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Ghost Limbs in Snakeskin Light

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versus the slow, deep art of place — poetry by Sean O'Brien,
Moya Cannon and Rody Gorman

CONTENTS

Issue 8, March 2014

- 2 EDITORIAL — Sharon Blackie
- 4 GHOST LIMBS IN SNAKESKIN LIGHT
— Leslie van Gelder
- 8 MEN AND NATURE: A SPECIAL FEATURE
— *edited by Alex Lockwood*
- 9 THE GLOBE FROM SPACE
— Sean O'Brien
- 10 REWILDING AND THE ECOSOCIALIST FARM
— Francesco Paris
- 14 TREAD
— Mike Collier
- 17 BUILDING A BRONZE-AGE ROUNDHOUSE
— Dan Cox
- 19 NATURE AND THE MASCULINE
— Geoff Mead
- 24 THE ART OF BELONGING
— James Aldridge
- 26 TWISTED INTO ROPE
— Stevie Ronnie
- 28 THE RETURN OF THE HOOF BEATS
— Linda Cracknell
- 36 AN ALCHEMY OF WITHERING:
The Psychology of the Ecological Self
— Steve Thorp
- 40 TIME AND A PLACE
— David Knowles
- 42 ECOPORNOGRAPHY VERSUS THE SLOW, DEEP ART
OF PLACE — Cathy Fitzgerald
- 49 BAREFOOT INTO REALITY AT PARAKU
— Tom Lynch
- 55 BENEATH THE VEIL
— Rachel Horsburgh
- 59 MADAGASCAR, THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
— T R Shankar Raman
- 67 PICKING PEAS
— David Crouch



COLUMNS

- 65 TALES OF THE CITY — Vivienne Palmer
- 70 LIFE IN TRANSITION — Charlotte Du Cann
- 72 NAVIGATING COLLAPSE — Charles Foster

POETRY

- 3 *Peregrina* — Sharon Blackie
- 46 FROM 'Sweeney: An Intertonguing'
— Rody Gorman
- 19 *The Greening* — Moya Cannon

ART

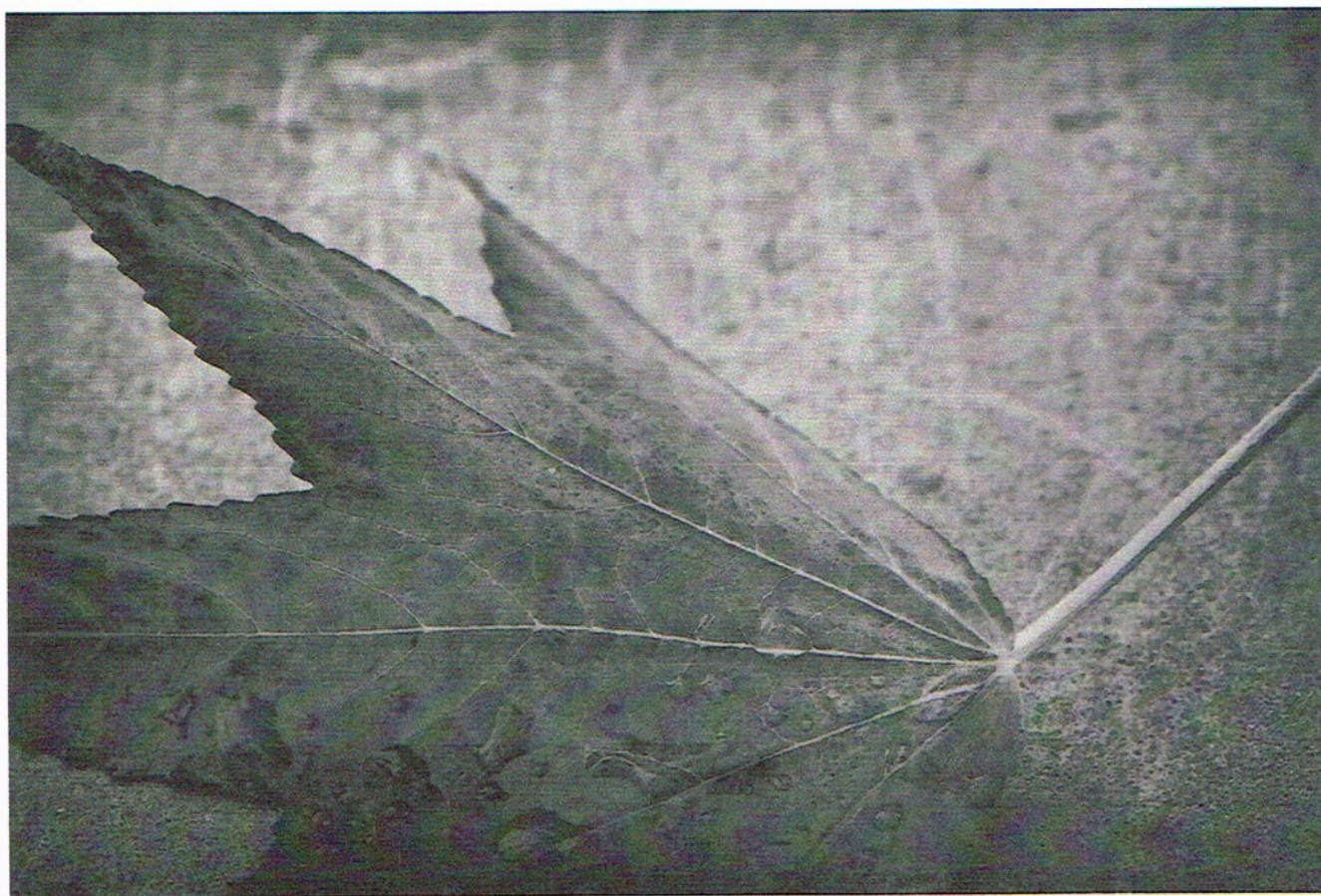
- 34 Mary Donnelly

REVIEWS

75 *Conversations with Barry Lopez* by William Tydeman; *The Heart of Small Things* by Julian Hoffman; *Album Review: Country Mile* by Johnny Flynn; *Miscellany*.

Credits – please see p. 79

Subscriptions – please see p. 80



GHOST LIMBS IN SNAKESKIN LIGHT

LESLIE VAN GELDER

On seeing home

A blind man lives a few houses up from ours in Oxford. He once was a university professor but when he lost his sight, he could no longer work. His wife left him soon thereafter and he acquired a guide dog named Lance. Lance, or in his full name, Lancelot, was a black Labrador retriever with a silky coat and warm brown eyes who had been part of a litter of other guide dogs - Gawain, Arthur, Percival, Tristan. Noble dogs all.

It was through Lance that we met. I had recently been parted from my own Labrador retriever and I was still in what is often known as 'dog withdrawal' and so, stopped at a crosswalk one day, I asked if I could pet Lance. After that the blind man, Colin, would stop by our garden on warm evenings as he and Lance were on their way home from their walk - Lance carrying his shillelagh-sized fetching stick in his mouth, and me wondering just how wise it was for a blind man to be throwing a club as thick as my arm across Christchurch meadow.

In the last few years, Lance grew old and walked more and more slowly. The blind man was told by the blind

foundation that he should trade Lance in for a younger dog, maybe one from the litter that were named for popstars. He could have a Kylie or a Brittany by his side. Instead, he tied a bell around Lance's neck so that he could hear him if he were lagging too far behind. Some days I found Lance asleep in line at the post office, the short walk up the hill now too great for him. Other days he struggled to get through the traffic lights before they changed.

The blind man told us he couldn't bear to part with Lance. Not for his own part, of course, but because he was sure Lance would die of heartbreak once they were separated. 'Five minutes in some new house with his tail wagging too hard and off he'd go,' he told us one night as Lance slept along the limestone river wall with his shillelagh for a pillow. 'I think I'll wait the old boy out. We'll just walk a bit more slowly now, won't we, fella.'

I haven't seen Lance or the blind man in the last two times when I've returned home. I have been away again, and when I am gone I do not think of them so much, but when I return to the familiar I find myself listening for Lance's bell

on summer nights along the Thames. I know he is most likely gone, and that I must live in the discomfort of this unfinished narrative, one of many stories whose conclusion I may never know because of my life of always leaving and always coming home.



I live a migratory life, moving back and forth between two homes: one, my childhood home in New Jersey; the other my married home in Oxford. It is not a simple migration of six months on and six months off, but is complicated by doing research in France in spring and fall, working in the U.S., and spending at least a month in New Zealand each year with our family. For the last four years, I haven't spent more than three weeks in any one place at a given time.

My father was a migrant, too, making his track between New York and Nairobi, moving between the rainy season and the dry, so this life isn't new to me. It's probably rooted so deeply in my blood that I am no more directing it than the arctic tern is when she decides to head south again towards her second summer. A dear friend, who is a poet, has lately taken to calling me 'You, of Two Springs', since my migration route crosses the equator just at the point when November light turns my northern home skeletal grey.

Friends tell me it is a life of romance. I see it as simply how I live, no more or less romantic than my friends who are daily privy to the wonders of their children learning to walk and talk, or the particular challenges of their work. But movement does bring to light certain paradoxes which rootedness might not. Moving through space and time, navigating the edges between leaving and home, has left me knowing a different rhythm of the world: one that makes me conscious that I will likely never know the end of the blind man's story. One that makes me realize that it is through my endless comings and going that I am learning to be able to see something resembling an idea of home, and I find that home is not a noun, but a verb.



Scientific literature often describes the migratory needs of animals as based on the forces of 'breeding and feeding'. My migratory path is shaped by neither of those drives in particular. Instead, it is based almost completely on love. Love of my husband, who had a home in England when I had a home in the States. Love of family balanced equally between New Zealand, London, and New York. Love of a mystery to be solved in France. Love of certain slants of light, branches of old trees, spring bird calls, my stepdaughters' laughter. All of these feed my need to move. And all of these lead to a life carved along a faultline of grief in parting from one set of loves, and joy in heading towards another. The two emotions, grief and love, live so closely together that they have become almost one, each made clearer by the warm breath of the others' proximity.

The only place where I feel free of this mixed set of emotions is in the hours I spend in flight. Flights, whether across the Channel or the South Pacific, have become hanging pauses between otherwise enjambed moments of living. Fully present in each place means these in-betweens have the curved luxury of a parenthesis - the plane going upwards to begin and coming downwards in the end - and

in between, a caesura of being above, liberated from the concept of place itself, an environment almost fully without context where this present moment hangs suspended between clock and body time, between here and there, offering me the chance to hold paradox in the brief spaces created somewhere between night and morning sky.

I often wonder from my cruising altitude of 35,000 feet what John Keats would have done with a night flight, as flights offer the truest space of negative capability, where for hours it is possible to inhabit the fertile space between wakefulness and sleep. Would he have stayed up all night watching to see if Orion would cartwheel across the sky? Would he have had words for the aurora's stomp-dance out on the horizon, just past the starlight on the edge of a wing? What would Blake have given to possess a godlike view of the earth below?

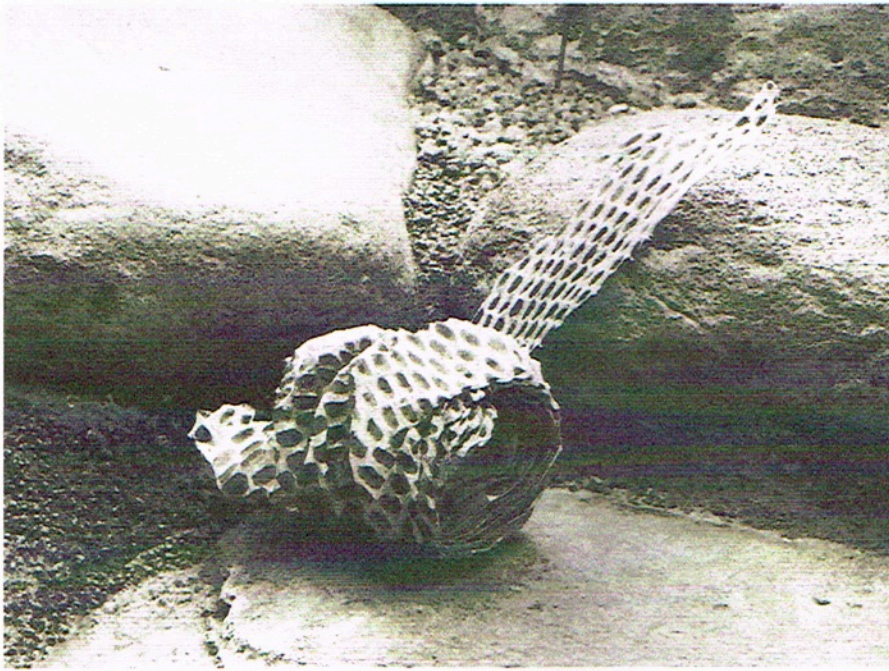
I know that for me, in that moving placelessness of an airplane cabin, I find most often that I am contemplating the notion of home. Perhaps it is only there, from a height so far above the earth that rivers look like silver necklaces dropped on an empty dresser top, and city lights straining through thin clouds appear to be nothing more than sleepless children shining flashlights through thin white sheets, that I feel I can see the emotional landscape of home, all of my homes, more clearly. I never see one place but I feel the rhythms of them all. It is the one time I am not in the spider's web, but instead am seeing it illuminated by the marriage of morning light and evening dew.



Sadly, the absence of place and the emotional freedom of a flight does not last long. In the return home, the rewebbing begins immediately. Landing in a familiar airport, Heathrow, Newark, Blagnac, Auckland, my eyes scan continuously trying to answer the question, 'What's changed in my absence? What's new?' This thought continues for the whole trip home. I study trees and grass for signs of rain and wind. I take in the familiar names of shops as the bus lumbers down the High Street in Oxford to see what new shops will have already come and gone. Onto what new roadworks scheme has the city council moved?

Oftentimes, by the time I arrive at my own doorstep I find myself thinking about how my blind friend reinhabits his space when he has been away, because it is in the first moments of return that my eyes seem to see most clearly. In that newness, I have noticed that the translucent light of who I was before I left reflects like the empty husk of an abandoned snakeskin back onto who I am now. I see my old self as if I were a sweater too small and frayed at the sleeves. When I've slept, my snakeskin crumbles into dust and I am simply home again. But I love what I now call 'snakeskin light' for that long shadow which holds the juxtaposition of a familiar landscape without eyes made local again.

Snakeskin light is brief - increased by tiredness and heightened by absence - but it is the only time when I can feel the process of a place moving from the safety of memory's glass cases of what Gaston Bachelard called 'time immemorial' to the pulse of a lived relationship again. I notice stains and uneven towel racks. Kevin makes lists of jobs to do. In two days time I will look through those stains - they'll no longer register because they will become part of the eyes of inhabiting



the place, a certain local blindness to its faults.



What is home for a person who has more than one, for a person who is always in motion? The answer I have learned is not so much in asking what is home, but in considering how do I practice homing? Home is a littoral zone between internal and external - the self writ on the world and the world collected safely around us. Homing, though, is different. It is the practice of bearing witness to chance intimacies. These intimacies are not the stuff of story for they have no plot worth mentioning. These are the imperceptible moments of wonder and mystery that serve as the thin layers of varnish protecting our hearts. The knowledge that two pairs of cardinals will return to the feeder each year, that the white foxglove blooms a week later than the pink, or that the maple on the furthest edge of the property won't turn colors until November when the others are bare. This is the knowledge that it's worth waiting for those three windy days in March when cherry blossoms under St. Mary's Cathedral in Oxford fly like dandelion manes wrapped in candy floss.

But it's more than that, as homing is also about attending to obligations. And while one can have an almost infinite amount of motion, as a migrant, all of my motion together creates no true lengthening of time. No matter how many times I cross the international dateline or reset my watch upon landing, this still remains true.

Obligation seems to be the essential piece in the practice of homing. For every daffodil I've planted into my garden in autumn, and every heavy-headed lupine in spring, I feel a sense of obligation. This is true for the walls I've painted, the floors I've sanded on my hands and knees, and the bird feeder refilled once again.

Perhaps because I am always leaving, I feel that sense of obligation all the stronger because my freedom to move does not remove my obligation to attend. Obligation has taken

on a very negative tone in the modern world, where freedom is the ultimate goal and then one has to ask, 'freedom from what?' The answer is always 'obligations'. When I think on my obligations, I don't even mean the regular maintenance of trees and plants or the taking out of the trash. I mean something more.

The trees grow whether I am in attendance or not. Flowers open and close. Birds will fly by and sit in the trees, calling across the river. The swans will have cygnets, small black-beaked thistle seeds in May, who will become lean grey gymsock versions of their parents' elegance by autumn. Whether I am home or away, the bindweed will still find a day to twine itself along spent blackberry branches.

And the coots will look no more or less foolish if I am there to see them running across the water's edge. Maybe in their case, it's better if I don't watch.



They do not know me, I think, and yet I am obligated to them. Or perhaps, better said, I feel obligated to them. But what is the piece of obligation? In a sense I do little or nothing for them and am owed nothing in return. But I do take something from them, something so profound that I feel the greatest sense of obligation back. They, those lanky swans, staggering coots, and brown-eyed guide dogs, are the source of my knowledge about the world, my faith in life at its root. They teach me about possibility. They offer endless lessons in hope.



The word *obligation* comes from the same root as the word *religion*. It is *lig*, like ligament, or ligature in music - that which binds. In *religion*, the word means to bind oneself again; in *obligation* it means to bind by an oath or a promise, through words and deeds. What strikes me as most important is that these ligaments are the strands that invisibly connect us to each other - our promises, our covenants, our commitments to be honored.

Living among trees, I know that we can never see wind. We only see leaves dancing with invisible partners. And in truth, we cannot see love - only hands and eyes, or the slowness of fingers running through hair. Our belief in wind is as much a leap of faith as our belief in love, for we can see neither of them alone.

We have to believe in their existence through feeling them in relation. Like watching raven curl her wings round the spaciousness of sky, or watching the wind caress the inner curve of a maple leaf as it twirls slowly down to the ground.

I cannot give leaves and wind much that they need. It is not as simple as Christmas with three handkerchiefs and a

new pair of knickers. The only thing I can give them is my attention, my capacity to notice, to care, to attend to their lives. This is the root of my practice of obligation. This is why the grief is so strong in leaving one place and why I search for hidden stories in my arrivals. No one tells me the stories that are the roots of my faith. They are too tiny, so small that they don't fit into the conventions of narrative. Each story – the one of the evening swallows arcing over the river at dusk, the purple mist of bluebells gathering at the feet of old oaks, or the dog running down the river steps to drink, and then so pleased with the water that he cannot resist slipping in for a swim – those stories are not worth telling as a tale of human invention, but like Seurat's drops of color and light, close up they are just one moment of an instant, but far away they are part of an every growing mural of what's beautiful in life.

And these are why the migrant's unfinished narratives prove so difficult: because I can love with an open heart, but I have simply no words to exchange those stories with my non-human kin. Am I the wind or the leaf? I can only know their stories by attending and bearing witness. And in this, the hardest part of living a life in motion, I find myself again feeling the edges of love and grief. I cannot ask Lance, the guide dog, where he has gone. But I am saddened all the more when I asked my neighbors where he had gone and no one had noticed he was missing. He had become so much a part of their local landscape that they had stopped seeing him. And only after I asked after him did I hear one of them call in to her husband, 'When was the last time we heard that bell?' He answered with, 'I don't know that I ever did. Who has a dog with a bell in this neighborhood?'

It is because of this blindness that I will tell you about the trees.

When I returned to my home in New Jersey last week, eighteen hundred-year-old maples across the street from my home had been razed during my three-week absence. Eighteen hundred years of collective life, gone in an afternoon. The house in the midst of the wood was ninety-five years old and took less than an hour to demolish. One of our neighbors who has lived in town for fifty-three years in a house built over the town's Victory Garden, chronicled the history of each room as the yellow claw of the caterpillar ripped off its facing. 'There's Johnny's room. Remember that snake he had? Oh and Granny had lived in that front room. Oh dear, oh dear.' She'd pause as the arm ripped through plaster and lathe. 'We knew them all.' Her husband could barely speak at all. When I asked him about the trees, he said, 'They're all I've looked at for fifty-three years.' I knew what he meant.

I was raised in that house in New Jersey and knew the outlines of those trees more intimately than perhaps any person I have ever known. I looked at those trees from my crib, made nests in their roots with the boy next door, caught summer fireflies beneath their feet, and leapt into enormous leaf piles we'd make in the fall. I saw them both as a collective and as individuals, and learned something I can't articulate about movement and light from the shadows within their leaves. Perhaps their best lesson through my childhood was how one can withstand hurricane winds without being ripped from the ground. I studied them in the winds, and asked them to hold me steady when my parents' lives fell apart around them. For many years I thought that

they, with their tall graceful limbs, held up every star in the winter night's sky. I'm still not sure they didn't.

There is a price to be paid for living a life in motion for I was not there to bear witness to their fall. But perhaps it is better this way. I don't know if I could have stood the pain of watching them be fed one by one into the chipper so their ancient lives could be reduced, in an afternoon, to sawdust and mulch. Perhaps I would have become like a young artist I knew, who gave up his art after he watched the Twin Towers come down a few blocks from where he stood. He said he simply could not trust what he saw with his eyes any more, and how could he be an artist when he couldn't see? Maybe had I seen the trees felled in the name of McMansions, I would simply not have been able to see again either. As it is now, I can't see their absence clearly, for my mind still fills in their outlines as a presence, in the same way I have heard people describe feeling hands and feet still alive when they have been amputated. Perhaps with trees, they are ghost limbs, too.

I sat with them on their last morning before the stumps were pulled from the ground, tracing patterns in their rings, feeling my way along ridges of time. I sang. I don't know if it eased their pain, or caused them more, but I had to believe that every gesture, even the most foolish, is sacred.

When some of my neighbors shake their heads lightly and say 'Well, it's progress' I wonder whether they have developed a blindness, or if they, like the older fellow who had lived fifty-three years across the way, simply have no words for the profundity of a grief that can enter into us at the level of home where it is possible simultaneously to lose pieces both of who we are and where we are from.

Tomorrow I will go home again to England where I will have missed the lilac's bloom in the meadow, and where I will ask again if anyone knows what has become of the blind man and his dog. Maybe he'll have a new dog, one named Kylie or Brittany. Or maybe I will discover that his heart, too, couldn't withstand the loss of someone who served as his very embodiment of home. Maybe he sang over Lance, too.

On tomorrow's night flight I'll climb back into the paradox of a life in motion where I'm continuing to learn that I can move so easily from place to place, resetting my watch as I go, but that my heart, which is a place and the root of my sense of home, must grow as many rings and ridges as the trees to be able to embrace the wordlessness of an ever shifting landscape of love and grief twined round each other like two old branches of autumn maples ever bending and dancing in the wind. ❦

LESLIE VAN GELDER is an archaeologist, writer, and member of the College of Education faculty at Walden University. In response to the trees being cut down and her husband's ultimately fatal cancer, she moved to the Rees Valley of New Zealand five years ago. Author of *Weaving a Way Home*, her archaeological work focuses on the study of finger flutings – lines drawn by people on the walls of Upper Paleolithic caves in France, Spain, and Australia. It has shed new light on the identities of cave artists, most especially focusing on the role of women and children.