THE GRASS IS EPIC: TIM LILBURN'S *MOOSEWOOD SANDHILLS*

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I. Living with Poetry

> You've planted some wheat; let it have a good time.
>
> —Lilburn, (*Moosewood* 40)

Most of our reading skims the surface. Few of us pore over and intensely ponder more than a fraction of what we read. We give such attention only to certain books or documents—we may even feel that in some way *they* choose *us*. When I recently read Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Desert Year*, a 1952 account of fifteen months spent in the Arizona desert, I became intrigued by his discussion of touring vs. residing, viewing vs. growing to know. Krutch sees "all the difference in the world between looking at something and living with it" (3-4)—a handy analogy to the difference between casual reading and passionate, prolonged reading (inevitably embracing re-reading).

True enough, Krutch is a little hard on tourists' curiosity and hedonism. While we should be skeptical about bus-window voyeurism and merely antsy diversions, isn't there a place for unrepeated fleeting experiences? To climb Snowdon—or the hill down the road—or to dance to King Sunny Ade and His African Beats, or to see Jack Yeats's "The Expected" in the National Gallery in Dublin, once and never again, with your senses alert and your imagination open, is to have your life somehow touched, nudged. Seeing a film or reading a novel only once needn't be a fragmentary affair, even if it doesn't build up the density of doing the same thing again and again (not that "the same thing" is ever really that, since each encounter is a new one watered by the springs of earlier encounters and changed circumstances).

"In nature," Krutch goes on to say, "one never really sees a thing for the first time until one has seen it for the fiftieth" (4)—a

charming, instructive hyperbole, but still an hyperbole. Much of our lives is composed of firsts that never lead to seconds, let alone fiftieths. We needn't use a fiftieth experience as a stick with which to beat a first. Short-lived, single encounters might even be remarkable in part because they *are* short-lived and single; you don't forget the one time a black bear approached you along railway tracks, or the one Seamus Heaney reading you witnessed. In our relationships to things, we're less often residents or sojourners than tourists. In grander terms, we're likely at best—to cite the title of Tim Lilburn's third book of poems—tourists to ecstasy.

Still, for now I'd like to talk about repeated re-reading, a form of *living with*. Emotionally and mentally nourishing poetry can keep drawing you back to itself but also fire your heels to hunt for stimulating parallels and contrasts in texts you have or haven't already read. Whether you re-explore the work at hand without much conscious reference to other works and things, or combine close reading with all sorts of intertextual delights, depends on many things—the amount of allusiveness in the piece itself, your previous reading and associative tendencies, your energy and time. One day you might linger long over a book's details and overall shape; the next day you might itch to experience it in bigger contexts.

This past spring I wrote a journalistic review of Tim Lilburn's *Moosewood Sandhills*, knowing that such a brief review could never encompass the book or my experience of reading and re-reading it. But however many pages you write, is there any end to describing your encounter with a book you love? Mine with *Moosewood Sandhills* includes a leaking chimney's damp creosote I smelled while writing the first few paragraphs of this essay in Halifax; magpies making their madcap calls while I write now in a back yard in suburban Calgary; Lilburn's earlier three collections—*Names of God* (1986), *From The Great Above She Opened Her Ear To The Great Below* (1988), *Tourist to Ecstasy* (1989); an essay by Lilburn in *The Fiddlehead* and an interview with him on CBC's *Morning-side*; other poetry, and natural-history prose such as Krutch's; poems I've written myself (can anyone who writes poetry avoid, in all honesty, thinking of their own poems when reading others'?); and—hello, it's a later draft, days after the afternoon in Calgary—my crossing paths in Writing-on-Stone Park with prickly-pear cacti, mule deer feeding at dusk along Milk River, and rock wrens chanting from sunstruck hoodoos.

II. Longing and Place

> Beautiful my desire, and the place of my desire.
> —Roethke, "North American Sequence" (198)

> Desire never leaves.
> —Lilburn, "How To Be Here?" (*Moosewood* 60)

The desire to live with *Moosewood Sandhills*, I realize now, mimics or shadows the poems, which dramatize a desire to live with a particular landscape. Among other things, Lilburn's collection is an account of a three-year period when he settled near a hummocky terrain along the South Saskatchewan River and frequently tented on the land—"planted thin gardens, dug a root cellar, slept in the fields under summer stars—and *looked*" (9), he writes in a prose note preceding the poems. The book itself is sparse with autobiographical details; it doesn't mention the three-year span or Lilburn's starting to sleep on the land only in the second year. One fiction of the book is the collapsing of three years into one (like Thoreau's blending of his Walden Pond experiment from two years into one).

Only through the *Morningside* interview did I learn certain facts about Lilburn's sojourn and hear this description of *his* experiment: "a journey . . . engined not by curiosity but engined by eros, engined by yearning and by a kind of loneliness for the world." By "eros," Lilburn told Peter Gzowski, he means not just sexuality but also something "intellectual, religious, aesthetic—any type of deep yearning, deep longing—this sort of reaching of the heart, or even reach of the mind." Lilburn's move beyond curiosity to yearning and desire sets his writing apart from that of many so-called nature writers—whose searches compared to his are often nostalgic, or scientific, or low-key. But it places his poems close to some passages in Thoreau's, Muir's, and Dillard's prose. That he emphasizes desire more persistently than those other writers may be partly because he works with the special intensities and economies of poetry (in relation to eroticism as he defines it, the poem *Moosewood Sandhills* most reminds me of is Roethke's "North American Sequence").

On the radio Lilburn described the Moosewood Sandhills as "a couple of ticks away from [being] a desert," and one poem imagines being "near a desert perhaps," but another poem uses the

word unqualified, simply starting "I've come to the desert" (62, 20). For Lilburn a desert is an actual place to inhabit, not first and foremost a symbol. In contrast, think of Eliot, whose hollow-men phrase "cactus land" (57) appears in Lilburn's preface (9); or Thomas Merton, who used desert images in his poems but—according to George Woodcock's biography—visited an actual desert only in the last year of his life (74). Lilburn told Gzowski that he found the sandhills "initially repellent, and too spare, and unyielding," but that the place "completely claimed my imagination, claimed my vision, claimed my love, in the end." Though the poems speak of "this land, this flagellation" and compare it to "bone, dark locks of meat frayed to an end" (23), they aren't centrally concerned with *narrating* a transition from repugnance to love; the book begins with the poet already responding to the splendors of "chokecherry dewlapped hills, / hills buffalo-shouldered with shag of pulsed heat" (13). The finding of beauty and nourishment in apparently bleak landscapes is itself a tradition in writings about deserts.

After rereading and reviewing *Moosewood Sandhills*, I picked off my shelves Krutch's *The Desert Year*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, and Barry Lopez's *Desert Notes*, along with John Daniel's essay "Desert Walking." Within a few days I'd linked Lilburn's poems to a passage in Darwin's prose puzzling over his fascination with the "arid wastes" of Patagonia (Lopez quotes the relevant paragraphs [5]); Daniel's description of the land around California's Death Valley as a "stark prison" that slowly began "working on me" and "took me in" (132-33); and Lopez's directive "I know what they tell you about the desert but you mustn't believe them. This is no deathbed. Dig down, the earth is moist" (11). My own hours walking alone in the Negev Desert in Israel on Christmas Day several years ago taught me the difference between first impressions of monotony and severity and later impressions of intricacy, variety, and texture. (More and more we also face fearful examples of the opposite, contaminated habitats under deceptive surfaces of fullness, sickness under guises of health.) So a question arises: do desert landscapes help call forth certain attitudes and ways of speaking? The above overlapping impressions suggest a *yes*, as do parallels between titles of Lilburn's poems and titles of Krutch's chapters: Lilburn has "How To Be Here?", "From an Anchorage," "Contemplacio," while Krutch

has "How To See It," "From a Mountaintop," and "The Contemplative Toad." I have no idea whether or not linguistically-charged, Jesuitically-trained Lilburn has read less rhapsodic, more fact-fascinated biographer and drama critic Krutch, but I almost hope he hasn't, for I'd like to think the parallels between their titles were encouraged by their chosen landscapes. Yet you only have to read a few pages by restless, shoot-from-the-hip Edward Abbey to see how much the observer's character helps shape a specific human-desert relationship.

On the surface, *Moosewood Sandhills* largely leaves behind cities and towns, friends and families, and the technological icons of our age. Its experiment is far less social, historically rooted, and politically opinionated than that of *Walden* (while Lilburn's poems mention the "cliff edge of the century" and "the red century ending" [58, 65], I don't find that mere references to the millennium have great power). The poems reach us in the voice of someone living alone alongside aspens, deer, coyotes. But if the poems don't assert political opinions on specific issues, they do challenge our thinking in ways that prompt Lilburn to say in his preface, "Looking with care and desire seemed a political act" (9). Lilburn also signals how he's actually very rooted in the twentieth century. The first poem in the book mentions "luminous rubble, torn webs of radio signals" (13) and at other times the poet comes across a grader on a road, sink parts under trees, trailers among roses (22, 25). Even his metaphors open up his memory-baggage of contemporary images: "a jackrabbit big as a motorcycle," "Godzilla skin of the leaves," "black artichoke head, hand grenade forehead" (34, 38, 43). Besides, the man uttering these poems is no unschooled *isolato*; coyotes and hawks are there, but so are the names of Hermes Trisemegistus, Origen, and Descartes, and a quotation from George Grant (30, 25, 17, 56).

The poems' stream of references contrast with their imagery of austerity and asceticism, of being "shaved and narrowed" for knowledge that "comes through the body's wound" (16, 50). Those sorts of images are treated humorously in one poem, where "Angels spitfire toward you stroking little Jesuit whips, pieces of cleated / chicken wire to rope hard to your thigh. You, hero of the rod" (30). Part of the eye-opening originality of *Moosewood Sandhills*: how it adapts the language of religious asceticism to a desire for intense union with natural phenomena rather than with a

Judaeo-Christian God. Titles of poems in the book—"Contemplation is Mourning," "Piety," "In Paradiso"—might be titles of centuries-old religious tracts, not of poems saturated with sensuous specifics of the South Saskatchewan region. Echoing Biblical passages, Lilburn speaks of "thrones, / dominions of grass," crane flyways being "what makes a man / leave mother and father," "the sun in frozen corn, a pietá" (13, 45, 48). In his *Fiddlehead* essay, he says that the language traditionally employed for describing "the soul's approach to God" can also help "plot the return of consciousness to the world, unnameable in its athletic variety" (91). Tracing Lilburn's relationship to Christianity from his first book to his fourth could itself take up a whole essay. Here I'll only observe that the relationship seems more ambiguous now than it did in *Names of God* and *Tourist to Ecstasy*. Little in the new book unequivocally suggests belief in supernatural divinity; much suggests Krutch's desire "less to meet God face to face than really to take in a beetle, a frog, or a mountain when I meet one" (38). And that longing is a longing firmly rooted in the particulars of place.

III. Deer Beds, Deer Eyes, and Contemplation

> What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry . . . or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?
>
> —Thoreau (111)

> Seeing is the extreme courtesy that comes when desire is broken.
>
> —Lilburn, *Moosewood* (65)

> . . . contemplation dazzles all I see.
>
> —Roethke (238)

Daybreak in Writing-on-Stone. Light pulsed outside, against the tent walls. Tempting just to keep lying there in the sleeping bag and *listen*. What a dawn chorus—waxwings, song sparrows, goldfinches, towhees, wrens. Sad that such fullness is so rare for me, I thought, *Like waking up in an aviary*—as if aviaries were prototypical, cageless sites derivative. Why not wait a few more hours before breakfast, "all ears" as the saying goes? (But before the hour was over I was up building a fire.)

Underlying *Moosewood Sandhills* are a few key activities—lying down, waiting, digging, looking, seeing. *Names of God* includes the lines "Wed the world. Lie down. / Stretch out / in its embrace" (44), but *Moosewood Sandhills* seems unsure about the ease or speed of such a wedding.

One poem in it combines the acts of digging and seeing: "You dig in the ground because you want to see. / Seeing receives a true, alto heaviness from work" (38-39). Another poem joins the acts of lying down and looking: "Lie on your belly now, stare, pour into the golden / eye of the grain and be counted" (41). In Lilburn's poems, lying down seems to encourage kinds of patience and contact unlike those found through that favourite, more familiar activity of nature poets, walking. The poems describe lying down in holes for storing potatoes, in coyote holes, in deer beds. One begins "You will wait here / in the slow place. / You will wait in a hole;" one ends simply "You must wait" (26, 34) (Lopez also recommends such acts, including "a series of strippings," and like Lilburn he uses imperatives: "Wait. . . . Forget. . . . Listen" [8, 12]).

Reading *Moosewood Sandhills*, I can think of no other book of Canadian poetry that so fervently cares about seeing natural phenomena as they are. For the value Lilburn gives to looking, notice his titles: "In The Hills, Watching," "Gazing at the Wall," "Learning a Deeper Courtesy of the Eye." Lilburn seems especially interested in seeing what sees him—of finding a kind of exchange in sight (from *Names of God*: "blessed be the eye-meet" [20]). One comic poem in the new book extravagantly claims "You could hold your beautiful gaze like a hand out to the world, say / 'here pup,' and it'd come" (30), but the arrogant confidence and power suggested (and mocked) by those lines aren't typical of the book. Other poems speak not of enticing the obedient-dog world but of trying "to be born in the animal's look," or of wanting "to walk in the dark garden of the eye of the deer looking at you" (47, 62). Another poem says, more elaborately: "This is seeing: to be looked at by deer, / to float on the cardiac line hummed into you by the tremoring stare" (28). The paradoxical seeing-as-being-looked-at is more than just passive openness, since it requires awareness of the other creature's looking and an imaginative leap onto some invisible "line" stretching from that creature to yourself.

Moosewood Sandhills mentions coyotes, fox, wolves, owls, hawks, cranes, and magpies, but deer are special, flickering past

in at least half of the poems. They can be glimpsed in Lilburn's previous collections—in "God's Feminine," "doe-eyed" (*Names of God* 17) and in a Sumerian goddess with a "deer-flicker instepped leg" (*From The Great Above* 39). Now Lilburn seems less keen on seeing the doe as some principle or embodiment of divine femininity than on seeing her as herself. Reading such deer-populated poems, how can I not think of the most famous encounters with deer in this century's poetry, Frost's in "The Most of It" (with its denial of "counter-love, original response") and in his more affirmative "Two Look At Two" (where a human couple feels a wave of contact from a deer couple) (338, 229-30)? Lilburn's rhetoric is far less cagey and more expansive than Frost's; at times, despite hunting for the deer-in-itself, he does make a self-abnegating bonding with deer sound like a mystic's union with God.

What does Lilburn admire about deer, or even envy in them? What drives him to write "You'd like to be the novice of a deer"? (14). A streak of cynicism would be needed, surely, to twist that attraction into the sentimental weakness of some Bambi factor, or to attack the phrase "the doe's ease within herself" (61) as blind to the agony deer suffer through disease, hunger, and gunshot wounds, or to suspect that Lilburn's attraction to the other would collapse if it faced a rattlesnake or a scorpion. After all, Lilburn is in part reporting on his sojourn in the sandhills, and we've every reason to believe that deer were among the commonest, most dramatic creatures present. Beyond their sheer unavoidability, he seems drawn to their large eyes and steady gaze, a stimulus for narrowing the gap between the observer and the observed (synaesthetically, he even detects "the fragrance of their stare") and to their exquisite beauty of form, their physical gracefulness, "el dorados / of motionlessness and glide" (24, 54). "The ego," one poem says, "rests on the pillow of their dexterity" (35).

Then there's the animals' freedom from human guilt. A quotation from one of the Desert Fathers in a poem early in the book—*"to place yourself beneath irrational things / and know they are without blame"* (18)—points to the blamelessness of creatures unstructured by reason (or at least reason as we know it). I'm not sure if a dynamic like trust is relevant to, say, our relations with grass, so I hesitate over Lilburn's lines "Wheat gives you its plush inattention and / is therefore trustworthy" (41), but I find the ending of another poem more illuminating:

> It hurts to look at deer,
> deer under their name.
> The light from their bodies makes you ashamed
> and you look down. (37)

The irony of "their name," of course, is that it's our name, our creation and possession. What hurts?—to know how our names don't capture the deer's essence and fullness? Why does their light make one ashamed?—because they're "without blame," as we aren't, and the "you" in the poem feels too little "light" shining from himself or herself? When another poem ends "You have been stared at by deer and / must grow smaller" (17), it seems that the deer's stare, not just its dexterity, encourages the humbled ego to rest.

If light from the deer's bodies shames the poet, light from the poet's lines shames me. Even after I'd read a book so suffused with subtle reactions to deer, one recent evening in Writing-on-Stone when I suddenly saw grazing deer following Milk River in the shadows of hoodoos, I grabbed my camera and quickly took several snapshots. Later, I felt like I'd betrayed the book with such a conventional, automatic response.

That hunger for some sort of union with natural phenomena feeds a drive to lose selfhood or consciousness. Compare Lilburn's lines "Empty yourself, be alone," "You wish to understand the world? Be vanquished by it," and "You could drift into the unbreathable loneliness of other things" (24, 52, 53) with some of Roethke's in "North American Sequence": "the long journey out of the self," "I lose and find myself in the long water," "I sway outside myself" (187, 192, 196). Lilburn trusts a kind of ignorance, a moving beyond "the banquet or shapely light of consciousness" to "Illuminated stupidity, an unknowing you could hold weddings in" (20, 21). For Lilburn, temporarily forgetting or cancelling the self-spectator can help bring about a state of unselfconsciousness and receptivity so that things are brought into the human self ("the wheat's gold shadow" would "enter you / and make its home there" [41]) or, vice versa, the human self enters things (you become "an oblique crescent near [the doe's] spine" or "a painting on the cave wall of her flesh" [65, 66]).

For Lilburn, the word "contemplation"—found in the titles of two poems—doesn't mean mere speculation or headscratching. His *Fiddlehead* essay, "Contemplation and Cosmology," defines the

term several times, including this way: "Contemplation is the moment when human knowing, lured by the possibility of perfect understanding, is thwarted, shamed, bent back on itself, but continues to know through this shame" (84). Contemplation, he goes on to say, "topples into adoration," which has "the completeness for contemplation that judgment has for rational inquiry" (89). In contemplation, the world beyond the self "is not a mirror, not a problem, an adversary, friend, playground, not 'raw stuff,' not a symbol, a balm, a terror" (90). In yet another effort to define the word, Lilburn writes: "contemplation is a recovery of the full eros to know being clearly in all its specificity, to know the world as itself, unqualified by language, unedited by consciousness" (93).

That last definition reminds me (should I suppress the link? can I?) of another poet, whose phrase "palm at the end of the mind" (Stevens 398) Lilburn may echo punningly in his essay when he writes "rests easily in the palm of the mind" (89). A huge driving force in Stevens was his desire to get at unedited being—in the phrases of two of his titles, mere being, not ideas about the thing but the thing itself (398, 387) (let's not forget, Stevens could also mock that hankering, most pungently in "Gubbinal" [53]). In the density of its in-the-field felt life, *Moosewood Sandhills* differs sharply from Stevens' poetry, but it might give a home to Stevens' lines "Let's see the very thing and nothing else" or "the barrenness / Of the fertile thing that can attain no more" (288). Likewise, Lilburn writes lines that might have been played on Stevens' harmonium:

> A brightness cakes the objects of the world,
> grime of early seeings
> and all we know.
> The true world lives in a hovel further back. (58)

It's no coincidence that both Lilburn and the later Stevens are drawn to the term "poverty," because one thing the word does is denote an austerity that leads to cleansed perception, a narrowing that opens to the fecundity of existence.

If Lilburn and Stevens share a dream of reaching the thing-in-itself, they both also show how that dream constantly fails, how the urge to question, qualify, control, and name never disappears for good. One reason the final poem in *Moosewood Sandhills*, "Restoration," is so moving in its vivid imagining of a near-oneness

with a doe is the number of earlier passages about the unknowability of the other. "The deer cannot be known," one poem says bluntly. "She is the Atlantic, she is Egypt, she is / the night where her names go missing" (15). Lilburn suggests that even if we imagine being immersed in some other being, we're an invader, without status:

> In one aspen yesterday, living like a spy, a
> city of light.
> Its depths, boulevards. Everywhere,
> the aroma of thought. You have no rights in that city. (52)

In reading this passage I think of microscopically enlarged photos of leaves, bark, or wood fibre, in which the images resemble fuzzily seen highways or human structures. Looking at such photos, we easily feel lost, alien.

Undercutting its propulsion into the aspen or the deer, *Moosewood Sandhills* uses phrases like "the spirit wake of masterfully foreign bodies," "the distance which is the oddness of other things," "a lit and horrible separateness," "the blurred / far-light-in-the-forest of their difference" (26, 62, 25, 54). Dennis Lee's comment on the back of the book that in Lilburn's "full-tilt grace of words . . . the world consents to be embodied afresh" seems to me mistaken, for the poems clearly show that the world does *not* consent to be embodied, but remains apart and blurred, however enticing.

Feelings of dejection and alienation never dominate the book for long. The long absorbing poem "How To Be Here?", which offers the paradox "The world or what is there goes away / as we enter it," builds up to the confession that "I am seduced by the shapeliness / of the failure of knowledge" (60, 64). Overriding threats of disappointment, there's also a seductive promise of freedom in Lilburn's statement "Looking undermines us" and in his advice "You must recant the glamour of clarity" (60, 58).

One reason for that failure and its attractive power is what scientists call biodiversity and what Lilburn's essay calls the "astounding particularity," "stupendous manyness," "ineffable variety," "apparently limitless play," "immense specificity," and "unutterable singularity of things" (89, 90, 93, 96, 93). In an age that publicizes alarming lists of species Vulnerable, Threatened, Endangered, Extirpated, and Extinct (to use one official categorization)

the variety of living things still is astounding. (In this essay, haven't I shortchanged geodiversity, ignoring how the word "desert" covers a variety of landscapes that differ greatly in temperature, soil, flora, and seasonal change?)

One of those coincidences that feel like unexpected gifts: the very week I've worked on my first draft of this essay I visited a farm near Didsbury, about an hour north of Calgary, and Lilburn's line from *Moosewood Sandhills* "The grass is epic, mortal, it is blinding variety" (50) came to mind as the owner pointed out to me the mostly cultivated grasses—for starters, timothy, alfalfa, brome, wild rye, Kentucky bluegrass, and quackgrass, the diversity of shapes and shades intricate beyond any names we "give" species. A couple of weeks earlier I'd cursed myself for not finishing this essay before leaving for a holiday in Alberta, but on the farm I was glad to feel the grasses vivifying that line of poetry. Just now, standing knee-deep in my memory of that field, I recall that in a poem I once praised "the biggest zoo for being / small" and tried to honour "the anonymous fish, the bird / free from all human eyes, the undiscovered / insect biting the rarest antelope's ear" (Bartlett 51). I offer those lines written years ago as a response to Lilburn's lines.

IV. Words and Grasses

> If a man settles in a certain place and does not bring forth the fruit of that place, the place itself casts him out, as one who has not borne its fruit.
>
> —an elder qtd. in Merton (45)

> I knew that the land could easily cast me out.
>
> —Lilburn, Interview

Moosewood Sandhills is that rare thing, a genuinely wise book, far from escapist. It might even help change how some of us relate to the natural world. After writing many pages here, I've still not touched on huge areas of it, such as Lilburn's Heidegerrean uses of "home" and his frequent use of the pronoun "you" instead of "I" (to downplay the autobiographical? to present the self addressing the self? to invite readers into the experience?). And what about the wonders and workings of specific poems as satisfying structures and utterances? What about the book's stylistic freshness and energy, its linguistic audacity and reach? A few

final words, then, about the book's language, one of the richest fruits of Lilburn's time in the sandhills.

More than most poets, Lilburn pushes his language far in two directions, the abstract and the sensuous. Unafraid of big statements like "All things are vowed to themselves" and "Desire is loaned to us by the dead" (19, 22), he usually avoids unearned loftiness (though some of his titles sound much heavier than the kinetic play of the ensuing lines). Lilburn balances the sensuous and the abstract by interweaving his abstractions with questioning tones, a few passages of humour ("what do I know; just a Baden-Powell Platonist, jack-Catholic, / slo-pitch cognoscente"), and earthy imagery (a deer bed where "grass hums / because the body's touched it" and aspen leaves "below you sour like horses / after a run") (32, 15). His vocabulary likewise captures that balance, ranging from "concupisence," "hermetica," and "gnosis" to "wow," "shit," and "smart" (17, 29, 66, 31, 24, 58). The choices in that vocabulary can be vibrantly unexpected, sometimes with an unexpected word-choice—"weem," "ordo," "penthos," "angelizing," "martyrion" (16, 23, 38, 49, 16)—but more often with a creative play of adjectives: "planet-like names," "Magpies hairtriggered and thuggish," "loyal-to-itself grass," "moth-clotted dusk," "brain-calving grotto," "somnambulant mud" (60, 27, 44, 49, 46, 35).

Among the greatest pleasures offered by all of Lilburn's books are the textures of their sentences, pithy or expansive. One sort of sentence Lilburn likes is a long, sinuous one with many commas and adjectival additions. *Moosewood Sandhills* offers "I've found a radar station north of here in snow hills, lost, odd, paint strips / falling like dirty hair from the aluminum bubble, alone"; or "I will have been dreaming there of one day opening milky eyes and finding / myself sick, inside her body, high up, near the spine, poor, relieved" (24, 65). The constantly modifying, sometimes chant-like building-up of such syntax aptly suggests a hesitant but ongoing, resilient voice.

That resilient voice, strong but humble, has set up a series of rhythms I find hard to forget—rhythms that make so much other poetry seem mundane and enervated (*Moosewood Sandhills* also forced me to question some of the restraint in my own work, and I find that one of the most personally satisfying effects of any strong poet). If our country's readers are open to such an unusual, demanding book, it should be read years from now both as one of

the most eloquent accounts we have of an experiment in altered perception and as a unique series of interrelated poems. While some of the poems in the book resonate fully only when served by the poems around them, pieces like "Contemplation is Mourning," "From An Anchorage," "How To Be Here?" and "Restoration" are in any context poems of great originality and conviction.

That day on the farm near Didsbury, as well as plunging through the blinding variety of grasses I see many mole hills, a badger hole big as a square of sidewalk, gophers rushing away from a little-used path. The owner talks about damage to the crops, threats to the farm machinery, the pesky animals' persistence. Two mule deer surface from among the grasses, their huge ears the most alert things in the landscape, safeguards of survival, prototypes of openness, lifted, expectant. The deer, dexterous visitors ending their brief visit, flee with their peculiar hopping leaps. I'm told about troubles even they give farmers: cattle won't eat deer-scented hay, hay from the deer's favoured parts of the pasture. What has Tim Lilburn's desire to "see my way into that place and into that body" (65) have to do with that reality of farmers' frustration? A reality stubbornly present, dangerous to forget. But what *Moosewood Sandhills* offers is newer, stranger, more harrowing and delightful than a logbook of agricultural grievances. Who else has written at such length about lying in deer beds and gazing into deer's eyes with an almost ridiculous intent, hoping for an impossible understanding of the animal rather than treating it as resource, target, or thing of beauty? The fleeing gophers and the badger hole are also like challenges to the poems, trials that the book survives, its language and rhythms new things in the world. My awareness of the poems seems woven into the grasses of the fields.

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