water The rib bones are set about drying giant teeth or ivory keys the piles and assortments the sorters the graders the tasters the markets have come look at the organs the size of Wills hands hair curls thumbs prized for their fat blue nails, red ears, white tongues, cabbage toes. the pink purplely teats what marvellous colours what sights and sounds oh, the thanksgiving for what we have received

*To market, to market, a gallop a trot,*

*To buy some meat to put in the pot;*

*Three pence a quarter, a groat a side,*

*If it hadn’t been killed it must have died.*
Must have we must have died and the organs first, soft blubbery unimaginable his and hers now ours slippery when wet it goes down, passes the lips as secrets do registering nothing, just rank rank this sliver is the liver sliveringlivering down it goes this is the kidney a rare stone Don’t even stop to sniff, scratch, pick, chew wince, moan this is the heart with its curious parts self sauced ticking this is the gall the appendix the gut and this is just wallops of gristlemuck slime what’s grisly is left. Raw raw rank and raw but I can only taste flesh as fat marbling from bacon the sun bubbles it till we dive down mouths hitting teeth chipping sawing hard spattering grub grease batter the skin can get caught in the hole the moles can get stuck in your teeth but sweet like raison plum.

_To market, to market, to buy a plum bun;_  
_Home again, home again, market is done._

_Ern_  
People say, is it right? They say, Ern, do you know what you’re asking? Fair enough. Fair ask. But look people, I say, what’s done is done. (and my she has a pretty voice) Meat would go off wouldn’t it otherwise
though I have to say that Mon Suet did good with his salting—everything dangling above us: some femurs, a few legs twined up from the sail dangling there like coloured laundry. Not much white. Still, lots of flavours. A veritable spice market. Expands the palette.

After a time, the blood stopped spurting red rain over heads and feet battle painted faces Wills shrieking, his little palms shaking like wet maple leaves People thinking hell was down, not up. But I think everyone agreed that it was for a good cause

I don’t mean to excuse bad actions but everyone agreed, didn’t they that the sound of Mon Suet oom pah pahhing out old the names (he had a nice barbershop voice) was like a tune from the radio or a glimpse of someone’s lighted window at night or the smell of the old terra firma, her armpits heavy with potatoes and mice.

I’m struggling to recall it gives me such a shiver: here we go Salami, blood sausage, frankenfurters, wiener, the wurst of wurst Fair suck of the sav, I remember and it was almost like a fair all those stuffed toys, meat platters raffles a tit for a tat girls with thin eyebrows, midgets behind the curtains

Look, the good doctor Lope and that Sol sotto voce feating over their plates of feet (most likely) good blokes

that genius clanking around in our bones as if we mawed him (kidding) Dog playing his tricks funny how he just went. Life’s like that. Such is it Furphy’s Law etc. etc. Tuck an old geezer’s shin bone up my trousers, where things get lame what saves is saving and I think everyone
would agree that the piles cannot last. Not sure how things will look the forecast shows better days, and worse to come
better with some bones in the belly, but whose bones it gets worse ‘minds me of all kinds of things we did in the long days shooting up rabbits well not strictly—just going at them with sticks knocking their rabbity heads in just to hear the sound sometimes the fluff opened on dead brown shit for brains someone ‘ed shout and nail its fluffy ears flat just to measure the degree of flop just what you do when you’re mucking about.

**Norma**

In a flash something came on me as if my insides were spring flowering with bluebells magic dragons bougainvilleas

but spring didn’t stop, it got hot and sticky, it got real sick all the petals turning into moth wings I got these brown flutters dusky with itch you could tell bees weren’t after me my inner hive being quite dry mind you, there’s still a queen, Norma Jean I sing still the browning made me think my lady had come to pay a visit but not as I expected I saw no angel the wind did not smell like baby’s breath
she’s gone and struck
me, Lux with fire she gave it to me like a flower or a trumpet it’s not even hot the feeling is a flame
like on a coal Barbie: it flames me
till I’m quite full
of candles it’s like I’m an immense wick. If I measured our lady I would get nothing she keeps
getting away,
one-twelfth of a foot-candle multiplied to the foot of the sun
Chippie?
Chippie, quick, I’m being apparitioned by our lady of Lux-
I’m a candle of infinite light (is that Jin dead yet)
Chippie, I’m a vessel. Didn’t I once say that my ears are tuning forks
I pick up spirits wastrels all and sundry and now it’s in lux lux time. Chippie, quick.

Our Lady’s making Honey in my vocals native honey. Not gleaned from the heathen swarms.

But from the land of our moulded ancestors. There’s a trinkling dripping sound Our Lady luxates
space and places it within me precious little

voice box.
And she says, I can sing what happens
I am abuzz with the sounds of singers singing
songs and then she like flutters about
and my throat gargles a baby kick a squirm

Chippie?

Wait, the voice looms it speaks, save your gift of Jin it is enough that Lux saw
(isn’t that nice) nice like the voice to Abe saying no to
Yitzak better gifts out there (look at god giving his own gift to himself)
doesn’t sound right, but I expect up there, nothing’s a case of clear reason.

Chippie?

Chippie, I think I may have a tune.

Dog

Now that the fur’s gone bones cracked between yellow teeth the giblets and goblets all now gobbled up
blood pawed into puss and pipes bags hags guts now the jaw hangs from the underside furthest
from the king undersea and hidden teething waves as it fails to anchor them in
now that it’s gone the nose the tail the wag the ship’s pet mascot of the needlessly kept
they they they ponder and pace apace for peace someone recalls De Canibus Brittanicus:
mutt, wolf kelpie cur? All’s down to memory Dog’s man’s best shackletonshot
The Raft

Helen Lambert

ice red and howling  Dog, what is  Dog?  Dog is gone  howls the ice  to the dogs  Now
smelling  what’s not  wagging up  air, sea spray, storm  condemnation?  J'accuse?
Dog’s just weathering up
Howls the moon. Now that all’s gone  they see more  howls the sun  fur crackles  in every shadow
the pant that  thou art  roars in their ears  fangs sharpen  into splinters  splintering their feet
paws for hands  claws for nails  vision split  into two blind  spots  a troubling sign
groan of the planks  vengeance? Threats?  Dog, what is Man?  Dog, what is Fate?
Dog, what’s not?  a troubling address.  Howls the waves.  The not.
Dog’s just weathering up.

Chippie
Then I want you to pop her in the stomach, then pop her in the eye and the forehead  that’s what she said.  I never heard
such  of course  I never  came straight here for advice  never never  thought of taking to me old lady
with a popper  and a brain in strife  what she said  was  that there was precedence  couple of cases
Medea vs Jason  Gertrude vs. Ham  the people vs the dingoes  but that’s all  go get the kid
I said  she said  the songs were sounding  the muses  flying  out to her  ignoring me
she was choking  her neck  without fingers  all the wind pipes  poking through  reverberatin  like an organ
she said  said she  was only putting out  for certain  returns  her hedge fund  was not to be
hedged oh dear I was caught in topiary snipped she has material she said and I want it
and when you get it I want it through my hedge after she’s popped slip it in
the old lady was my oldest oldest bleak my thoughts saw her on stage at nine jiggling and juggling
her jelly rolls of puppy fat her non-titty titties two sequins of pink a little misaligned you can tell
the developments: mistits mistreatment her straggle hair nesting everyman’s joy to shame
slag fish nets gold tipped fags tottering heels in cobbles or mud her laughter is canned
banging from cars calling her book of numbers at night it’s dirty her lampshade auditioning moths
shrill growing heavy spilling tears some brute’s brut I took her with me gave her my coat
that’s all it takes to get a root years we gave shows and betted on cocks danced with mice
she banged for a compliment I watched never never womb boxed her like Jinny That’s why I’m here
I said, listen she’s not original she just drowns the others out. She’s the ocean waving
and waving she can’t hear herself hear.
I was caught Pop her, pops go on, pop her the soggy breathed tart I want her muse polychorida
to deck me out. Some material gifted with blood impish feet a lively presentiment
of me oncoming death.

That’s why I’m here. I’m not sure I’m pop.
Lope
Back struck whilst contemplating no muttering is more accurate any witnesses? any witnesses
for the witnesses? Over into happens regularly reaction action no one bats an eye. There’s a
spot
where they stand, Mount Ernest on the left side the aspect is craggy rotten grottoed
with ropes to hold on and fly off nice view of the piles below the cotton fields on which
to glean and glean to gorge and gorge how many days can we stay this way? Went flying
with his bottom up fluted trumpet the farting bells someone grab hold of Jin the watcher of
the protector of entrances and exits two heaving jugs for looking eyes sir, milk me for your records
two bleating buttocks for backsight a cow, or gadfly that some bitch released, no
another story, that springer of hot springs molten defender of gates and homes my tinkling bottles
want in
want in to order, to order. So then, he was back struck
whilst blathering was he pushed? that fluting thing. Head into waves moaning pop
pop pop. Was there a hand behind his back a gun a throttling wind? Was there a chip on his head?
His lady screeching her wails pulling at her snaggy hair renting her clothes holes to her
fatty bits her black mole hair her grey milk spurts repulsion the old hag
The Raft

Helen Lambert

I rut  I rut  she rents  my medicaments  overflow
you’re man’s gone  she rents  Do you know what day is it?  the holes spill over her tent  of snatched hair
thighs rolling  lap lapping  herself up  It’s Funday, she says.  She’s singing twit songs

Her man is gone/  she achesachesaches  /real bad blue/  to the very depths/  of the downs/
See, her man is gone/  he gone up to gone/  gone t’ol gonewannaland  /she achesachesaches/
cause it’s tootootoo  /late for chance/  to come calling  /in this ghost/  ache town.

Was he pushed. By his own hand.  But but was he upset? Did he speak?  Did he mope?  Jinny jugs, who saw to
say  he and then  she, the cat’s mother  should stay  As your doctor, I would advise
once one goes in  why not two.  but not three.  that’s excessive.  Anyway,
I think you’ll find  It’s all pre-promised—the matter of the oath.  Repeat after me.
In sickness  and in health  in good times  and in bad  in boats  and on rafts
in swirling oceans and still  in morning  and night  as then, now  if you, I
Come ride with me, Come fly with me  said Moses to Aaron,  Staff to staff-of  As God is my
witness,  Come die with me  Cast die  with me.
My bottles twinkle twinkle  the stars are clear  her jugs of milk  produce the famous sabine dribble
to order to order besides maid, her fat lips will feed us for a day. And still, the rest. Does she nod? The wave of her snake scented locks Which face is for appeal? I check my coat is white call me Doctor.
Wills

Mummy, there’s something that’s really hush private but if I say I’ll only get horse whipped on the raw botty like always but Mummy, is it a sin to think hush privates? the whole thing was only because I was so famfamfamished ‘n’ you said a little lad should never go without his evening soldiers stuffed in snifty white bread ‘n’ now what? Your little lad has none ‘n’ all the rest were yacking down what came from the piles ‘n’ they said that it was Fatzegut ‘n’ this was the time to try it cos I might never get to Fetzeficken all the rest cackling ‘n’ I went near ‘n’ tried to get some but it was stringy ‘n’ pink as Sissy after bath ‘n’ there were little ribbons of red when you squeezed like daddy’s nose veins that get the threads ‘n’ the blubber wobbled ‘n’ I was too feared to touch it all the rest slapping blubber ‘n’ wobbling the pink ‘n’ it stunk like rodents it did ‘n’ off-stuff from Sissy’s lunch box ‘n’ I couldn’t touch it Mummy wasn’t cooked or nothing ‘n’ the pink ‘n’ slimys were all slithering and worming from their fingers as they ate like snakes from that lady’s head ‘n’ I backed off ‘n’ how they laughed ‘n’ jeered me Mummy ‘n’ one said I wouldn’t survive wif that high falutin liver ‘n’ they asked if I was a prince ‘n’ I said I was a little lad ‘n’ they slapped their pants ‘n’ someone held out a dead knuckley fist ‘n’ it was yella ‘n’ dry so I crunched it ‘n’ someone yelled Kosher ‘n’ someone did a jig ‘n’ Norma got out her song book ‘n’ Ern leashed me in ‘n’ whopped me on the botty ‘n’ started counting to four ONE TWO THREE FOUR botty whops ‘n’ are you good yet little lad? ‘n’ FIVE SIX SEVEN FAINT ‘n’ his hand got covered wif stink bits ‘n’ pielets from me pants ‘n’ he got
crustin’ mad ‘n’ he pulled down on the leash ‘n’ I crunched more ‘n’ more till I fort I was Dog ‘n’ he choke chained me ‘n’ the memories came crunching straight to my eyes ‘n’ cranked salty ones that got stuck to me cheeks ‘n’ he pulled on the leash till my lips went all quivery blue ‘n’ I dropped the knuckle down on me foot it went clap clap but nobody did did they? Mummy, ‘n’ then pictures of Dog came banging in ‘n’ till I fort I was moanin’ ‘n’ fur sniffing pantpant ‘n’ whinin’ ‘n’ then I ‘membered that beastie wif the knife what got Dog. Twar Rope ‘n’ you know I never dibdob Mummy, but he slitted his own dog in the belly ‘n’ Dog told me other stuff too but Mummy, I forgot to ask you if it’s okay to eat your own steamers? cos I’m famfamfamished ‘n’ I learned it from Dog just before he got slitted ‘n’ he told me all secret like Aunt Mabel on your brass bed croaking so she could be heard over the tennis ‘n’ so loud everyone knew there was a train set coming but it never did did it ‘n’ Dog’s last will and testament got covered up by the waves, Mummy ‘n’ then hush hush but I found this note, from I don’t know, not Dog but sinful to read:

Whoso list to hunt, etc etc I am not your hind nor your forefather nonetheless I exhibit parental concern.

Therefore, there must be certain questions asked of you as for me I do not care to wait for a reply

The vain travail hast wearied me so. Let us begin Did you find this note, or was it placed upon your person? Are you aware of your body? Is it being tampered with? Are you a slave to slavery?

Or slave to master Can you have it both ways? I refer to the classical business to business model and the creamy idea, so whipped it requires no seed no beginning just the market marketing.

Do you know what I speak of? Are you leashed for your own good?
Or are you less than  a dear boy, perhaps you have become  Dog? Coprophagia.

What have you eaten today? For the love of pie crusts. Coprophilia. Questions to ask to dear boy to trigger his mental faculties:

What’s the friggin’ point. Next. The days? The seasons?

Time? The latitudes, the longitudes? The ultimate measure? Have you heard the sun? Does it tick? Does it tock? The molten clock?

Or do you prefer the moon croon deep in shadow unwinding in her garden of loose springs,

one kick rustling the waves. one flick maning froth and fringed tides The passage of time in her fingers


Where did you find the note? Did you find it round your steamer? Dear Boy, who holds you dear?

There is nothing to keep you here. Leave off therefore. The measure of your heart’s clear as Dog.

martyrdom—martyrdom.

*In a net I seek to hold the wind*
The Raft

Helen Lambert

Mon Suet

In and out of the white—My boss used to say foam is a little birth between meat and meat course he meant it was a baby palette cleanse a foaming venus suppling between the wrinkled ham hocks fetlocks

in and out every day’s white taste is white sound is white: their lips hushing don’t eat the shooshing in their shell ears don’t eat but you must conch conch foam

A pea shooter? foam pulsed squab? It goes down nicely, takes everything with it—

eateateateateateat the work that’s gone into it dawn dusk blunt cut stink piss slop slop

no napkins or forks no silver no service -foam- the dreams of pond yabbies soiled kipfers double English cream down down the hatchet You wake choking on belt leather you wake you face your meat. -foam- But it’s not all bad for me, there is worse than knowing man conch conch. Man to mouth. Think don’t think

-foam- down the hatchet don’t eat

Degustation Tasting Notes

The pate is prepared in the Provencal style simple, yielding its livery how it coats the tongue the cassoulet is a gamey interpretation bold
no beans, but the kidneys are from an old battleaxe
imparting an essence of pigeon or highland goat
the short ribs are deliberately long one of the giants from Sol’s army
a jerk sauce tops him off
course there is foam intestinal foam drained and shook about by the giant himself
prior to rigor mortis it’s personal, for me, there is no taste like it-
a certain brine follows top note to the tri tip what a surprise soppressata donated by
a floater gone on day one self-salting
we left it out in the sun. Finally, dessert The sugars are turning time for
a shot of sea,
-foam- Little birth I am seeing myself drinking the sea but I am drinking a giant mirror
in the mirror is me. It cannot be possible. Perhaps I should repeat -foam- I must drink tonight the chef (moi)
is sampling a rare broth purportedly stewed for centuries a sup of fossil is the sea
she blows her blue cheek
out for many fathoms sup sup blowing scales from all the schools
tuna salmon mackerel trout
god forsaken cod  those shonky balmain bugs  schools of the less fortunate  pilchards and what have you always sequining off
-foam-  and then she blows the deep trombones the fat ones near the bottom  the eyeless dog whiskered with their sticky gills flubbing downwards to muck  and then other things  pelts, lost anchors
frayed ropes  tressing about  old tins bruleed to rust  a gang of parasites for every— but it all adds to the pot
the chef recommends  the fossily brew  be infused with a steeping agent  quote: it would be nice if the sea were a tinier bit younger  not so haggy baggy  a hint of mint will freshen her up  -foam-  I must drink  I am drinking myself again  my lips are licking  my lips  Mouth to sea  Alors, the chef is making out  Sea to mouth
quote: I am a good chef, note my subtle knifework  how I butcher a man and make him look innocent one could slip on him, he looks like little leaves or flowers.  How did I do it?  I believe it’s because I was born to such honour— no, there was force, an oath  certainly, there was pressure  the men stabbing men  the stink
and those tables out there demanding a chef they were insistent and then they began ordering off the menu wild things, and they got up, began wandering about the piles pointing out the plump ones, the young ones a shame to waste that, but you’re the chef, you choose.

-foam- and overhead the scraps the birds sea birds trilling all day and below the sharks graving circles into sea waves parting and joining constant interruptions the pressure the sweats I am always in some fever how to keep their guts lined their hands silvered linens lapped the salt the sup I must get in with the sea what tributaries are flowing in? -foam- I am not telling porkies when -foam- I think of man as a great preserve to be put away and served again much later the sea is foaming her sup of fossil look at her birthing white my lips.

Rope Boy

Shut up shut up the old ones are shuffling stories round the deck hoping for a full house a right royal flush you can’t help but hear the wind bags at it Let me tell you the time when I and then old young so and so that one that clopped me bloody I was something dangling
missus clipping her nails off into the grass toes humming along lot of sympathy
some doctor sewn it back said he was you can’t help but hear the bellow bags
although I shake my head every now and again
they come off in your ear start playing over your thoughts That’s nuthin I stole my best mate’s stole
off to… got sick of it mind you left her waiting in a public said I’d be back lips sticking to her mug
cold tea by now you can’t help but hear the piper piped up Well, well, you boys ain’t confessing are ya? I’ll give you mine if you’re up for it. Voice like a full forward how can she sing shut up shut up the pugging insatiable now it’s playing me:
what else but poor, poor Dog.

Sol
What a lark. No chance of nothing and yet the stakes are up bookies would make a killing on hope
what’s the chance of rescue the office finds 99 percent holding their hands to their heads
as if the sea can be seen from all sides on account of its flatness they hope but real
morale is built on none the waves curve the office reports that the chief reporter has been caught
communicating with waves not as in a dialogue but a nod like one given to a neighbour. saying quote I find them consoling in their restless slap slap a man’s got to be shut
The Raft

Helen Lambert

not to be beaten by her irregular heart
what a lark
that office of lessons
learned
to cover
up
the curving sea
the turning sea
the men going out into
paddling
out
into
their shadows
the waves lapping them up
the office reports
now is the
beginning
and the end—
no-one can decide
what is
beginning
what is
ending
there is no
doubt about it, said x to
y
that not a lot of learning
is going on
day after day
the same
things

night after night
the same things

it was better
when there were fights
remember when the
soldiers
rabbled around
and we feared our lives
women running round holding their necks

but it took
our minds off
the same things
said y to x
nothing can stop us
no-hopers from not hoping
the lessons

going nowhere,
what a lark
the army gone soft
the foot soldiers lost at sea
can’t
get them into the office
can’t get them to fight
softness
it’s gone inside
plumped and pillowed
their

empty heads
the office asked the reporting officer:
where was you born? what was the course of your life? when did
you first want to dress up and fight?
reporting officer was nodding
I don’t recall
I don’t recall
but when I first found my first shell it was inside me I was led shouldered led around
no sound my feet pulled to marching spitting commands the boys saw it enter it was a sign
I was born shelled couldn’t stop being led about leading what a lark shot
into the army big shot, the waves lapping me up. Where was I, right, no bookie, no
hope of rescue odd odds
the lessons being learned. The course of my life said the reporting officer to the officer is spent
nodding to waves.

Boyle
Ratchat I dreamed we was eating our old mess mates but only their clothes cause Ratchat we stopped we were
undecided about correct procedure that’s what you said carney but and then you had this thread
coming out of your mouth and I said go on pull on it have a bit of a tug and you were pulling on the thread it went on and on
in laundresser blue molten gold some shade of shady to herring redwards all those yarns turning
you old dreamcoat but then one by one all your mates came out but they were made of cloth like dolls or puppets and then your mum came out dressed in King’s uniform bit of a bosom that’s where you get your bad posture Ratchat and I didn’t recognize all of them but you was sad once the thread stopped and you saw that you weren’t there but me neither and you tried to wind them up again into a big ball so you could put it back in but it wouldn’t stick together you tried to stuff it in your gob but it spilled out and you spat the threads all over yourself until your mouth was clothed cause the threads were you and you was sad because you couldn’t make nothing of it but rumpled raggedies Ratchat are you with me?

Fair enough, it’s not like I’m a dreamer or nothing I don’t go round speculating or rodding the skies

but the tailoring nature your threads Ratchat either you’re onto your own inner fabrique on gut terms with your guts oar oar let’s row the boat gently down the stream you’re being worked by a master oar oar bespoken for by the tailor. Oar oar. Ratchock? I don’t want to start anything but you know that office rag that off-his- ex-colour sergeant of ours I reckon he’s your thread puller unravelling your innermosts I’m referring to the soul the host
and its ownmost ghost right out certain reports of which I can’t go on elaborating
which may or may not feature a golden calf cock lowing and buttering ratch
his gilded nads through and via which means butter wouldn’t melt in his
lowing
in his curdling and custarding his icecreamning and buttering idoling gold your mind
Ratchcock,

a fool’s head unbutters his bread

a fool’s thirst’s sea girt

a fool’s shame one polished dame

core of rot feat in threads a mess, mate your labour is perva gongoozling
up sea’s dress Ratchcock I’m only interpreticking the winds you’re me brother but
trouble is the truth leaks out the wound before scab reports I’m getting
brother rat and his idle cock un-buttering his daily bread The subject of the state ment
all is not well-well.
Ratchett

Right Boyle. You’ve made your points. One two three Fourbe. Not that I don’t hear you. Steaming’s always loud and whistling. But listen up Boyle, Sol’s going places nah don’t knock him he’s got plans and plans of plans he’s not like you, he’s not hatching them mind but minds them hatching there’s a subtilistic difference see, one is mind and one is hatch hatch see, happened to that genius tell me that Boyle?

Who’s stepping up to plug the sea reft? Tell you what Boyle, quoth: this frigging sea by the sea shore and the point of that Boyle, is what. The raft is not here, it’s not of wood or splinters made it’s not planked with rot and rope it’s not the result of toolery The raft the true raft is the sea listen merrily merrily merrily life is but a seaaaaaaaaaaaaa. Boyle, Sol heard all her subtonics you’ve got to be trained In sea we drift to the sure as shore can be.

Like that. My addition. Should have shared it but you’re always steaming on besides which Sol says you’re lacking in good old commons he means you’re loose leaking heat out your top windows
he says your pockets are full of red cents copperous he says Boyle’s broiled to broilly
pit-mirk, I don’t heed that Boyle it’s just idle chit chat muck raking
before his making
but I can turn the colours of your coat Boyle, I wouldn’t to a mate but you’re a true mate I’ll
refigery your rot dreams I’ll off the steam see, Sol says we’re ready to step off get me? he’s
organising it
she’ll take us to her shore the true one, it’s genius.
the problem so far being the interpretation of the raft see, Sol says we can float out
while the dark’s out and the pity and the pity being that the sea doesn’t take just anyone but I’ve
heard
that she likes battalion boys brings out her best fish finest coral for a lick of our brass
buttons and swagger Boyle, it’s genius. This is it this is the second raft. The one that was lost
**The Ninth Day**

**Chippie**

Blasted blazes and all that the cursing’s the only thing left Norma dear they’d throw an old codger in to that soup just to thicken it swear I felt me whole carriage being shunted couple of times didn’t cog onto the exact hands involved heard it was a new strategy called ocean blue or wine dark can’t cog the exact term something relating to persons non grata wanting to extend the field hold the fort don’t know the whats whens whys keep trying to cog it old ticker’s wound up Norma dear best to stick close see what happened to Dog no sound no signs Norma dear they’d throw that kid off just to have a cry swear the strategy is some kind of expansion of surface to sea best undertaken light hence the rations the numbered days Doc calls them by numbers saved me life he did but still things must be preserved life and death two different canneries see what happened to the piles it’s only rational Norma dear they’d throw that Jin off just for a drink
it’s a question of strategizing if the blue ocean’s blue and the blue sky’s blue what gives returning to the sky it’s a mantel no, that’s the earth blasted numbskull globe a glob of blue have a squidge on the markings to see if they match up how many days of fluff nimbus and nebulous all clouds flocking about in forms made of tock tock carmet heard about that stuff puts the wave in stone shape shifting sores the best heads those cloud flocks are unherded too, no muster no road what would you say can’t be Rorsharse with his blots on sense Norma dear it’s definite cog this, down the blue ocean blue up, the blue sky blue down waves up clouds tock tock so it is clouds must be waves crashing up Norma dear, it’s definite the strategy is both out and up the sky is the ocean the sea’s in the air we’re just waiting on this platform for the switch have a squidge at it from all sides we’re four cornered no, that’s bunk wrong? cog the nights when blue’s covered up the markings dot dot dot a twinkling of stars to wish upon but it can’t be a well dot dot dot dash the heavens are beyond the rational that’s the strength how to think the night of black sky black lamps not lighting far off a twinkling of eyes see, the waves, the clouds, the whole thing covered up Norma dear cog this, could do with something to wash down the gristle swear I feel the grip right around the old ribs never been shunted before swear there’s a number on my head
Helen Lambert

Norma dear if there is would you tell me? Like in the old days you were always counting cards coins chips bingo ing your threepenny lips bingo if me squidge ain’t twenty twenty bingo if there’s no there’s no end like the first me squidging you through a half window wouldn’t budge nosegay in glass a right sight of smudges could just make out a hand waving white hanker chief blossomed in lippie kiss kiss squidging down at the shine on your black patent shoes up at the lolly pink pill box who got that for you? fishnet in your face flag lipping kiss kiss I couldn’t look for the smudge of blubbery cheek your best goodbye dress squidging you through breath smudge bugswipe kiss kiss waving me down the tracks where was I going flap, unfurling Norma dear stick close what does it mean if we’re shunted on to the blue or blue to be waving in the waves the heavens flocked goodbye have a squidge can you count the cards dear, numbered are the days a tipped hand they’d throw me over just to gawk at the old codger on his back how the deck goes out to the heavenly-blue-black track.

Norma

That cook always by knobbing his wares cluck goes his tongue it’s the dress, Chippie it’s undressing me without my prior sometimes I don’t like to admit it no-one might be listening
I can hold a good tune always a song-bird Chippie not a nightingale a big fat lark theatrical
too with my whims and what nots the feathers in my hat crowns in my fur I like to make a tune out
of the bunglebungen like those dames of the operatic the lamentation slowly feathering then choke
like crow down a snake Chippie
as I tuned my warble best I was watching the watchers heads in hands hands in head
I know you’re not supposed to make contact a singer and the sung to good reasons stage fright
ghosts by the foot lights but now affixed with my original material I felt I did
twas high time to turn the spotlight a bit no faces Chippie no eye to eye just
watching them heads heads in hands hands in my ears were all pink and burning at
the no faces Chippie
and then I could hear myself hear like I was being sung warbled. Khoomei borbangy

came out from my second voice which must have been tucked inside a secret pocket or drawer

Khoom
my lips stuck in rondel 0, all pulsating like they was on the electric Khoomei flu fluteflu flute flu
Borbangy flu a warbling parrot flued right out o my lips in green ready ness flued lara-
parakeet past heads in hands hands in head passing the past no faces
but I believe I seen a knowing flinch from some no face and then tragedy baying for it

I delivered shrill one cage cleaning squawk Kargyraa raa jaw buzzing and chippering huff
huff flued greenred passing over you eating that gristle bit like it was parsnip that’s what
they say it tastes of earth burial redtop fluting past in distant rumble locolocoloco I looked
over at your open mouth like you was joining the chorus gristle mouth shaping a cage
cleaning squawk but Chippie your mouth didn’t sing it opened a face like my lady luxing and
full of stars my lady was pointing even though you’re not sposed to point of fact it’s quite rude but
she was anyway and her finger ended at the fleeing parrot redtopping toward the setting sun
I did the rondel 0 Chippie my baby winging it the gold coin swimming in two eyes that’s
life I ronaled wondering if my para-larakeet will come back or whether my top-voice second to
one got singed in the sun it’s a shame a big shame Chippie, but the real tragedy of the
tragedy is the fly away song.
Dog’s gone and I’m cursed with dogsense who’s on first, what’s on seconds
I don’t know this square of bags Edible No. 24: Bone marrow gall stone pursed lips
23: Loose lips sink ships 14: Blond busted up nose right pockets slit
31: Freckled fat mole
to the chin ruddy even indeath. 1. Unknown soldier proud organ donor 92: Fell in for king and country.
87: Left eye lifted moderate temple burn 46: Young boy cruelly taken Up, your swords of justice
57: Unidentifiable assortment of spoiled fruit. 76: Tart to the cannery. 33. General ruffian of no special interest
68: Manly firm flesh is there a place for you? Numbers: 12, 1, 2, 6, 3, 9, 8, 10, 3, 7, 4, 11, still shuffling on in loving remembrance of dear old succabob and suckabel in whom we hold in gust, in gust, in greatest gust suchiskin
Animal crackers in my soup/monkeys and rabbits loop the loop
gosh oh gee but I have fun swallowing animals one by one.

kinwhispering to Dog, who’s on? flinch Dog, what’s on? itch
Dog, why’s that? fur up I don’t know a square of bags from a square of bags the numbers, the crowds, the runs.
But when I get hold of the big bad wolf,

I just push him under to drown then I bite him

in a million bits and gobble him right down.

Bane the morrow and suck your kin don’t come in whispering o Dog who knows who

o Dog what knows what o Dog why knows why o Dog god’s inner snoop When they’re

inside me where it’s dark/ I walk around like Noah’s ark

I stuff my tummy like a goop with

animal crackers in my soup.

dogsense.

A bone sight better than joining the slag birth of her slag fatuous chorus line belting out warwar

what is it good for the troops never having cried suck salt off their licking lips before tucking in to suchandsuch kin.

Burial tomorrow. Dogsense.

[Chorus] The New Land

Sol. Someone should keep a look out-

Lope. There’s still a few with twenty-twenty-
Rope Boy. For float boats full of fairies.

Dog.

Ern. I know it’s coming. It’s yonder, just over yonder

Norma (prepares to sing).

Chippie. I got twenty-twenty Doc.

Ratchett. I got twenty-twenty on ten, Doc.

Boyle. Raise you fifty-

Mon Suet. I will cook you next-

Jin. We’re rooted we’re rooted we’re rooted-

Wills. Look!

Dog.

Lope. The boy sees a glimmer.

Ern. No wool covering my Wills-

Sol. Mr. twenty-twenty?

Chippie. Let me see, let me see-

Mon suet. Doctor, there’s rot in these piles.

Rope Boy. Shut it-
Ratchett. He’s piling it on
Boyle. Course he’s got piles of personal experience,
Wills. It’s a funny shape.
Jin. Does it make a sound?
Norma (sings). Click go the shears boys… click click click.

Rope Boy. Hasn’t that whiner learnt to shut it.
Chippie. There’s a definite ripple.
Lope. It could be the skiff of oars.
Boyle. Skiff he says.
Sol. It’s nothing.
Wills. It’s not nothing.
Ern. It is the new world-
Norma (screeching). The ringer looks around and is beaten by a blow….
Ratchett. What a blow
Mon Suet. I am working on tripe
Jin. You’re all gutless
Dog.
Ratchett. Listen to maid maudlin
Boyle. I’ve had a gutful
Wills: It’s waving. Look!
Jin. We’re rooted we’re rooted we’re rooted-
Lope. We have medicine, we have meat, we have a place to lie our kin to sleep
Sol. The positives are all positive.
Mon Suet. Tomorrow I will slice off the ears.
Chippie. It’s definitely something…
Norma (still singing) Glory if he gets her won’t he make the ringer go…
Rope Boy (wave). I'll ring yer ringer right off.
Dog.
Ern. Walking-fish (wave) bladderlungs (wave) I, dipnoid

Jin (wave). One question relating to-
Chippie. Whatsat?
Ern. Is it question time? Oh dear? Have we time?
Lope. I say, who can answer Janet’s question?
Mon Suet. She is a very fat girl to be talking.

Dog.

Sol. This is relentless–

Rope Boy. I'll posit one.

Boyle. You're time is up.

Ratchett. It's an answer that must be three-in-one.

Norma (sings). Fixed is his gaze on the bare-bellied joe.

Wills. I know–

Lope. Nothing can save us now.

Sol. Now now, Doc.

Rope Boy. It's a shamrock.

Wills. I known it.

Dog.

Ern. The familiar (wave) clover sick seas

Mon suet, Greenskin Redskin Liverskin Whack Fatskin, Thinskin Slackskin Crack

Boyle. Time’s up. None of youse got it.

Ratchett (wave). get it?
Chippie. You boys better improve your act-

Norma (sings). Roll up your swags we’ve off on the tracks

Jin. But what about (wave) Dog?

Ratchett

Catsmother reckons there’s Dog floating back seen it wither own one day a sight of four little skiffs paddling to reckons Dog’s not dead that was a filthy furphy Dog lost Dog overboard Dog swimming in swimming hole doyareckon she’s inclined mystically like as when you’ve tucked a few under the belt pat pat and slow as slow can be bonnie brown snakes unloop de loop your trousers drop on the knob lot bonnie’s weaving contorting buckle down your very delicate’s gone snakeular

buckle up there’s her fangs cloven tongue hiss hiss your head’s tight as a tinny Ratshit visions you call em seeing the eternal a well fulla brown snakes wriggling as straps on a death chair constricting your lungs will this is the god’s honest shoel visions hit you in the ‘lectric.
Doyareckon me eggs are hatching Boyle, doyoureckon catsmother Jin’s onto the way

the truth, the life: ‘no one comes to me except through dad’ my you’re looking impressed here I am

lathering charm up the eternal. Boyle, if Dog comes back I’ll eat me flaming eyes I will

I’ll throw me good parts to the pits my bad parts to the gehenna I’ll dotter the unknown floors

like a poxy spotted shark I’ll howl and gob up Geist and I’ll spit it all to Jin I’ll rip me bloody arms off I’ll finagle a pair of flesh fins.

Boyle, if Dog’s back it’s because all good things return

right? Not like gravity or boomerangs I mean like the proddy son, who pisses on his dad, but his dad says, you’re alright

like the resurrection of whatsit, that other son, who says– I’m dad, but like younger and

I’m man but like better

and his dad says nothin’

(nice one dad)

It’s all Jin-mystical right? An pseudo echo of homo chucking things back
Hear that?  Don’t stop me I stake all on land,  On Dog.  On coming back.
Posit positively.  That’s my way:  Hear that?  Don’t stop me

The sound of our future is washing up.

Boyle

Ratshit, Ratshit all of it,  you raté of common Rattus Rattus  a liver for your faith  I say. You and that Jin
mystical  I’m not a believer in the eternal rains, the how many circles, the broken rocks  the bad
neighbours  the violent against themselves  Woomera seed  Medusa-furies  wood of thorns
cataracts of blood  the violent against nature  the violent against art  the panderers and seducers
sayers and peculators  odorous odes  of Uly  Oedi  Donny Q  Leer

all ladies under curfew
until the frozen lake of Cocytus  you traitors to kids  uncles  schoolmates  King
exody your country  spies and terrorists  trading in secrets  states of mind
descend  to Cocytus
all ladies under curfew
until
later  quoth Uly Oedi  Donny Q  and Leer  until
the havelon-haveitons  have finished their makeshift dams  their copies of nature
until stove-top plagues and poisons brew up the Lethe the Sodomy Lot Ratchitty here is the clearing of clear felled trees the lake on fire, ashes to ash dust to the beginning of the end- quick, pray: for trinkets, a new bike, recognition and please let my mummy get well.

Ratshit, it’s a pile of old cobbled dreams. We’re goners. Going under.

Dad’s silent. Wake up

Wills

Mummy I am real tear sorry for my porkers and my wallops ‘n’ little whiteys that come out of my mouth ‘n’ get all black ‘n’ tarry like as that boy who cried wolf ‘n’ did I tell you I spotted Dog ‘n’ he was paddling in the waves ‘n’ I saw his fangs all covered with seawop ‘n’ weeds green as the clover leaf Sissy used to sniff ‘n’ I waved ‘n’ called Dog who came paddling by ‘n’ the fur on him all wet ‘n’ his pink tongue waggling to the loon side ‘n’ that lady what sings the rhymes snaked her bone fingers out to grab grab ‘n’ I smacked her on the knuckle butts trying to get Dog ‘n’ she went back in with her fingers ‘n’ started in with her hissing snake hair flying ‘n’ making to lash me in the kisser ‘n’ but I seen him first Mummy ‘n’ finders keepers losers peepers Mummy ‘n’ Rope moaning ‘n’ contorting ‘n’ poor Dog this ‘n’ someone got up to have a squidge ‘n’ that’s it what’s it ‘n’ bodies falling ‘n’ grabbing on it’s Dog ‘n’ a shout went up ‘n’ everyone stopped chewin ‘n’ guzzling ‘n’ let’s ave a cheer boys ‘n’ that lady singing should auld acquaintance be forgot ‘n’ let’s ave another cheer boys ‘n’ Ratchett blew on his botty horn toot toot ‘n’ someone sang here’s a hand my trusty friend and gies a hand of mine ‘n’ toot toot float the raspberries ‘n’ Ratchett sniffing them like they was
cream ‘n’ I screamed Dog ‘n’ I got tugged under someone’s arm ‘n’ my mouth was bogged I couldn’t breathe properly. Mummy ‘n’ a bit of knob got stuffed in me cheek from the piles ‘n’ I tried to spit it out but I couldn’t breathe or swallow ‘n’ my little milk teeth being gone ‘n’ there was just gum ‘n’ new sharpies chattering ‘n’ Dog paddling by ‘n’ I saw him first ‘n’ Ern covered my eyes but I saw through his shaky fingers little bits of sun foot shout then I chewed on the knob ‘n’ Ern screamed ‘n’ there was Dog being wave digged from the wet ‘n’ I saw his tongue lolling ‘n’ throwing up sea gunk ‘n’ his tail stiff up ‘n’ then I sneaked a peek ‘n’ Dog was on the piles ‘n’ I went to pat him but I touched an old man’s nozzle ‘n’ where’s Dog but no-one heard me with me teeth chattering ‘n’ Ern lamed out on the planks ‘n’ bodies bustin to see who’s the saviour ‘n’ there was his paw between the wood ‘n’ sea ‘n’ Rope giving deck cleaning instructions ‘n’ no-one hearing ‘n’ one last cheer lads ‘n’ Mummy all the ladies were waving like as from a grand ship ‘n’ Ratchett tootin raspberries ‘n’ Mummy I always knewed he’d be back.
The Tenth Day

Mon Suet

That pip squirt with the high voice always spoiling things his bald face is a turkey spreading it thick with cranberry jam lies lies lies as fast as his pitter patter feet squirt gobbling over the men howling like that gingerbread child stuffed in an oven today he is seeing a spot of Dog on the horizon a yip yip of beast coming back from... no matter lies lies, demoralizing I put the knob on squirt I stuff his putty mouth up Ern shuts his eyes gentle, like he was lidding up a corpse but squirt wouldn’t swallow the Dorset in my fist wouldn’t drink I am getting the action-reaction over this picky eater. Prickles Venom Fevers Sweats. I say, you cannot be picky when it comes to the dead. Pip squirts his bald faced turkeys around I grab him, he’s not fit-
put him on the spit up and down jump the men rip rip rip sing the ladies as they shred a deadman’s coat wave wave sing the hankies to the ragged ocean line lost lost pip squeak screams and lames over the dreadly piles pip squirt squirts out Dog and Dorset knob spits from mouth to hand burial of bone

Darmstadt rip rip rip sing the ladies my last known address if only the sea could see the ladies’ hankies for they are not snotty but dead white for surrender Darm-let them hang I make knobs not supplications I am not obliged Darm- they eat of my salteds nod nod nod their heads pat pat pat their stomachs all the while their minds on my next serving Darm-one or two personally thanked me for the meat and asked to be told what name it once had

I don’t recall the names I am not obliged Darm-they go back to drifting about The women wave in one more sun down with their raggedy hankies loose un-corseted sighs I am thinking a good sight they would make trussed up two pigs in a blanket Darm- what is it the sows saw ah yes, the piles being plundered they took twelve coats, a rind of forgotten lemon an old fob watch personally I don’t care
no-one can prove who found what from whom  the lemon abloom  in stickydick mould  the rags stuck to skin
who knows what is what.  that sopping wet fob  keeping ocean time  who knows where they hid these things—  all pockets  slits, all mouths  holes  There was Jake the peg over the plunder  pulling at this bloke’s evergreen teeth  **grunt grunt grunt**  the squirt collecting  in his two sweaty palms  upper jaw maxilla  clink  molar, back  **clink**  uncultured man, he was  **clink**  but for this here gold seed
Ern’s shirt a bloomin hammock of clinks  lower jaw mandible  **clink**  all filmy as highland rice  he says, personally, I don’t judge  I am not here to witness this or that  to judge extractions, pillage, amputations  I am not obliged  to disclose  **rip rip rip**  whether  my knobs are grass fed  sea fed  kelp fed  dead still four  of my best Dorsets are pinioned from the old mast:  Tuscan pinks, florid  areds  upended  like umbrellas  fruit bats  the rawest rottenest  curtains of meat  no, that’s not quite true  that could be a porky  not a curtain  barely a screen  something to pull on  a dangling mobile for tots, or  a window dressing  at the local meatshop  mutton dressed in tinsel  tin bells in the beef  a few flies  blowing in
dead hides twitchy with fly feet Darmstadt

was not like that— all the meat was hidden in the back so as not to shock

the ladies, who wore fur and grew their fingernails very long and one could not tell after their powder

wore off, what was what rillettes of goose pork duck pursing their lips one must

hide Darmstadt would not allow the piles: they would bury them quick quick quick

in sand, in lime, in pits, in peats, in loamy musty secretive earth. Darm- no matter the piles are running out. People will forget the taste.

People will crave it. Darm- only the live ones left I am not obliged to disclose

those willing to give up their noble limbs to the Stadt for a piece of rib steak sun-

seared

A limb for life! A life for a Limb! I am not suggesting it, of course such things must be freely volunteered

the chosen limb chosen by an enterprise agreement, a fairness test a blind vote a

signature from a blind witness and then something is breathed into the air someone makes a sign

to the furthest corners indicating infinity, or the memory of land other things I am not

suggesting force, of course the volunteer reserves the right to say no but the no to that no lies with the

Stadt

I am not obliged to disclose who enters into such agreements Darm- but really, what harm

could come of a system so Darm fair
Ern

Now that the sea is grown greenly calm we can expect an improvement in sightings of the unknown headlands

the great rocky outcrops, the mangy groves consorting with my internals I am convinced

the new world is Moorish I expect there will be a desire among these poor dreaming weakened souls

for more of it, and of the old world lessofit and of the watery world noneofit and of the heavens

of the image of man made in the image of forgetit so it is that I find my rest and my source of calm

which is humbly and humbly sought I think I am a source for the men an end

seek and ye shall find no, no, it is seek and thou shalt not find and yes even

them that contended with thee they that warred against shall be as nothing and as a thing of naught

Now that the sea is grown greenly calm we can expect to hear the morsels of the highest mind

I am convinced that my fall dear Wills my bodily infirmity

my lamity clamity that indication of a feeble mind a weak fist a toxic liver a short neck

of a man inclined to sob is a blessing; some still call me King. I think I am a source for the men
The Raft

Helen Lambert

a spiritual crutch as soft as mould or moss upon the rock I give my voice
dear Wills my world to come newly dawning let us moor in to call
into
I, a muezzin climbing the minuet no mineret hence the box I built with
me own cutters in any case the important thing is to moor in to the word
dear Wills no lamity clamity can obstruct the arrangement of verbs crisp and correct as
stone flowers set in the Taj dear Wills I've always been a frank man not much of a father but you remember
I never let you go don't listen to the old the raft's like any other raft just like their ome
in the old country their creakbed plain as life this raft just planks floatin with
no apparent end. They see the raft in everything: an upended table, square arguments crud family they
didn't choose no earth no end no end to the end. No end to their old threats:
could sew their lips up could hang from the mast head like those knobs of Mon Suet's feet
first sword up could chuck a mate over could sink myself dive deep in the nuddy right
inbetween those finny fin sharks. Don't listen: shut your trembling ears dear Wills I haven't been brained
like them, who couldn't give a rat's those walking breathing dribbly dead. And I'm not
romantic
I'm just sharing, you're as me son me second leg listen to the new day Mooring dear Wills

the call is like a whistle stilled will make your own neck'airs stiffen straight to lapidescence and then you'll be thinking of nothing. The whole arrangement will appear just as al-Mi'raj it's all here in this handwritten note I found in my lame sock look here: the crumples the way they suggest a virgistic rose I'm not a romantic mind it's all here:

Hallo etc etc who is reading etc etc Hallo Hallo anyone are you there? Okay good let us start etc with a few words say Ern say, He be gone but not begotten oh the nights and days take refuge in the sterning hand the Sheppard etc say Hallo Hallo do you worship what you have carved yourself schedia extemporaneous raft insults songs and this includes all poems say He be making but not maked say there is one who owns the words the pretty pearlescent luminescents who never sleeps take refuge in the sterning hand the originator of heavens Hallo Hallo and earth Ern, say it be only a short sermon one is one etc etc for always and forever. Watch out for your fellows
those idolaters of stars and imaginary ships who think only of rescue of keeping their heads and losing their minds
who carve and sing out of time Hallo Ern, say there is only One He be gone you be begotten.

etc. etc.

Rope Boy
Previous life. I was coping, I was I mean previous to that moment, I was getting the tie of the knot of the hoary fray by the neck didn’t bother me none, the slipping and chafing the previous life of sail cloth rigged to me bed mum’s idea, canvas portholed down over me slumber twenty brass lined eyes above mine up until fifteen me swell of sleep under the peep holes I had carpet before ocean bed before deck breakfast before the rope mirror before the sea-- Previous, me last look out logged a containment of oceans and mirrored fog through which I could see me red peering face in the way again always that same noggin in the glass.
I wiped it clean for Neptune’s bath I wiped and wiped me leering face
The Raft

Helen Lambert

but I couldn’t get out of the way
How long

of the ocean-

before I got the calling

over and over

to her wet? In swelling sleep

washing her wet hole

long waves fluttering

washing her salt and brine

washing her whole body over

me

any previous convictions? no sir
water

I am just a lad

I mean

her steaming off the harbour

is the smell of someone’s private soak

the smell of everything kept still

unseemly

scum and dirt

seem twilight

plugged

her musk led me on
the ninth in the same
in such and such a circumstance

blue

Previous to that, there was a clap board house

sticky lino protectin the floors

picking up milk bottles

Daddaddadadadadadadadadadadadad always calling

no more thanks

empties

me mum would say, no more of that

I was back to flinging stones
Indian minors
always cackling

catapulting
too

cheap cheap

dead budgies through the window of Mrs Staynes
never did I use a galah but

squawk squawk

Daddaddaddadadadadadadadad

mouth full a peas

effing idiot dingos
me room

me mum

was a shade of sea

wait till I get
ribbons and waves

out

off me mum’s precious carpet

on account of the light

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Previously it was always too late. I mean, there was no moment when things changed: the bottles were always found empty, no more thanks the sailcloth on my bed. See, I'm not remembering because my solids were already given to the sea.

Dog
What? Campaigns for the return of speech less & wimp erring fur What?
   How about Dog trick #.... turning Alpha into Beta #....
   finding inner Aleph #.... nine lives of mog #.... no word on Dog

# He weeps they weep all weep for Metempsychosis #.... howl lower fang to light crouch all fours prints of the finest flower # what is Dog to a mirror? #...
feet to hands
# best angle bare wombat snout up black, wet #... now, croon o moon o man o mutt #... there, a collection plate a true meal of the finest metals
and medals man o war o #... was Dog to be your Lassie What?
Bring Dog back? What: you would have Dog repeat upon you your beastly echo
your natural nature your whiskering canny little onslaughts scruff o neck maul
to th’ head o man o war o scent in blud # … Dog, in retrograde inversion the
serial possibility of the twelve Doggerels # Wolf mutt beast k9 Kunos pup hund dog
man’sbest heeler dingo effin’bitch # dog hund man’sbest wolf mutt dingo pup heeler k9 Kunos effin’bitch beast
come here, come on boy, come here to your final trick Dog’s promise days of oar
dawn before a good heel.

Sol
They’re always around, an omen of something something not right get me. Take these bludgers. I’m busy working
in the office—not polishing the decks with me story spittle. Lately, all me men have gone, save two: retched and boil Bludgers,
Me left collecting so many sorry tales, if only they could be put to something useful. I had ideas: a workshop
for eradicating holes, a committee for emergency signals S wave O wave S
it’s something. The walking could be collecting oddments figures and facts reporting on slips falls drowning by numbers such employment has assisted me no thanks to this bludgering mob of unemployed at last.
Me noting the pops offs. It’s wearilying, but a man must keep a count. Lope’s always about checking my numbers against his but no-one can write or remember but the shadow Doc’s coat makes a circle of deathly white.
The bludgers are always about for instance Boil looking to me, as if I could mop up the spills in his eyes a bad testament that one to survival. He and every employee. I ask you I’m beginning to lose interest in life and death it’s their fault, the unemployed at last that mob’s relentless and the waves keep going on and on the sun keeps going on and the raft keeps on the sea and the sea on it lurks There’s Boil with his dog eared reports nothing on them, all filler white as Lope’s coat. The rest are bludgering up Boil says indifference is steady and indifference to indifference up 90% a difference of 90%
There’s a bit of left over sentiment one bloke is all it takes who goes about telling some blubby mothersome tale what’s to tell? what story can be put to use.
Boil has examples, names changed to protect the Bludgers. Quote: I come from a small ratshit village I'll have you know where people know me by name I am known—Wait a second! quod y to x is that an apple on your head?

Boil bangs his report: the survey is vindicated, 45% agree there is a juicy Jonathon on the first man’s head. Toll reports Boil says, that 72% rank Toll middling to dim Boil stops and counts on his fingers 8 being the number that can’t tell between living and dead. Boil reports from his eye witness: three people spotted chatting with rags one clavicle cradle rocked assorted men spooning with puffy ones over by the edge one lady suckling upon her own tit also one man seen trying to eat the crisp off his dearest’s skin my little chicken he was alleged to whisper, Boil says. my little chick chick chick His mouth was full of what he took to be feathers. 92% report this town is full of strangers Who are you who disappear when I talk chick chick look at me lips they ain’t moving for fun in biting my little chicken, there’s love. Bludgeoning bludgers.

Me tells Boil there will be no more of this Sol officer regrets having to let go his best staff only chuck the surveys into the sea mind the blank condemnations, the white shadow of death. The mob lie about in inward ascent.
The Raft

The days has come, the vials dry up the victuals of life lie flaccid. In truth, the member doesn’t stand the member for Janet. Can’t see that milk wench. Last seen with her tit in twolips she’s a sight for sore eyes, all covered with the pink contagion, yet can’t report it. Natural causes, a good end. Just a bit of high colour, folks a gluey squint no medicinals in my clank bag Not to worry. The day has come, when I must stoop to collect wash from sea to siphon a bit of marrow paste, from mon suet’s finest knobs. No more whackety whack. The member doesn’t stand. The rounds I can do in a counted minute administering marrow wop to a man who thinks he’s a plank a Dog a dead man no-one bothers with symptoms. The condition is always the same: Nothing. Even time has sprung from their faces who would watch over their empty dials? Wretched it is. They tick over and over their tongues clacking back. In truth, if I were not pinked, if my seed could only take seed

Would the member for Janet please stand! Then certain things could be cured Spermotology
in truth, a most promising field.

Janet, what a bosomy sow tit what a deep brown dip between twolips to order to order Will the member please stand!

Sometimes I take to daubing a cheek, stroking a stray hair I have that special touch, hands on, as many have said.

Janet’s ears are pricked, her head slightly cocked. How, at each breath she intones a hearty sigh

my palm presses upon oil slick hair I glue her eyes shut thinking of twolip slut

how would she shower buff her bovine jiggles how would she bath

to order to order I go in for doctored tales: a bag of clank for the quiet ones sugary spoonfuls for the sobbers

O my youth

in a damp forsaken place at the ends of the earth Dumfries for instance or The Sneug I was born calling
from the humble chambers of our straw bale hut. This shelter barely big enough for a pig. But our family name commanded it
to us, we were the Sodsons. Outside, you could see fields of yellow rapeseed black mud, acres of sludge
ponds and marshes and always under a foul light. The heavy skies pressed down upon us--wetting our young heads
with a presage of sleet or rain. Inside, you could see creaking rafters of mountain ash uprooted from some colony, spilling indigenous quantities of oil and sap.

_O my youth_, in this hut, squeezed in with three dumb brothers and two sisters both bonk mad my parents lost one year in a storm, never found a tragedy, which left a delicate impression, of course. The bank sold the hut and our mud and marshes. I was left, I was.

_O my youth_. I took to walking on cliffs I beckoned to the winds: let your hands direct my destiny. The winds stopped.

I was left—until, one honest man, a wanderer from a town he called Exduss, took me under his woolens where I like a Joey hid.

My days spent learning the cutting by apprentice, the wanderer’s right eye thick in malachite glass. I was getting into precious stones learning the colours and shapes incise here or there tiny instruments the size of your fibula, your basic bone size crack.

_O my youth_, but looking down, my patients were snoring and snoring I left them. The waves thundering, the raft cracking the opening and closing the stars blinking the moon waxing everyone hungry for their wake.
The days have come when I must confess: I’m not all bad
I can’t say my past except as lies
Janice through the pink quick, one more glance for medicine, of course.

The sea is fielding shots, watering my feet my bag of pranks
How they all look to me and I look off-

I check, my coat is white they call me Doktor.
The Eleventh Day

Wills
Belch he did mummy all over me vents got stuffed right up but it’s awright mummy cos whatever you do never shame a fraud ‘n’ I didn’t mummy promise not even when I wrote it in my head to ‘member like you taught me make his belch sound all polite like a lady would record it on her French handkerchief for want of paper but Sissy said it no it’s so a secret can fly out of her lady hand ‘n’ only a man hand can pick up ‘n’ finger the border lace ‘n’ then he will see the writing all delicate like unbrushed hair that’s how to meet ladies but the belch keeps getting into my breaving mummy ‘n’ so I close my nostrils but there’s an opening through my mouth where belch sneaks in like poo fairy ‘n’ belch the taste rots me fair out ‘n’ not breaving mummy so Ern’s pinching me cheeks spit it out the water on your lungs spit it out but there’s only belch mummy ‘n’ stinking when I breave in and out I’m trying to write it for you mummy for your prosperity but it gets all blurry ‘n’ I can’t remember the start or stop only the middle like as a great big puddle I can’t jump over belch Ern’s twisting me neck ‘n’ something’s caught lodged he said ‘n’ the others gawping ‘n’ gulping ‘n’ someone’s poking me blown up throat ‘n’ mon suet saying let them eat cake ‘n’ it came to me that I was the founder of the dried bean ‘n’ this wonder was in me ‘n’ everywhere past me lips ‘n’ nose was the giant plum pudding on this grand day ‘n’ the watching faces ‘n’ the cards readying to act in character ‘n’ the singers straining to let it out belch the warm pudding flesh future naming its new King ‘n’ if I spat the bean out I would lose it mummy ‘n’ you always said I was special fit for royalty mummy not like old daddy–no–title drinking hops from a brass thimble One Two Three Thousand I don’t drink just a few sips mummy ‘member the midday staggering daddy like as a blood filled beetle ‘n’ thimbling his fingers along the hallway tick tick
tick ‘n’ then only the sound of him rifling drawers closets hat boxes mummy till he found it ‘member ‘n’ he opened all the blinds ‘n’ snapped on the lamps ‘n’ we saw her white frilly knickers growing out of his right hand ‘n’ member daddy put his nose ‘n’ shameful the snail trail all showing ‘n’ he wiped it on the sash ‘n’ his silver thimbles falling on the floor one two three whore ‘n’ Sissy cried ‘n’ daddy was all hopped ‘n’ went out rifling ‘n’ shot an Indian minor ‘n’ put it on the top step for all to see screaming yellar yellar ‘member mummy ‘n’ then he threw all Sissy’s dresses in the pond ‘n’ came back to wipe French lipstick all over her wicked thighs ‘n’ you were cowering mummy ‘n’ he got the safety matches ‘n’ burned her silks on the grass right leg left leg black smoke up like the can can ‘n’ then he hung her boobie covers in the public case you’re wonderin that slut’s not mine awright but kept her frilly knickers in his pocket ‘n’ moaned for his snuff box all hours thimbling the walls calling tick tick tick twat twat twat ‘n’ Sissy blushing red through blue but is it really twelve days after the fir tree ‘n’ train set ‘n’ caroling at the door I can’t tell what day it is only the head writing won’t stop mummy, it won’t everywhere I look is far away ‘n’ the puddle goes right to the middle of the earth mummy it’s true ‘n’ it gets into you ‘n’ makes ponds in your chest belch that old lady with dropsy fished Sissy’s dresses out ‘n’ kept ‘em for her mangled girl wif the frog fingers ‘n’ Sissy saw ‘n’ her lips wobbled belch I can’t breave ‘n’ daddy put his big nose in ‘n’ Sissy says it’s like when a pudding first hits you plum in the belly I can’t breave mummy arms don’t work mummy but Kings like to lie about don’t they mummy wallowing in stink ‘n’ such I’m just reclining ‘n’ things roll over me ‘n’ over me ‘n’ how long is it like the sea this being King ‘n’ Ern’s fingering me up the tails get up laddy boy ‘n’ hurry there’s something on the horizon ‘n’ I squinted but I couldn’t catch nort only the big swollen bean that got in mummy ‘n’ seed what got mixed up with a little King-
Ratchett

Now for something of interest, my ears tell me, there's a little event planned. Wake up Boyle, it's no Dog just a little funerary, followed by some strapping words, music provided by the two wailers.

Long time residents, flapping arms, the chook dance, size twelve please, stir the bucket, square your sets, all around the left hand lady, then the patter call Boyle, steady beaus, box the gnat, guzzle your gass, ready belles, pass in pass out, trade family, flutterwheel, weep for a quarter.

Left veer, pass the ocean promenade, courtesy turn, beaus, slide the clutch, spin the top, shoot the star, flies down belles, run cross run, in the name of the father, diddy your neighbour, and the sun, scoot back, followed by a corpse throwing contest, I'm in that Boyle, my dangles out, me arm's going like a chopper, me palm cupping, the little red chick, stitching to fly, she's a shiner.

Leaves her stain, all over left groin, and there she goes flipper, slider, or flamin' googly, I can chuck her when it suits me. It's a celebration, a festival of the hole in me boot, in the planks, in yer head, a wild thing.
Boyle, we'll toast the great war all in attendance the hangers on the buried the unburied the speculators the grey nurses the great whites watchin us like a billy being that we're still here a pair of guts through thick and thin with not a coin to flip our names

next to them unreasoned head scratchin johnnies that dodgy rope cuttin chef that friggin Dog we're doing well 'cept I would a thought we'd go down noble like anti-heroes dying of a freak tidal infection occasioned through the boot hole that's it yer number's up hole is the mouth of death only spreads you can't do nort about it Boyle?

don't bother answerin a man in strict confidence I know you're party material proud member of various and assorted groups very respectful for a mate medal quality a stiffness to yer upper

lip Boyle locks in your expression I'm just suggestin you go the wet mutt the about gad the nudge and wink us two us pair not in a romantic sense no rot I'm serious laugh at the olden days a bit of the old one two free assistance with all live burials off with the dead wood
Boyle, don’t get sulky I see I was a mess you had to watch me living in a dream a regular
Joseph wasn’t all bad but you can’t stay there can yer? who fished me out of the well because it’s not fair to
the rest loping around dank humour musty habits seeing the garden of exotica and delivering it to men
the fat years the lean imagining the imaginary making symbols of symbols me own picture show
Boyle had me reeling no pansies but only briars and stink weeds antlered thorns men wanting
handouts a fat wench renting me finery mutual suckling upon her breast that’s a quote actually twas
imaginary a local tart pumping her keg on the bar the rest out for me Boyle despite me hatching
me tendency to hallucinate I say it like it is a good mate go on admit it not like sol I don’t offer you anything I’m just here mate something good to look at not like you
look at yourself you vain bastard always circulating a thrush with news and now’s the time for off
leash off stage off the friggin good behaviour bond Boyle? I like to look at the sea the sea the sea every day I reckon there’s something
different to general mono tony that’s cos I’m mentally alert to signs waves tell
the lean years and the fat years the plagues all whispered in me ear if I drop off dip in tarry
in her dreams is it wrong Boyle the waves it’s hard to hear preparations for
the burials but listen we will switch a brown nose for a lump of lardy we
will rule Boyle by the rod of her divining.

Boyle
Ratshit Ratshit all of it if you weren’t so close I’d throw you to your ratshit rod divining Rats
if what you say is true and who can trust yer bellowing billy puffing out kohl to line the eyes her
bedroom lies If I assist you for one night of the swaps gallanting about it’s because I don’t like to dance
gives me a feeling of the grave what goes on above it all that stomping feet on feet shake of floor and
the music galing through the room hands pulling up bodies wet backs falling back to floor thumping
feet in squares and circles then form
a straight line look, your matted hair her lips on his lapels feminine sweat puddling over the dryest
beds not enough to break the drought the wallflowers on the wilt who will pick me who will up root
me hours spent bacheloring the open door the lean in the frame Ratsack where’s that list the burials and
who’s going down all fancy haven’t we dispensed with rituals the point of ceremony is blunt let them rot but
first for the good bits get em into yer I’m scrapie with itch everything’s skins the wood the
flaming water all crackling rippling man hunger moving in Ratshit what’s the friggin point as
someone once put it  I think it’s a capital concept  ever since that Sol had me retrenched  always digging me self out  ever since  Ratshit  I’m bothered by the bother of  why flamin bother  for instance  there’s no work  no sanitary  no serial or compound interest  it’s not like looking forward to something  on the horizon

a mystery that unfolds  who done it  it done who  nort like knowing your old lady’s sculling  up the stairs with a plate

of freshly made  the bother is being bothered  to the flamin bothery  will I eat  will I sleep  will I dream  will I won’t I will I the endless rot  and now? and next? and whatsat?  it ruins days  the pure lilt of them Rats  days gone to bothery  do you feel it Rats  the bloody vandals  to be up  up and away from all noise  conching  scabbing

for a word  a treat  place to rest  one’s feet  to up which goes  before all sense  do you get the jist  Rats  I’m beginning to feel  no don’t feel anything  but  hot and flaming bothery  live or die  either or  no choice in not choosing  henceforth  that man with the old man smell  Rats  let him get it  him and his lardloin of a wife  why not  why not.

Jin

In tree she stumps  her bark bubbles  like Poseidon’s wet- the oceans knobbled in  cobbled in black and red petrified and wouldn’t you be  when held in water and rock and bye bye  a litter of drowned kittens with rudderless tails
waiting out centuries for imprint of wave wave wave as a single wave as it once waved to mythical sirens
mobs, a one eyed monstrous fury, see see how the currents cracked the hard wood linear, the style
almost boring, but where would we be without wave wave wave a single wave cobbled in knobbled in wood
and petrified faces and the slippery slapper the rollicking Pollocking raving moon
her gravitas a drip painting let there be wet (in the wood, the lungs, the piss heads, the pants)
and what wet gets dry wants
her work includes installations of men-women writhing about here a happening of unpaid men-women in
dishevelled piles humanity a temporary exhibit featuring hordes, rubble, scabs, gnawed-down sawed-down limbs
(accompanied by continuous loop of a loop) critical notes: is that a black man? is that a white wo-woo man? is that a tit-tit falling out of her robe passing interest: the rot-stink midden of skin rubbish barge going up the canal references to B.
the annals of meanwhile.
In her bark shield her corner of wet night in her tree she winds her body rolling days to the rings of trees
whose calendar of winds and winds the moon the sea the earth the day the night to each other they are rhymes of each other, reflections, copies, echoes, falsies but mostly indistinctions: what is tree from what is leg what is bark from what is voice box what links larynx to wind y accordion to what end are beginnings

by chance she sees things from her bark coffin, though she is not gone yet a glimpse of her mother the songstress of the fat-homs the deep weight of her pins bowling tunes down the aisle hear she now with her bosom breaking the winds cheekyhorns pointing both ways now what tears melt even more of her face

listen, she’s singing *dear what can the matter be, oh dear what can the matter be?* Her husband is the udder girl’s bull ramming in his years though he’s already gone to pasture Her husband is the udder girl’s pastor, no papa who is the girl in the tree/name of me

listen, would you like another jin, sir no she wouldn’t offer wishing’s in her eyes clear as well pennies turned screeching loon face up madness speaks to those wishing by chance she caught her udder mother

by the ankle fat moist like kitten heads in water scruff the bark curls with water she sat by the udder mother string hair all like harp wind on it weeping weeping and she put her lips to her cheek but found
she was licking at the water oh dear what can the matter be? Daddy’s so long at the fair-

Sol
Facing sun. Last time I’ll say it listen up some of youse believe me a traitor others a hard working Mensch of this battalion spits
I can’t say I want to see any of youse again but now that we’ve met a certain pity grown between us go on pretend go on haven’t heard o any long-lasting lend us a fag friend ships developing only a few dips in the old mermaid winks a few bats with the fruit hanging from her hair tree now that we’re familiar, remember not by choice spits
I’ve decided to introduce meself say a few words about me life’s times pause let’s see pause born to a good looker never knew her liked shopping the low street in her clack clack heels one day she popped me in her best clutch me sucking on the purse lips o not like Moses and his fancy reeds pause gold plate in my mouth let’s see couple of people looked some bought and sold the young sol for a few coins or cutties by and by there was a man name of who bought a raffle ticket from a lady with the shake in her shakin as to wrinklin the very air my number’s the only number man thinks sure enough E 1 comes up, that’s you
The Raft

Helen Lambert

sings shake man folds the square in his handsmile crawling over his lips the sun appears youse may not know it but his was

a yellow square affixed with date vendor and the initials of man O.C. for old O'Cohen let's see

years pass they do go on pretend just like here the outside rushed about and Mr O.C. gave me to the local school as a mascot for (classified) in return for some books and I got on had to wear a suit bunny ears

spits

I can't say I want any of youse to but shortly after Mr taught me the letters o another language and sure enough he whispers you're not a bunny no one now knows you from any one side he brew on the letters in front o me you're double-tongue boy a clacker pause let's see I was educated by the books in the home library and I never knew the import of what I was reading come on I dare you to know what you know but letters got inside like flood rain collectin in the ceiling and one day like any other dam burst me head plastered in and I'm scrumming round punching in wall paper right through gilded aforescent bird flower tree to hollowall I never knew the impact of doing I dare you to know what you're doing only make hole, bigger hole down on all fours the floor planks can't get knife, sharper knife cut I must have missed me lips are pursed from quivering o house of cards

spits

Mr showed me his ticket stub all I have he quacks like it was first tooth

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The Raft

Helen Lambert

first word first time went off I did he cried into his cuff years pass

spits

I'm in the biggest mob a soldyar days ago I had green feet green face green gun blast if I know meself in reflection but we're mascots for (classified) can't say I find any of this useful go on talk amongst youselves

I know it's rivetin

spits

the friendly fighting green and brown places to rum around go animal till old man's old stub

burns out pause let's see aboard the bleeding float an animal no training for the sea slop and stuck

with you lot what help a man listen up remember me to your people sol that's me name

commanders Ratchett sgt. first class. Boyle officer third class. European cattle regiment. Lookout for suspected illegal entry vessels. spits

out of time, out of time

battalion.
Mon Suet

Pictures they come to me whirling like dervish please, if everyone could just concentrate we could begin by preparing perfectly fine gelatin out of our combined olfactory fluids forget the bones and the other cuttle extracts no need we have a new substance see, already it looks like a premier Champagne jelly scent mild to twee I am imagining sunflowers seeds man’s first cold piss in hay I have one prune eye saved in my good pocket for such a dish who would not kneel before me and savour the juice of late summer sourced exclusively from seeing eyes not from concentrate sir, witness it all our best seats look out to the setting sun where some go willingly blind but I have a standing pit that is very cheap casual dining where imbibers snort at the fiercest fishes snort at their dining companion snort snort please waiter, wiggle your toe through the crack how it excites the buggers below snort pap pap pap must watch the ticker when there’s lashings of entertainment where’s that prune. consult with the maitre D the chef is returning to his Darm roots Special of the Day: Prune surprise  

Tasting notes: immediate shriveling upon the lateral tongue concentrated mount of balsamic rapidly yields to a paddocky goop of golden raisons handpicked by peasants and washed in a blessed well
prune says let us share one little kiss  what a surprise  please, will you have a seat  or will you take a post in the pit?
the days of lolling how they try my creativity  suddenly with no announcement I find my hands
untethered the rope just slipped off  perhaps I had a little chew  with my Darmstadt indentured teeth
how convenient  fetid weasels already they forget my list of crimes  my parents would lock me up
rope cutter fish gutter
tit titter
how it excites the little boy  pap pap pap  to watch pudding head pork barrel pigbits  with his knife and giblets
grown men begin pushing off the piles of meat  they do  how else is it all gone  self-savages
they must be off their tockers  need to institute conservation and preservation laws  who is the leader here?
every last man woman child  every last finger fibular foot  can be bottled in the water
with this rope, I thee thread  for months we can sup from the sea  an amuse bouche of washed cuts
volunteers, I will admit their limbs are still attached  it was perhaps my little porky, no pie intended
please, we can survive but the culinary arts are dangerous  they are an aproned wilderness  where forgetting begets
man parts  please, let me start, looking at the sun, buoyed by the waves  limbs, cheeks, tongue
I have it in mind for the pudding  to be minced
Ventralwards, a word I’m fond of Wills, gleaned it from an old geezer in the markets who reckoned that’s why we face down when we’re in need of a quiet moment a thought paused to behold the beauty of the world and righto it’s plush enough even this waving scene Wills you’ve got to admit a certain sparkle pervades the toil and trouble froth and bubble a pink flush given by our minds not from sun or wave but from natural colouring a natural blush the thoughts that fill things in such thirst when water is everywhere sink to your belly your one and only Ali, Ali, finest flesh seat swollen with fleshly prayer soft skin upon the floor first mouth in the original Fassung and so it was said to be a lone knot flowering the bungle of birth, followed by the bungle of speech and that is why Wills us Twelvers are devotedly tongue tied not that I’m a religious man, I got it all from an old geezer at the market sold me a rug Wills with directions to paradise a book on the Imam the great mourning of Ashura almost as good as ventralwards I’m not a believing man Wills, just a maker of simple tools but Cack my throat’s dry and this idea of returning to the knot the bind the flower the belly-up is my legacy to you not that I’m off
I wouldn’t go and leave you I’m readying to set my clock but it’s paradisiacal time, understand Wills, the tribes are here all twelve and only norts in them painted pictures that runny prune cake get the belly on the rug Wills, and thy lips acurlycued

Chippie

Norma give me a sip.

no response.

Norma, I’m dying.

No response.

Sits with legs open. Waves break over his crotch. Skin is red-raw from frequent scratching and bleeding. Right foot has a deep wound from an unknown accident and is sea-green,

Norma, I’m flaming dead.

No response.

Opens his fly. Free bagger. Waves break over his crotch. Surveys his wiggling manhood.

Norma, come here and tell me I’m dead. Someone’s gotta make the pronouncement. Who knows my face.

No response.

Norma.

No response.
Picks up his manhood in two hands. It worms like a worm from the earth. Looks around. Sees Jin.
Norma, I’m being devoured.
Norma.
No response.
She’s clawing me flag pole. She’s waving it to all nations. Norma. In breech. Flag conventions.
International signatories.
Norma.
No response.
Smiles at Jin. Licks his lips. Pulls his worm out. Waves crash over it. Pulls his worm out. Waves crash over it.
Pulls his worm out. Waggles it about.
Encore Encore. Have a look see a look see…. don’t fight it the purple bait catches your eye.
Waves crash over it.
Norma.
No response.
Buttery mess all over his fingers. Wipes it on face and arms. Then slowly into his punctured foot.
Oh that’s good. Norma,
No response.
That’s it. I’m done for. Time’s up, gentleman. Drink up.
Norma?
*No response.*

It’s closing time. Where’s me supper? Me six o’clock whistle wetter?
*No response.*
Norma have a heart.
*No response.*
*No response.*
Norma. you wouldn’t waste it would you in song.

*[Chorus] The Rules of Entertainment*
*Rope Boy.* No sighting of land, no ship—
*Dog.*
*Chippie.* Give us a sip love.
*Ratchett.* A man’s got enough to put up with—
*Boyle.* In other words zip it
*Mon Suet.* Chop chop.
Wills. I found the bean and do you know what that means—
Ern. Suffer the little children.
Jin. Suffer yourself.
Lope. What has Toll to report?
Sol. There is a secret song-bird. Little Flo—
Norma. I'm conserving me throat.

Ratchett. She's saving her spit
Boyle. Her god-given gargle.
Lope. Quiet. We must get to the bottom of the food shortage—
Mon Suet. Chop Chop.
Sol. I've seen all kinds of men sinking their brothers.
Dog.
Wills. Everyone listen to me, I found the bean in the cake,
Rope Boy. It was a plant.
Chippie. Dover, show us your clover—
Norma. You can't entice me
Jin (to Norma). I'll sing for you

Dog.
Ratchett. Slag chorus. It's predictable.
Boyle. A flaming musical at sea-
Ern. The colony, it's inside me
Norma. I'm conserving my throat.
Wills. Everyone stop talking and listen to me.
Rope Boy. Is someone speaking?
Chippie. I ordered a drink an hour ago, where's that slut
Lope. What does Toll report today?
Sol. Guilty is guilty.
Jin (trills). What shall we do with a Drunken-
Mon Suet. chop chop

Ern. It is said that Innocents never blink, for their sight is pure
Dog.
Wills (looks around). Please let me be King, just for one day, please.
Mon Suet. This is not a game Squirt.
Chippie. I ordered a flaming brandy soda-
Norma. Still conserving.
Rope Boy. We heard ya the second time.
Sol. This is relentless
Lope. It is with heartfelt desolation, felt from the four corners of the raft that I bring you this report: we have no more supper.
Ratchett. You’re kidding.
Boyle. Who ate up our piles. Stand up ya mug.
Jin (sings). Way hay and up she rises–

Mon Suet. I shall have no employment.
Wills. Submit to me.
Ern. The guilty, in no special order: Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Benjamin, Issachar, Levi, Reuben, Judah, Simeon, Joseph,
Zebulum–
Rope Boy. Save us from the cracker
Jin (belts). Tie him to the taffrail when she’s yardarm under
Chippie. Whatsat?
Dog.
Ratchett. Push him off

Boyle. A decent bloke. Couldn’t help spreading it around—off him!

Lope. What will become of my white cloth and rag bag, my life-saving, my bedside manner, when there is no more sustenance.

Sol. I was witness to a burial at noon o’clock.

Norma. Preserving…conserving…

Lope. A burial? At noon?


Boyle. Push them off.

Sol. There was coffins made of hands. Bodies made of bones. Bassinets made of men rocking their coffiny hands. One, two: on the count of three. Sound of waves eating them up. I eyed them going face down to face the sea.

Rope Boy. How do we know you’re not the one who did it?

Ern. Innocent is innocent.

Chippie. Slut took my drink

Wills. Stop. One minute of silence please.

Dog.

Norma.

Mon Suet.
Jin (sings). Soak im in oil till he sprouts flippers. Turn im over and drive him windward.

Sol. I swear upon my mother’s (wave) the bodies went Plop Plop Plop-
Ratchett. Fair go, that’s private.
Boyle. Cack me if that doesn’t sound like Ratshit-
Ern (wave). I expect there will be a few attempts to overthrow us-
Rope Boy (to Chippie). There goes your brandy pawnee-
Chippie. Don’t argue with me you fucking brick head.
Wills. Silence!
Dog.
Lope. How many hands did you see? Who amongst us has murdered-
Norma (bites her lip).
Jin (starts up). Put him in the scuppers with a hose-pipe on him. Heave him by the leg and with a rung console him.
Mon Suet. All hope ladles from me, unemployed at last

Norma. I can’t conserve it any longer-
Rope Boy. Shut your trap.
Jin. Shut yours
Chippie. Fucking slut split me fucking drink.

Ratchett. Push him off

Boyle. Plop him

Lope. We stand among killers, who done it-

Sol. What good will it do?

Ern. Ask not what good it will do-

Wills. Stop it.

Mon Suet. There is a stink of pot luck about this

Dog.

Sol. I never dog on a mate.

Ern. The Sevensers are here. Fire.

Chippie. I’m going to smash you fucking lepers with my brandy foot

Jin *(starts up again)*. Put him in bed with the Captain’s daughter-

Dog.

Lope. Becalm men, it is only the water picking up, the wind picking up, the stillness ends.

Norma. I feel one hundred pro all that gargling

Rope Boy. Doc, we could eat the ones left
Mon Suet. I do not kill live specimens
Ratchett. Push them off!
Boyle. Faguettes!
Wills. This meeting is off course-

Rope Boy
Should have shut my rooin’ mouth donor what came over me busy remembering a story of how a group of early men survived the great western mountains eat-mate and conquer I can’t even piss in private have me on watch for forking a mate they stripped me took me shorts, sandals, head rag now Doc calls me ropacoius a total twat knot the true tramontane donor what that means should have shut it while I still had a chance could have got me some white meat
dark meat
Dog, even my teeth are hungry I heard your gums rot without meat breath goes to cat there’s a real lack of cover no shade, nothing burns me right up can’t settle in me skin without me meat frying that yellow thing flaring in me eye sunny side up Dog, I’m on my knees, I can’t tell if man- rope’s loose burns me right up I’m probly having it off with the sea-lick, porkin away while me korper burns right off
What’s your first childhood memory? everyone’s got one, come on have a think have a think, no pressure but
it'll take your mind off
the cracker
breathing his brimstone in me face reckon he's too far gone to know it probly thinks he can pass his speeches
off as souvenirs the last recordings the dead sea scrolls the basement tapes all duplicated in these coral shells
He'll sell em on the beach, scare the little kiddies give them phone numbers to the ministry of browbashers pulpitmapshers tubthumpers
hang up Dog, whose wearin me head towel, what's this? the cracker
saying, listen to the voices from the deep blue yonder. I promise you thorts like these only come from top presentation quality sea shells if these voices were let loose I promise you the whole lubbardy land would sink
every man would lose his wife every wife would lose her self every child would burn in sea fire
every animal would float on grot until all is hwyling scabys of hagseeds thorts like these can be yours for 99 cents
have a listen
his scnozz holes blow into a double abyss—let me think, let me think awright
the time I the time I and Dog and me and Dog no, let me think once I made love to the knot
in the captain's sheets didn't I get caught Von hundert and one roasting once I decorated me own glory with a pink turk's head, like the scouts wear didn't I get boson whipped once I no, no, I'm in for it I'm not a knot rooter, I'm not a cracker
I'm not.

Dog
Hot under collar hot hashing two coats, side jowls a-dribble bond white whack hot hashing wet dry hushing pant hushing dog gone Rope over in sit stay circling him the shrieks and wails new winds from the back underblow belly shiver nine tits burrow in black ticks pupped on milk blood new winds tuning ears blast blast blast shiver F sharp what ears know inform two coats nerves bond white whack
tuck ears back Rope stays lasso go their eyes in rounds about him Rope face saying nothing seen all the rope tricks Hot under collar shiver stink brines under belly ears scruff neck no longer slave Dog tail up. Mast of windy wind and sunny sun collect Dog story comes the flood waters from the sea rain rising from wave lip spray spray tears or wave a-dribble bond white whack underwets belly lasso go their eyes round his neck Rope stays shiver nothing to say Dog bark. Bark off.
Rope nothing to say Dog bark. Rope nothing to say Dog ate his papers his watch his tobacco in the time of black paws leaf pads acorn shells surround smells folded up for unfolding then blast blast blast smells hiving the snout swarm clouds hieroglyphs the tracasserie in each sniff

sea days, no Dog mate  the fur of dreams  entering mouth  a-pop go two eyes  a-shake a-tremble from
tits
to scabbardy tail  no low bow  play?  no Dog mate Rope  grates up his past  nothing  the sea days
Dog shivers  grows  long hair  bark groan  each Dogday no better no worse  shiver  one child
shiver  ten cursed masters  Heel Heel  and hold up the night.

Lope

Once upon a time there was a young man with birds' eye vision and hands that shook so fast, they appeared still  surgeons
hands-

It was this unmistakable combination of bird seeing and bird speed  that disguised the young man  beyond robes and
title-

He inhabited a cabinet with a prim little bell, and soon appointed a young boy to sit behind a desk and write in names and
addresses for billing-

He wrote in 2B lead upon a stack of yellow legal pads that were not yet known for famous writing -

He merely hoped to impress his infant scrawl into alignment-
He called the pharmacists every morning and new bottles arrived, powders and tinctures, acids, pollens, essences, spirits, French blown glass cups—
This young man was not yet called Doctor—
But since he looked so well, like a surgeon—
The prefix overcame his name, and this prefix excused things: small accidents, daily whoops a daisies, details not inked upon his pad—
One day a little girl came in from the cold, she was whooping it up: dog hair, dust, strings from her own guts
Girl’s mother sat twisting her hair, a-gripe about the cost of tea or the shops being shut with her arms crossed
The little girl looked like a pig when she hacked, spluttering eyes, bright pink ears
She’s gormless Doctor, Girls mother said, and what’s more, she’s cursed with a lope
With a what? The young man asked
With a lope
I don’t know why this comes to me. Nothing seems important now. No food, no fear. All the same, images get to wrestling in the mind, fierce as man hunger. A roll of film spools and spools. It’s not interesting. It’s not true.
But if you stop watching,
then what.
I get hairs on my back coming through. How did they get to thinking I was titled? My practice on the infirm was improvised.
Never a thank you note, despite the unrecorded records of good deeds in the dead of night. I was curative for them, I listened with the phone off the hook, all night their voices in my ear, help me help me, Doctor-
One day the little girl curdled up in the young man’s arms—he noticed that the eternity of her pig face was whitening and that she was, whooped out
What was I doing? Thinking no more Lope
Girl’s mother sat crossing to her god for services unrendered.
Did the young man get paid?
All the same it won’t fill the whack bottles, he thought.
The wind is picking up, and yet, the waves are curiously stopped
Are you getting this? The shake in my hands got it here, doing the rounds.
What did I say before on the subject of my father from Exduss? I am curiously stopped. The wind is picking up.
I check. My coat is white. Who calls it Tahrihim

Norma
How about a sing song? Been preparing a little number, as much as you can out here, washed me body parts, scrub a dub
dub under the arms with a slough of sea weed, prep me face with my own spittle, went over me teeth
The Raft

Helen Lambert

with me index nort to do about me flyaway hair. Contrary to popular views there ain’t no place on earth without music in my humble opine the sea is full of it and it’s not all nice, but it accompanies one’s journey one’s drifting thorts This song I wrote is one-hundret pro original I committed it all to me mammery didn’t I Chippie it didn’t come from the sea he’s witness to me endless thorts upstairs, me novel ways a bit of hush please a few words by way of tarting up the oncoming entertainments: frankly it’s been out of sight out here lots of inspiration lots of time to collect meself reflect on me innards and without such a ripper experience I might never have received our lady of lux and the beginning of a very intimate correspondence—

Boyle. Rip out her bloody throat box
Ratchett. Gut her-
Rope Boy. Shut it (wave)
Dog.
Lope. A long time ago, there was a man who passed himself off as a Doctor—and upstage there was a fat slag who passed herself off as a siren, and downstage there was a wanker who wanked himself away—
Chippie *(takes out his worm).* Watch it, you blaggards–
Ern. She sings the unknown songs of the dead
Jin *(groans).*
Sol. Entertaining *(spits)*
Mon Suet *(to Wills).* I saved you a lolly.
Wills. The King doesn’t eat lollies, anyway, that’s just a bit of paper
Norma *(closes her eyes).* And with the blast of your nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as a heap, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea…. Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of your arm they shall be as still as a stone; their rafts will stall, their eyes will roll, their tongues will babble like the winds, till your people pass over, O O O, till the people pass over, whom you have purchased.

Sol. This is relentless.
Norma *(bowing).* Shirat hayam!
Ratchett. I’ve heard of that.
Boyle. Been done before.
Ern. Semite! Fire!
Jin. I’m just going to freshen up
Mon Suet (to Rope boy). Lolly?

Rope Boy. You’re dead

Dog.

Wills. Give it to me. *(un-crumples a square of paper)*

*(reads slowly)*

Lope. Right then, I’m off. *(slowly takes off his coat and watches it flop into the sea)*.