MÖBIAL CORPOREALITY IN W. S. MERWIN’S ECOPOETIC CORPUS

by

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*We also certify that written approval has been obtained for any proprietary material contained therein.
For Julie, who watched the video of my moss garden blooming under the mist, and who only shook her head when Daniel and I discussed Jean-Luc Nancy by the pond, where, also, there was no wheel to revolve.

January 21, 2013

Chelsea, whose energy is in my house and my heart.

July 27, 2014

Miriam, who shares with me the love.

Nate, the moss on the stones in my palm.

Kelly, strong forever.
On the Subject of Poetry
W. S. Merwin

I do not understand the world, Father.
By the millpond at the end of the garden
There is a man who slouches listening
To the wheel revolving in the stream, only
There is no wheel there to revolve.

He sits in the end of March, but he sits also
In the end of the garden; his hands are in
His pockets. It is not expectation
On which he is intent, nor yesterday
To which he listens. It is a wheel turning.

When I speak, Father, it is the world
That I must mention. He does not move
His feet nor so much as raise his head
For fear he should disturb the sound he hears
Like a pain without a cry, where he listens.

I do not think I am fond, Father,
Of the way in which always before he listens
He prepares himself by listening. It is
Unequal, Father, like the reason
For which the wheel turns, though there is no wheel.

I speak of him, Father, because he is
There with his hands in his pockets, in the end
Of the garden listening to the turning
Wheel that is not there, but it is the world,
Father, that I do not understand.

(The Dancing Bears, 1954)
In loving memory of Julie, Chelsea, George, Dee, Norma, Kendra, and Dan.
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Möbial Corporeality in W. S. Merwin’s Ecopoetic Corpus

Abstract

by

CATHERINE ROSE DUNNING ALLEN

Over the course of his published poetic career, W. S. Merwin develops a model of möbial corporeality that offers humanity an opportunity to redress human ignorance, neglect, and even willful cruelty towards nature. With the goal of healthy coexistence, Merwin’s career-long development of non-hierarchical conceptions of the nature-human relationship puts bodies in relation to each other through möbial thresholds, rather than binaries. This model makes clear that nature and humanity are materially, rather than metaphorically, incorporated in each other. Like a möbius strip, each side of the relationship appears independent and, yet, closer inspection reveals that the two are one. Chapter 1, “Body Matters in Ecocriticism,” lays out this model and contextualizes it in the field of ecocriticism. Chapter 2, “Merwin’s Möbial Corporeality” close reads Merwin’s poetic enactment of this model, giving particular focus to Merwin’s use of thresholds and liminal spaces as central to möbiality. Chapter 3: “Doing Thinking: Intersections of Ars Poetica and Ethics,” uses the formal changes that occur over Merwin’s career to demonstrate a möbial relationship between Merwin’s thinking and his poetic praxis, making it clear through his ars poetica poems that an ethics-aesthetics möbius is indispensable to ecopoetry. Chapter 4: “Unfolding Forms in The Folding Cliffs” revisions the traditional epic, in which the reader passively consumes the poet’s master narrative, allowing Merwin to use his own dangerous position of colonial power to explore, through a combination of history and legend, active reader engagement as the crux of ethical ecopoetry. Finally, chapter 5: “Nature-Human Relations in the Time of the Anthropocene” situates Merwin’s poetic praxis in the geologic reality of the
Anthropocene through an exploration human cruelty, the urban, and human perceptions of time, reinforcing corporeal experience as the heart of humanity’s potential for healthy coexistence with nature.
Introduction

*The Name of the Air*

It could be like that then the beloved old dog finding it harder and harder to breathe and understanding but coming to ask whether there is something that can be done about it coming again to ask and then standing there without asking

(*The Pupil, 2001*)

* * *

“It could be like that then,” begins W. S. Merwin’s heartbreakingly beautiful poem “The Name of the Air,” in which the speaker and the beloved dog on the verge of death occupy not the separate realms of nature and humanity, but the same liminal realm that is life. Life is the threshold between birth and death, the place and time within which living beings coexist with each other and with the environment around them. Coexistence requires an equality between subject and object, object and subject, subject and subject, and object and object that can be difficult to understand and even more difficult to express. But such is Merwin’s task. The complexity of “The Name of the Air,” a poem that at first reads simply and inevitably, marks the extraordinary skill of a poet teasing out the ramifications of a sacred scene. The careful line breaks, the syntactical ambiguity, and the immense attention to language leads the poem to portray the complex relationships at the heart of ecopoetry with an air of ease that slips into invisibility as the reader becomes caught up in the visibility of air as connector in the poem. What becomes clear through “The Name of the Air” is not only the formal and linguistic complexity of the poem, but the philosophic complexity as well.

Coexistence as a means of undermining traditional power relations is so carefully woven into this poem that the reader is, at first, hardly aware of the statement Merwin is making. Opening the poem with the word “it” suggests objectification and, at first, “the beloved / old dog”
could be read as the object (1-2). Splitting the line after “beloved,” however, breaks the flow, suggesting that the reader must spend more time considering the object, an object that the line-break also facilitates becoming subject with the emphasis on “old dog finding” (2). It is the speaker, on the one hand, finding the beloved old dog; but this implicit finding is superseded by the explicit finding that the dog does, a finding that transforms “it” into the object of the subject dog. With “the beloved / old dog finding it harder and harder / to breathe,” the two “it”s come together as experience difficult to express in words—a difficulty evidenced in the careful bringing around to the potential meaning of “it” (1-3). Even at this point, however, the experience is still taking shape for the reader. The implied proximity to death in the word “old” shapes the feeling of inevitability that builds with each labored, line-broken breath the poem takes. This inevitability is understood through the perspective of the speaker, who is a presumed human player in the poem’s action but who is also clearly relegated beyond the traditional place of human privilege.

This relegation of human privilege to secondary status becomes evident when the beloved old dog comes “to ask.” At this point, there is no clear indication to whom he is coming or of whom he is asking. The most likely first reading is that the dog is coming to the speaker, as there is a clear relationship established through the word “beloved,” the grammatical status of which is suspended by the line break. The possibility of “beloved” as a noun, before its clarification as adjective, suggests the word as a state of being, rather than as a descriptor. Being the beloved implies that acceptance of the role is necessary. Thus, in the third and fourth lines, the question of to whom the dog comes contributes to the sense of agency and power already latent in the first line’s language and line-break. There is, additionally, the possibility that the one to whom the dog turns is not a human speaker, but is God, nature, death, or some other greater being, thus further decentering humanity. Even if the dog is coming to the human speaker, it is clearly of the dog’s volition, undermining the typical command that would bring the dog to the master. The dog’s
inherent agency, latent in “beloved,” begins to reveal itself with that first “finding” and continues through the “understanding” that acts as a foundation for the asking (2, 3). This agency, along with decentered human agency, promotes a sense of coexistence by subtly shifting the reader’s perception of the dog from object to subject, and from secondary in comparison with humans to equal footing.

The movement to equal footing with humanity comes in part from the dog’s understanding, and then asking, and then not asking. As breathing becomes more difficult, the dog has “understanding” but the human reader is forced to ask, ‘Understanding of what?’ Is it the situation? (And, if so, what precisely is the situation in all its complexity?) Is it death? Is it inevitability? Is it that life is merely a threshold between being born and being dead? Teasing out that understanding is, perhaps, a human instinct, emphasized by the conjunction “but” that prefaces “coming / to ask whether there is something that can / be done about it coming again to / ask” (3-6). This asking ultimately leads to “standing there without asking,” as though the answer is already known to the dog—understanding is already there—and there is no reason to ask. The syntactical ambiguity of these lines complicates the question of what is being asked. All of the questions I posed above about “understanding” were from an individual perspective in the current moment. Merwin’s syntax, however, suggests that the dog may be raising a larger perspective. The key is where the reader imagines the pause in line five, with three primary possibilities: “coming / to ask whether there is something that can / be done about it [pause] coming again to / ask” in comparison with “coming / to ask whether there is something that can / be done about it coming again [pause] to / ask” or, finally, not pausing until the very end of this excerpt, so that effectively “it [is] coming again to / ask.” Retrospective logic focusing on the dog as subject suggests that the first reading is the syntactically correct interpretation. However, the possibility opened by the second reading is too significant to ignore: the poem returns again to “it” (coming again) and now
“it” resonates with the cyclical nature of all the possible antecedents. The third possibility is that “it” itself takes on agency through asking, affirming the presence and subjectivity of the antecedent.

Naming the antecedent once again proves difficult. Oversimplifying and calling “it” death overlooks all of the ancillary elements of the experience, all of the emotion that the speaker feels in the telling, as well as the presumed experiences and emotions of the reader upon which the speaker can draw for common ground understanding. Making the poem itself a threshold, this continuing struggle over the word “it” reminds the reader again and again of the difficulty in using words to convey experience. Asking and naming reveal, in this poem, the complexity of such endeavors. The experience of the beloved dog is hardly foreign to humans, as anyone who has watched a loved one struggle to draw in breath after breath can attest, and so the asking is really on behalf of all who breathe. Ultimately, what are we asking though? Death, is this it? Why does it continually come? When is it truly death? That is, when do we leave the liminal life, or, what are the actual delimiters marking the threshold between being born and being dead? To or of whom are we asking? And who, actually, are we? Can we name with any precision the answers to these questions? The poem’s title, “The Name of the Air,” with its notable specificity and explicit naming of names, immediately centralizes the importance and the unreliability of language. In contrast with a formulation like, ‘Naming Air,’ Merwin’s title focuses less on the action and more on the experience. “The Name of the Air,” also draws the reader into the particularity of experience, using precision to bring the reader not to the broad air that surrounds everything, but to breath as air so specific that it becomes part of the material body. And herein lies the corporeal crux of Merwin’s ultimate shift in thinking and doing.

The material body in Merwin’s later work becomes the point of connection between humanity and nature. Instead of following Timothy Morton’s urge to remove the problematic term
“Nature” from the problematic “nature-human” relationship, thus, problematically leaving only the “human” side of the lexical equation, Merwin is not interested in expanding conceptions of personhood. Rather, Merwin is concerned with all beings, with existence, with coexistence. My project draws out the relevance of the term body in discussions of nature and, in particular, thinking about nature as having bodies, just as one thinks about humanity as being comprised of bodies. The body of humanity as a whole contributes to the body of nature as a whole, just as individual bodies within each likewise affect each other. The recognition of the nature-human relationship as being one comprised of bodies allows Merwin to depict the relationship as one not of overlap but of incorporation, which recognizes every body comprising and being comprised of other bodies. That is, nature is not like humanity and humanity is not like nature; but, in a material way, nature inextricably is humanity and humanity inextricably nature. The complex nature-human relationship is, of course, the heart of ecopoetry. However, thinking about this relationship as bodies coming together—not metaphorically but materially—is a unique mode of thinking not yet explored and perhaps better supported by Merwin’s poetry than by any other poet’s.

For decades, Merwin struggled to express the complexity of the relationship involving nature and humanity, beginning with a mythology infused image of nature at odds with a destructive humanity, working his way through a growing ecological awareness and pessimism about humanity’s role, until he finally reached a turning point in his work published in the late 1980s. After abandoning punctuation in the 1960s and experimenting radically with form in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, Merwin’s poetry comes to reflect that the shift necessary in both his poetic and world view is not constrained to poetic practice; rather, it requires a möbius of doing and thinking. The pervasive pessimism associated with the period surrounding *The Lice* yielded to the hope always inherent in Merwin’s love poetry. While this led critics like Harold Bloom and Charles Altieri to undervalue Merwin’s poetry in the late 70s and early 80s, these collections
ultimately developed into Merwin’s contemporary iteration of his *doing thinking*. What has emerged over the course of Merwin’s most recent decades of writing is a recognition and exploration of the complex interconnections between nature and humanity from a perspective markedly different from where he began his career. Merwin’s initial attempt to change his approach to the nature-human relationship, clearly visible in *The Rain in the Trees*, collapsed the distance between the bodies of nature and the bodies of humanity, as if to say, ‘We are all closer and more similar to each other than we think.’ The individual bodies become lost in each other, in a single body longing to encompass the collective. Collapsing the differences between nature and humanity, however, becomes equally problematic as fixating on them, which leads Merwin towards the complex representation of incorporation and coexistence that emerges through the recognition of a nature-human möbius.

Conceptualizing the body of humanity incorporated within the body of nature is perhaps the easier of the two directions, as this is, in a sense, a short jump from thinking generally about the way that human actions affect “nature.” (I put the term nature in scare quotes here to emphasize how conceptions of such terms are continually changing and continually marking the historical moment. Lowercase “nature” indicates a dynamic non-reified understanding of a human constructed concept.) The body of nature moves within the body of humanity, as when the body breathes in air as a metonym for nature. Air permeates the human body, just as water permeates the human body. The reminder of the physical incorporation of these elements into the human body becomes the catalyst for a whole new perception of the relationship. Instead of thinking about points of connection, the focus becomes coexistence through shared corporeality. In each conceptualization, nature and humanity remain independently named, thus maintaining themselves as having unique characteristics from the other. Emphasizing ‘points of connection’ asserts that nature and humanity occupy two different spaces, as in Merwin’s early work, in which
humanity occupies the space of the speaker, while nature in its pristine form is an unreachable horizon. In contrast, shifting toward a language of coexistence, in particular through incorporation, moves the emphasis to simultaneous dwelling in the same space. Rather than reinforcing boundaries by trying to connect them, coexistence through incorporation makes boundaries transparent and permeable. Nature and humanity inherently occupy the same space, to the extent that each exists within the other, while the other simultaneously exists within it; in this way, each is both self and other. In Merwin’s poetry, this coexistence and shared corporeality that occur during the liminal threshold “life” is prefaced by birth-of-the-same-origins and concluded by death-to-the-same-ends; the only difference being the timescale on which this inevitability plays out.

To understand the development of Merwin’s mōbial corporeality, one must take into consideration the full trajectory of Merwin’s published career. Given that Merwin has more than 20 collections of poetry without taking into account collected works, I group Merwin’s collections together into units in order to make the corpus more manageable. The first three groupings are actually Merwin’s own: The First Four Books of Poems, The Second Four Books of Poems, and Flower and Hand, which each include 3-4 previously published collections printed in one volume. The authorial choice of publishing the collections together indicates that there is some significance in reading those collections together. Merwin indicates this explicitly through paratext; but, the reader can also understand this implicitly through subtler indications like the collected works’ titles. Each of these groupings contains significant formal shifts that constitute the foundation of Merwin’s doing thinking. The next three collections—The Rain in the Trees, The Vixen, and

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Travels—comprise the fourth grouping, in which the visible beginning of Merwin’s möbial nature-human relationship appears. The fifth grouping is actually a single text: the long narrative titled The Folding Cliffs, in which Merwin has the freedom to articulate his möbial approach, and its ethical implications, with a facility and explicitness not afforded by traditional collections. This text is a watershed between the collections leading up to Merwin’s möbial corporeality and the collections that exemplify and further develop it. While, on the whole, this project is organized thematically, within each chapter there is some sense of chronological development because my argument centers around Merwin’s poetry as a space of developing engagement. Merwin engages the world, his readers, and his own life. Each chapter, in its own way, contributes to a developmental understanding of Merwin’s published career.

The first chapter, “Body Matters in Ecocriticism,” addresses the current state of ecocriticism, focusing largely on the usefulness of the term ‘nature,’ as well as the extension of personhood beyond the human species. I consider the importance of the personhood debates, in particular, the way their shortcomings make clear the need for a more inclusive approach. Bodies, rather than personhood status, are an alternative way to approach the nature-human relationship without creating hierarchies, as personhood discussions inevitably do. As a foundation for the remaining chapters, I use the work of Elizabeth Grosz to lay out a model of möbial corporeality as a means of understanding the nature-human relationship. The second chapter, titled “Merwin’s Möbial Corporeality,” takes up the framework articulated in the first chapter, exploring and expanding it through Merwin’s published poetic career. This exploration brings out the importance of thresholds and liminality in the development of Merwin’s approach to the nature-human relationship. Chapter three, “Doing Thinking: Intersections of Ars Poetica and Ethics,” takes as its focus the intersection between Merwin’s ars poetica poems and his clear interest in human ethical obligation to nature, arguing the two endeavors work hand in hand to model what ecopoetry
should be and do. This chapter also demonstrates that Merwin’s formal shifts are explicit indicators of Merwin’s ongoing möbius of doing and thinking. Chapter four, “Unfolding Forms in The Folding Cliffs,” argues that The Folding Cliffs is Merwin’s revisioning of the epic form, transforming the epic’s traditionally passive reader-consumer into a necessarily engaged participant who continues the text’s ethical mandates beyond its close. Merwin’s role must come under scrutiny in this chapter, as he attempts to create an ethics-centered learning experience in a context in which he is very easily viewed as colonial invader. The final chapter, “Nature-Human Relations in the Time of the Anthropocene,” focuses on the significance of time in ecocriticism, a consideration typically relegated to secondary importance in comparison with space. Merwin connects individual, generational, and geologic views of time through corporeal experience, showing the body to be capable of experiencing a geologic scale the mind cannot comprehend. Reconciling these perspectives of time through individual and aggregate acts of cruelty, as well as the reification of “the urban” as a scapegoat for the violence against “Nature,” leads to an understanding of how the individual answers to the geologic. In the Anthropocene, Merwin models what ecopoetry and humanity must do in the name of nature-human coexistence.
Chapter 1

Body Matters in Ecocriticism

Noah’s Raven

Why should I have returned?
My knowledge would not fit into theirs.
I found untouched the desert of the unknown,
Big enough for my feet. It is my home.
It is always beyond them. The future
Splits the present with the echo of my voice.
Hoarse with fulfillment, I never made promises.

(The Moving Target, 1963)

* * *

W. S. Merwin’s contributions to the field of ecopoetry are some of the most significant of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His ecopoetic model offers humanity an opportunity to redress human ignorance, neglect, and even willful cruelty towards nature. With the goal of a mutually flourishing nature-human partnership, Merwin’s career-long interest in bodies forges a model of möbial corporeality, offering humanity a non-metaphoric understanding of its relationship with nature. Best understood through Elizabeth Grosz’s work relating to dichotomies in Volatile Bodies, this approach proves invaluable in light of contemporary ecocritical inquiries. Discussions concerning the usefulness of the term ‘nature’ and their intersections with debates concerning personhood, hold particular relevance to my project’s focus on the role of bodies in the nature-human relationship. I contend that the tension inherent in the desire to eliminate the reified term ‘nature,’ while simultaneously calling to extend personhood to non-humans, risks reinforcing traditional binaries rather than countering them. Instead of eliminating ‘nature’ and

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4 Current ecocritical issues include: ecocriticism’s two historical waves; a global, multicultural, and interdisciplinary turn; inclusion of the urban and everyday as a more sustainable approach to the nature-human relationship in the Anthropocene; as well as explorations related to posthumanism, materialism, and animal studies.
extending personhood, I advocate an alternative approach centering bodies. Through Grosz’s work, I propose a means of understanding Merwin’s poetry that puts bodies in relation to each other through thresholds, rather than binaries. This model makes clear that nature and humanity are materially, rather than metaphorically connected; and, moreover, that nature and humanity are non-paradoxically both independent and one. Human understanding of the nature-human relationship has immense significance in everyday life and, therefore, any solutions discussed in the academy must be actionable and practical beyond its boundaries. *Theory must translate into practice.* This assertion is the foundation of Merwin’s poetic career and necessity for his focus on corporeality in the nature-human relationship.

**The Field of Ecocriticism**

Since William Rueckert first used the term “ecocriticism” in his 1978 article “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” both term and field of study have undergone immense change. Perhaps the most cited definition of ecocriticism is Cheryl Glotfelty’s, which identifies ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 8). Ecocriticism, of course, goes by other names, such as environmental criticism, and encompasses or intersects with other areas of inquiry, like poetics. A retrospective look shows that the 1990s formed the first wave of the field known today as ecocriticism, building from British Romanticism and the American tradition of nature writing (Buell 89). According to Lawrence Buell, the first wave of ecocriticism “became especially identified with the project of reorienting literary-critical thinking toward more serious engagement with nonhuman nature in two different although related ways”: namely, a humanist Heideggarian tradition and an approach deriving its models from science (90). The greatest legacy of this period, according to Buell, was first wave bioregionalism, or an “attempt to fuse scientistic and humanistic thinking” through “an
eclectic body of thinking that interweaves findings from ecology, geography, anthropology, history, phenomenology, and aesthetics in the service of the normative claim that a person's primary loyalty as citizen should be to the bioregion—or ecological region—rather than to nation or some other jurisdictional unit” (91). While the early scholarship did much to establish the importance of ecocriticism, Buell articulates a number of shortcomings echoed in the scholarship of the past decade and a half. First wave scholarship was “limited by genre, geography, and historical epoch” (92); it “typically privileged rural and wild spaces over urban ones” (93); its interest in preservation held the attitude that “environmentalism equals nature protection in thinly populated remote areas,” neglecting environmental justice issues (94); and it privileged experiential approaches to the detriment of philosophic ones (94). The ecocritical scholarship of the 21st century has attempted to address these shortcomings by expanding and balancing out the work of the first wave.

The second wave is marked largely by efforts to address populations and perspectives inadequately covered during the first wave. It addressed issues relevant to broader global and historical scales, expanding through texts like Patrick Murphy’s 1998 collection Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook and his 2009 Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies. Critical, also, to the second wave is the idea that the “wall of separation” between urban spaces and “rural and wild” ones “is a historically produced artifact, that throughout human history nature has been subject to human reshaping and that, especially since the industrial revolution, metropolitan landscape and the built environment generally must be considered as at least equally fruitful ground for ecocritical work” (Buell 93). Breaking down boundaries between nature and humanity, whether geographically, culturally, or conceptually, intersects with interest in finding sustainable approaches to human relations with nature. The growing recognition that the Anthropocene has arrived, and that it is only a matter of time before science makes that
proclamation official, requires that humans confront the reality that they are inescapably implicated in the geologic record and must address the fact that constructed boundaries do not alter the effects of human action. In this endeavor, scholars like Timothy Morton argue against the acceptance of a reified “Nature,” which he claims inhibits any real attempts at ecological thinking. Citing Mark Lynas, Richard Kerridge offers a point of view that, at the outset, might seem similar to Morton’s. “There is no more nature, if 'nature' is understood, in a dualist and purist way, to mean everything that is not at all the product of human action” (Kerridge 346). There is a, however, a key distinction to be made between these two points of view. This difference leads into the question of personhood, the central second wave issue on which I focus. The possibilities of personhood in a practical sense are intriguing; but, even more intriguing are the new ways of approaching corporeality in the nature-human relationship that stem from personhood’s risks.

The nature of Nature

Arguing against a romantic, idealized notion of capital-N-Nature may be useful in that a reification of nature, especially as it relates to humanity, does not focus on reality. Instead, it focuses on creating fantasy taken as reality and implies static identity rather than ever-changing dynamism. That said, doing away with the concept of nature altogether, especially since nature does not have to be a reified “Nature,” is actually counterproductive. The pivotal “if” in Kerridge’s statement (“if ‘nature’ is...”) appears in Morton’s work as well, when he admits, “True, I claim that there is no such 'thing' as nature, if by nature we mean some thing that is single, independent, and lasting” (Ecology 19-20). This statement seems nothing short of silly since conceptualizing ‘nature’ in any real sense requires plurality, interdependence, and changeability. But Morton is not focused on this slippage. Instead, his point is that “Nature” does not exist but “deluded ideologies and ideological fixations do” (Ecology 20). Morton insists that “Nature” has been and is treated as
a “fascinating object” but that, through the goal of “dissolving the object, we render the ideological fixation inoperative” (20). Morton’s goal, then, is to create a type of ecology or ecocritique sans “Nature.” (Though Morton does not always differentiate between ‘nature’ and ‘Nature,’ I will consistently use ‘N’ to indicate Morton’s concept and ‘n’ to indicate a non-reified category.) The easily anticipated problem when insisting on dualisms is that the more you work to remove one half of the dualism, the more prominent the other half becomes. If “Nature” is contrasted with “human,” then eliminating “Nature” will only emphasize the human; and, even as Morton means to improve the nature-human relationship, this is what happens. The final two sentences of *Ecology Without Nature* are the most telling for those who share my fear: “Ecology may be without nature. But it is not without us” (*Ecology* 205).

For ecology to “be without nature” but “not without [humans],” humans must face a frightening but revelatory prospect. While Morton argues, at moments successfully, against the usefulness of the term ‘Nature’ as a concept, ultimately his presentation of this concept is so constructed to fit his argument that the argument itself falls flat. The “if” that appeared in Morton’s problematic definition of nature appears again in an equally problematic definition of ecology, in which Morton posits, “If ecology is about collapsing distances (between human and animal, society and natural environment, subject and object), then how much sense does it make to rely on a strategy of reading that keeps reestablishing (aesthetic) distance?” (*Ecology* 154, original emphasis). Morton’s concern is the way that “we’re stuck” (as humans) between high art and kitsch in our attempt to distinguish between high and low representations of nature, resulting in perpetual distancing from nature. My concern, however, resides in the continual reinscribing of human dominance. The transitive use of “to collapse” is a prime example of Morton’s insistence on human construction. Earlier Morton alleged that, “one of the principle complaints against establishing a vivid, solidly real nature 'out there' or 'over there' is that it just fails to be convincing”
(77). Morton creates distance as a requisite for human conceptions of nature and then argues that ecology centers around “collapsing” those distances. This process of creation and transitive collapsing is counterproductive anthropocentric fiction. The distance is not real and, therefore, the process of collapsing that distance is not real. Thus, Morton’s argument is faulty:

Let me say right here that the attempt to forge art and concepts that lie “in between” traditional ideas of inside and outside is noble, exciting, and the only reason why I can write this book at all. The problem comes when we start to think that there is something behind or beyond or above (in other words, outside!) the inside-outside distinction. Not that the distinction is real; it is entirely spurious. Thus, it is wrong to claim that there is something more real beyond inside and outside…. (Ecology 78)

As with the “if” definitions, Morton relies on word plays, here a sequence of prepositions meant to make constructed spatial relations strike the reader’s ear strangely so that the possibility of something other than inside-outside seems absurd. But the fact remains, there is distinction to be made other than inside-outside. Because language is a tool of human construction, both itself constructed and deployed by humans, it gives the speaker a great deal of power to reveal or conceal. In this instance, Morton uses cleverness of language to conceal other possibilities than a strict inside-outside binary. My exploration of how Grosz’s work becomes relevant to Merwin’s centers around the in-betweenness that Morton denies, making the argument, moreover, that this in-betweenness does not need to be limited by the language that expresses it. Instead, it can be expressed through a model that reveals the inherent other than concealed by the prepositions supporting traditional binaries.

There is a simple model that reveals an alternative to dichotomous inside-outside conceptions: the möbius strip. Morton mentions this concept in passing (as is too often his
strategy) but he does not explore the extent to which the Möbius allows for understanding how an alleged binary pair can seem dichotomous and, yet, not be. The Möbius strip is a three-dimensional representation of what appears to be two sides (perhaps in-side and out-side) but which, upon closer examination, turns out to be one side continually thresholding into the other. Morton wastes the two sentences in *Ecology without Nature* that feature the Möbius strip by using them to discuss Descartes and human inability to “designate one (either ‘self’ or ‘place’) as ontologically prior” (178). Instead, the focus should be on the potential to clarify relationships too often accepted as dichotomous, like the subject-object relationship (since Descartes is on the table). Also surprising is that Morton does not acknowledge Grosz’s work, which both draws on and diverges from Lacan’s use of the Möbius in relation to the subject, using the Möbius as a way of rethinking the relations between body and mind. Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between those two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another. This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its physical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside. (xii)

Grosz, then, gives the opportunity to see a relationship other than the dichotomous binaries that Morton insists are fundamental; that is, the opportunity to understand how subject and object,

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5 Morton also mentions the Möbius strip twice in his essay “Malfunctioning,” but again misses key opportunities.
inside and outside, nature and humanity, can be visible both as apparently distinct and as infinite places of threshold along the möbius loop that connects them. Morton’s work, like many of his contemporaries, misses the opportunities that Grosz opens up. Morton concludes that, “Ultimately, ecological politics should not be about dissolving the dualism of subject and object. It should be about conquering aggression and violence” (Ecological 177). The problem with his statement is summarized in two parts: first, Morton’s use of “dissolving” implies that there is something solid to dissolve and that the solution (or dissolution) is to do away with difference; and, second, as in so many cases, Morton’s language defeats his purpose, since “conquering aggression and violence” only reinscribes violent domination. While Grosz also uses the verb “dissolving,” her purpose is counter to Morton:

In dissolving oppositional categories we cannot simply ignore them, vowing never to speak in their terms again. This is neither historically possible nor even desirable insofar as these categories must be engaged with in order to be superseded. But new terms and conceptual frameworks must also be devised to be able to talk of the body outside or in excess of binary pairs. (24)

Grosz’s use of “dissolving” underscores the instability of rigid binary pairs, recognizing their existence without reinforcing their solidity. She seeks alternative terms of engagement not just “outside” but other than the typical terms of inside and outside. In contrast, Morton’s use of “dissolving” underscores binary thinking that must somehow be undone, rather than recognizing that binary as always already misleading.

Before delving more deeply into how Grosz’s conceptualization of the möbius and the body intersects with my interests in Merwin and the body, and, moreover, the significance on these intersections for ecocriticism, I need to make clear why I want to frame this exploration through a corporeal lens rather than a cognitive one. One of my most serious concerns with
Morton’s school of thinking is the way that it sets up the relationship between nature and humanity. Throughout this project, I differentiate between a ‘human-nature’ relationship and a ‘nature-human’ one. A human-nature relationship is one in which humans are concerned with nature and with human impact on the environment; this relationship is inherently limited, however, by the deeply ingrained human perspective. Centering the human is logical because, as humans, our survival and happiness is our primary concern. It is also impossible to move beyond the human proprioceptive experience into any other experience, thereby making it human nature to say ‘human-nature.’ Countering this perspective, however, is the ‘nature-human’ relationship, a representation that does not privilege nature over humanity. Instead, it works to decenter the human perspective in explorations of human relations with nature, whether through empathy or logic. Ideally, ‘nature-human’ and ‘human-nature’ would be understood as connotatively and denotatively synonymous; but, currently, the gap between the terms marks the problem with Morton’s proposal. If the relationship involves nature and humanity, and nature is removed, that leaves only humanity. Unfortunately, this is what has taken place in not only Morton’s work but American society as well, a consequence clearly seen in current personhood debates. This makes discussions about personhood part of the core literature to understand in seeking a corporeal approach to the nature-human relationship.

The haunting realization from Ecology without Nature that “Ecology may be without nature. But it is not without us” (205) functions as only one of several red flags that the human-centric model may go awry. In Morton’s follow up text, The Ecological Thought, the reader learns that

The ecological thought fans out into questions concerning cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and the irreducible uncertainty over what counts as a person. Being a person means never being sure that you’re one. In an age of ecology without
Nature, we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people. ... Ancient animisms treat beings as people, without a concept of Nature. Perhaps I’m aiming for an upgraded version of animism. (*Ecological* 8)

Extending personhood is not a novel concept and any engagement with such an idea must contend with the reality of that practice as it plays out in society. On the one hand, there are rich conversations taking place about what it means to be human, to be a person. Is a human always a person? What about a dead human? A human in a comatose (dare I say, vegetative) brain state? A zygote? How does modern technology affect conceptions of personhood in relation to human beings? So, on the one hand, both in scholarship and in the media, nuanced conversations are taking place about human personhood. At the same time, if the average person⁶ Googles the definition of a “person,” the first result automatically provided by Google is, “a human being regarded as an individual.” This is likely the conception of “person” that most “people” have. Therein lies one of the issues: changing deeply entrenched human conceptions about personhood is challenging, especially when misleading representations are continually reinforced. Another major challenge stems from Morton’s above assertion that, “Being a person means never being sure that you’re one.” In reality, personhood is entirely human-defined and the very foundation of the human legal system rests precisely on *being certain* that humans are people. From there, measures can be taken to determine whether non-humans are also people; but the assumption of “natural personhood” is that humans are people by default while no one else is. In this way, on the other hand, discussions concerning extensions of personhood intrinsically represent a ‘human-nature’ approach rather than a ‘nature-human’ one. That said, these debates are worth

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⁶ This statement appears to assume that the ‘average person’ has access to and is capable of using Google and, of course, prefers Google over Bing, Yahoo, etc.
exploring, not because I want to propose an answer to them—I will leave that to the courts and those who find personhood more persuasively useful than I do. Instead, my focus is the way these conversations enlighten an alternative discussion that can be taking place not instead of but alongside them.

Conflicting Conceptions of Personhood

Defining personhood is a highly complex, high-stakes endeavor. It often entails naming and applying criteria, though there are vocal critics against this criterialist approach. Timothy Chappell uses Mary Anne Warren as an example of someone using an “all-purpose” view in asserting that personhood is indicated by sentience, emotionality, reason, the capacity to communicate, self-awareness, and moral agency (3). An obvious limiting aspect of criterialism is that proposed criteria frequently correlate with a predetermined stance, rather than providing a means to objective judgment. One of Chappell’s primary concerns is the “proleptic view of personhood” (7). According to Chappell, “Having once decided, on other grounds, that a creature is a person, we know that this makes it the kind of creature that is likely to display sentience, rationality, self-awareness, and the rest of the personal properties” (7). That is, humans search for personhood traits as a result of having already decided that the subject is a person and, therefore, “we treat it as a person in advance of any such displays” (Chappell 7, original emphasis). Criteria are important but Chappell argues that they cannot be used as definitive measures of personhood (12). Grzegorz Holub’s 2008 article “Being a Person and Acting as a Person” aligns with Chappell’s perspective that humans are natural persons; that is, by simple fact of being human one is granted personhood status a priori, after which point that status may be called into question. Holub tries to clarify the relationship between humanness and personhood:
To be a person means something different than to be a human. Even if some people are regarded as persons, it is not self-contradictory—it is claimed—to describe non-human entities as persons. Something which was typically considered a person can be a non-person; and vice versa: a being which was traditionally held to be a non-personal entity can acquire a personal status (Hursthouse 1987, p. 93). Personhood—in this view—is distinct from humanness.

Hedging his bets, Holub allows that nonhumans can gain personhood status and that humanness is, in theory, not synonymous with personhood. In spite of this, Holub continues on to argue that criteria and actions are not what make a human a person. For Chappell, a major problem with the criterialist approach as it applies to human personhood is that, what appears to work in one circumstance, becomes highly problematic in another, for example with an infant or a person with dementia, who clearly do not fit the outlined criteria but should be constituted as persons. Holub explains that, “Basically, the problem consists in emphasizing the role of the acting person at the expense of the being person, and also in conceiving the former as a semi-autonomous and independent entity” (Holub 278). What I find most discomfiting about these approaches is the way these scholars insist that discussions of personhood must “put at the centre the human person as a paradigmatic model for all thinking about the nature of personhood” (Holub 279). This hardly seems like a viable foundation for understanding personhood within the nature-human relationship.

Even more discomfiting than the insistent centering of the human is the way that (for all the debate about making personhood lines clear so that nonhuman animals are not miscategorized as persons) the category of personhood can be stretched to the point of abuse when it benefits humans. Arguing against the use of clear criteria for personhood becomes
problematic when personhood is as inextricable from the legal system as it is in the United States. Purnima Bose and Laura E. Lyons argue that corporate personhood and fetal personhood build on a wrongful legal precedent set in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad*, “in which corporate lawyers brazenly and successfully argued that corporations constituted persons under the Fourteenth Amendment, the legislative measure to guarantee full personhood to freed slaves” (vi). The case’s decision did not itself grant legal personhood status to corporations but a court reporter included a headnote doing so that provided foundation for future cases arguing for and expanding the rights of corporations as persons. This decision ultimately resulted in corporations attaining the same rights as individual persons, for example, the freedom of religion. Bose and Lyons feel that corporate personhood rights are overtaking the rights of individuals and that, alongside this, movements like the one arguing for fetal personhood are threatening not only women but, ironically, minorities.

In the hijacking of civil rights discourses to advance fetal rights we see traces of the earlier commandeering of the Fourteenth Amendment to establish corporate personhood. As with many aspects of American experience, race provides the palimpsest for a cultural and ideological dominant that now includes fetal personhood and the legislated fantasy of a rights-bearing corporate person, in which the ambition to secure the political and economic privileges of a few powerful stakeholders masquerades as the lofty aim to uphold the values of the First Amendment. (xiv)

Contemporary society is seeing the extreme playing out of the fourteenth amendment’s “hijacking” in the name of personhood. While my project does not explicitly engage gender and race as primary threads, when discussing marginalized bodies, there is no denying that gender and race are major factors. That measures taken to protect one group of human bodies could be
pivoted to repress that very group, as well as others, is only one of many reasons for treading carefully as discussion expands beyond asserting that all human bodies matter to asserting that all bodies matter.

In the wake of exploring corporate personhood, it is easy to ask how the legal system—and humans in general—could consider a business as a person, but not a living, breathing, thinking, communicating animal. (But there I go with criteria.) Given the precedent set in establishing corporate personhood, court recognition through careful navigation of the legal system, using whatever foothold possible, may seem like the best route to take. Following this strategy, the Nonhuman Rights Project (NhRP) has filed writs of habeas corpus on behalf of Tommy, Kiko, Hercules, and Leo, four chimpanzees. In New York State, where the cases are taking place, if a court recognizes someone’s right to habeas corpus, it means that the court is also recognizing that individual’s legal standing as a person. Going further than the NhRP, the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) was a major advocate in New Zealand for the recognition of animal sentience. In contrast with the NhRP, which requires high levels of cognitive functioning for persons, the WSPA successfully advocated that New Zealand should recognize all vertebrates as having the capacity to suffer and that said capacity should take precedence over questions of cognitive complexity. Karen Davis argues against hierarchizing animals at all because parsing the cognitive capabilities of nonhuman animals in this way relegates the entire animal kingdom, apart from humans, to a condition of mental disability that is totally incompatible with the cognitive demands exacted upon real animals in the real world. ... Mature, unimpaired nonhuman animals are not tantamount to

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7 The WSPA cited legislation in Chile, Monaco, Nicaragua, and Tanzania already recognizing animal sentience explicitly; as well as Bosnia and Herzegovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Serbia, and Slovenia as having written into their laws the significance of recognizing animal suffering as foundation for protection under the law.
mentally defective and underdeveloped humans ... Ranking animals according to a cognitive scale of mental and emotional development risks making excuses to violate any animals that scientists wish to tinker with, not only the supposedly 'lesser' species, but also those regarded as 'high up' yet inferior to humans in their genetic endowment. (36, 39, 40)

The result of hierarchizing animals is that members of lower species are seen within the hierarchy as being comparable to disabled members of higher species, which becomes justification for rights violations. Some countries, like New Zealand and Ecuador, have taken measures in line with Davis’ arguments. In 2012, New Zealand recognized the Whanganui River as a legal person. The river is not sentient but, rather, is an entity with which other beings and entities interact and upon which they depend. Thus, the body of water is an entity that has a right to protection under the law. Similarly, Ecuador wrote into its new constitution a section focusing on the Rights of Nature. It grants Pacha Mama rights that include “integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes,” as well as the right “to be restored” (“Constitution”). When this protection was tested in courts in 2011 through a lawsuit on behalf of Nature and the Vilcabamba River, the result was that the court decided that the local government not only needed to cease the detrimental expansion of the road adjacent to the river but rehabilitate the damage they had done over the course of three years.

Current debates, according to Gary L. Francione, “can best be described as moral schizophrenia” (25). Francione highlights discrepancies between people’s alleged attitudes towards animals according to survey responses and their subsequent actions in daily life (both individually and societally). Human hesitancy to recognize personhood beyond our species stems undoubtedly, in part, from notions of human exceptionalism, which fuel continued denial that any other species could be considered on the same evolutionary level, or deserve the same respect as
humanity. Elizabeth Oriel points out that, “Drawing a larger circle of personhood reduces the verticality of human uniqueness and creates a more horizontal model of participation and rights” (46). This human challenge is not simply about ego but about willingness to accept the ramifications of recognizing personhood elsewhere. In her article, “Evolving Notions of Nonhuman Personhood: Is Moral Standing Sufficient?” Dorothy I. Riddle argues that attributing moral standing to animals (the crux of personhood) is not simply about the critical distinction between “person” and “thing” but, moreover, between human moral obligation and none. That is, “Both our ethics and our legal system are based on notions of moral standing, distinguishing between two primary categories: persons with intrinsic value and due our respect, and things available for our use without regard to their interests or preferences” (Riddle 5). The significance of this distinction underscores human motivation for selective entrance into the personhood club. Riddle explains that moral standing is not about animals’ responsibility but, rather, changed human responsibility, since “any exploration of moral standing, which underlies personhood, is an examination of the boundaries of our moral duties to other entities, not of theirs to us” (5).

Because granting personhood to nonhumans may impinge on comforts that humans have taken for granted, when assigning personhood, humans face the “temptation to draw the boundary within our comfort zone or the zone of our present behavior” (Riddle 13). Riddle, among others, calls for humans to push beyond their comfort zone and current understandings of moral responsibility to consider how others, especially animals, can be recognized as persons.

In spite of the potential benefits of legal personhood—the most significant of which would be court-enforced legal protection of rights—the drawbacks are numerous. The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth highlights one of the major barriers: global agreement. The conference's resulting document puts responsibility on “corporations and governments of the so-called ‘developed’ countries, in complicity with a segment of the scientific
community,” calling for these countries to join the global movement towards responsible and fair approaches to the environment and the global community (“People’s Agreement”). In particular, the United States is singled out “as the only Annex 1 country on Earth that did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol,” arguing that the U.S., therefore, “has a significant responsibility toward all peoples of the world to ratify this document and commit itself to respecting and complying with emissions reduction targets on a scale appropriate to the total size of its economy” (“People’s Agreement”).

Even on a more local level, difficulties arise in using personhood as the means of arguing for the extension of intrinsic rights. Specifically, confusion easily arises between what constitutes a: human, person, human-person, natural person, artificial person, legal person, other person. Debating these definitions can be expansive, bringing into focus nuances that matter, as well as ones that do not. At the same time, participants may become so focused on the terms of the debate that they forget altogether why the debate matters. Even the brief exploration I have provided of personhood debates, emphasizing their goals and pitfalls, illustrates the ease with which criteria and hierarchies can dominate the conversation. These conversations need to continue with an understanding of what is at stake: not the creation of rights (that, again, did or did not previously exist) for non-human animals and entities—but the recognition of human responsibility in relation to everyone and everything that coexists with humans. At the same time, there must be alternative conversations that avoid the inherent divisiveness of personhood discussions by building on the goals of personhood while avoiding its missteps.

Body Matters

Clearly there are benefits to pursuing legal personhood status for various animals and entities, especially given the way that many countries’ laws are written. From a practical standpoint, legal protection provides a foundation for action, even though legal protections are
not always adequately enforced and though it is possible to argue that increased legislation has ironically occurred in conjunction with deteriorating treatment of animals. For laws to matter, humans need to believe that the laws matter. Otherwise enforcement will continue to be lax and no amount of legislation will make any tangible difference. Herein is literature’s, especially poetry’s opportunity. Ecopoetry can take a body of knowledge and turn it inside out, back right-side in, pull it apart, twist it, reconnect it, and then illustrate that what appears to be a resulting new body is actually the same one, only viewed from a different perspective. In the case of nature and humanity, the movement from what ecocriticism considers “environmental poetry” to “ecopoetry” was precisely the move from understanding a human-nature relationship to a nature-human one.\(^8\) Within this broader movement, the poetry of W. S. Merwin undertakes another: reshaping human understanding of this relationship not through the human-likeness of personhood but through the more inclusive likeness of bodies. Merwin’s poetry illustrates that ecocriticism and, consequently, contemporary social and political debates would benefit greatly from understanding that, though every body appears to be an individual, distinct from other bodies, in reality, distinctions between bodies are neither clear-cut nor blurred but rather möbial; and that bodies, while infinitely unique, are the universal requisite for shared material existence.

Approaching discussion of the nature-human relationship through a corporeal lens makes it possible to avoid the most significant dangers of the personhood debates. The definition I use is broad and inclusive: at its most basic level, a body is a fundamental unit comprising anything material. That is, anything material has a body. In comparison with the term ‘person,’ once a definition is laid out, there is less clarification that needs to be made concerning what constitutes a ‘body’ or how the term ‘body’ can be extended beyond the human body. Even the term ‘human body’ strikes the ear more easily than ‘human person.’ Without the need for a list of characteristics

\(^8\) See Scigaj, as well as Fisher-Wirth and Street.
determining what constitutes a body, the concerns about the criterialist approach are allayed. Likewise, concerns about global agreement do not have the same pressing relevance because, even if linguistically the word ‘body’ is not translated in the same way—for example, a body of water, *un cuerpo del agua, un plan d'eau*—the concept of the body as a fundamental unit of existence can be readily explained. It does not rely on word play. Humans are universally understood to have bodies. Animals too, clearly have bodies. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) provides a reminder that a primary definition of body is “the complete physical form or assemblage of parts of a plant.” Other commonly discussed bodies in English include bodies of water and celestial bodies. In fact, when considering the term body, one is forced to ask whether anything material could be understood as not having a body. Even air, which is not visible to humans is matter and, therefore, has a body. Like water, air can enter your body; it is difficult to pick up with your hands; you can store it in a jar. These are observations, rather than criteria, shared commonalties rather than requisite characteristics. Thus, it is fair to say that all material bodies are natural bodies even if all bodies, or even ‘persons,’ are not ‘natural’ persons. The fundamental applicability of the term ‘body’ thereby provides the possibility of avoiding hierarchical categorizations or inherent privileging of certain bodies over others. That is, from the outset, the focus is on the matter of bodies rather than ‘persons’ as a selective subset of bodies that matter.

Privileging some bodies over others undeniably happens in practice, so simply shifting the terms of the discussion will not eliminate underlying prejudices in a world with limited resources. This is clear even in the treatment of human bodies, so expecting humans to be understanding and respectful of nonhuman bodies may seem to require a leap of faith. Though it is tempting, one cannot even claim that a nature-human partnership centered around bodies would be able to take as fundamental that all bodies exist and have the right to exist. Where there are conflicting
desires and needs, there will be privileging, with species generally putting their own best interests first. There is no way to resolve moral conflicts of interest so that all parties are satisfied; and, in the case of disputes involving humanity, human needs and desires nearly always take precedence. In spite of these difficulties, what changed terms of discussion might do, however, is refocus the discussion in a way that mitigates the divisiveness inherent to mind/body debates, which is where personhood inevitably stalls. Grosz asserts in her opening chapter that, “The body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory,” and that, “Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart” (3). Turning the body into a negation of the mind devalues not only the body but all that is associated with the body. Grosz continues on to say that,

More insidiously, the mind/body opposition has always been correlated with a number of other oppositional pairs. ... These lateral associations provide whatever “positive” characteristics the body may be accorded in systems where it is the subordinated counterpart of mind. These terms function implicitly to define the body in non historical, naturalistic, organicist, passive, inert terms, seeing it as an intrusion on or interface with the operation of mind, a brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence. Through these associations, the body is coded in terms that are themselves traditionally devalued. (3-4)

Aligning binaries so that one group of terms must be subordinated to the other is not an inherent state of existence. Instead, it is a human construction complexly interconnected with traditional power structures that allow one group to dominate another. In line with Grosz, my project also works to counter such devaluations of the body, understanding bodies not as negations of the
mind but as the mind’s möbial counterpart. The body has value independent of and inextricably in conjunction with the mind, a foundational actuality when countering the privileging of certain bodies over others as a result of their relation to the mind. The mind may play into the conversation but it should not do so to the detriment of the body.

‘Mind’ over ‘body,’ ‘human’ over ‘nonhuman,’ ‘culture’ over ‘nature,’ and ‘I’ over ‘other’ are a few of the ways that privileging has manifested itself in the relationship between nature and humanity. Nonhuman bodies are frequently subordinated to human bodies, being treated as products, commodities, and test spaces for the benefit of human bodies. There appear to be clear but murky divides between what constitutes nature and what constitutes humanity; that is, humans seem to know that there is a division between the two but are incapable of articulating precisely what that division entails or where it can be drawn. Culture is a primary example. Research looking at whether culture exists in nature falls prey to the same concerns lobbied against the criterialists in the personhood debates. “Culture” does not exist as an inherently defined set of criteria. Rather, the characteristics that align or divide humans with other species are entirely human constructed, with many humans insisting that humans are the only species that can demonstrate culture. Turning to an intersecting example, the urban has been viewed as the epitome of non-nature, the extreme example of human construction, running counter to that which is naturally occurring. The problem, here, is two fold: on the one hand, humans are making problematic distinctions and, on the other, they are privileging one over the other in both inconsistent and unfounded ways. The reader can consider, also, examples like parks, which Jonathan Bate calls “re-creational space[s]” in The Song of the Earth, explaining that a park, as “representation,” is nevertheless real (64, 63). While Bate’s exploration is fruitful, one has to question the consequences of the “re” prefix, which has the effect of reinscribing the human
perspective. The challenge, then, becomes how to discuss the human perspective without centering it and, consequently, reifying nature as Other.

Though, earlier, Bose and Lyons read the legal status of corporate personhood in a mostly negative light, they do suggest that it may help the cause of nonhuman animals in some way, addressing the choices that humans make when drawing lines of privilege between human and Other. They point to the work of Katherine C. Grier, who studied the growing pet movement that began in the United States, accompanied by “the advent of the big box petstores in the 1980s and the ensuing proliferation of pet products and intensification of marketing directed at their owners” (xv). In this way, corporate and consumer culture has worked to ‘humanize’ pets. One question to ask here, though, is whether the anthropomorphizing of animals through the pet movement and corporate marketing actually inhibits human ability to see the most important connections between humans and animals. There is no clear line between marketing that anthropomorphizes animals and broader shifting awareness about the responsibilities of bringing animals into human homes (just as there are responsibilities when bringing in human children). While this kind of marketing risks anthropomorphizing animals, working counter to those animals’ standing as individuals who deserve respect and rights, one can also argue that pets allow humans to see animals as individuals rather than interchangeable anonymous pieces within a species. Many people view pets as members of their family, treating their pets’ bodies not as anthropomorphized objects but as individual bodies that have the right to be protected and cared for just like the rest of the family. There are countless examples of families spending money on tests or treatment even when there is no guarantee that treatment will be successful. This sense of responsibility, along with the responsibility not to prolong the suffering of gravely injured or very ill pets—an issue hotly debated as it pertains to human bodies—suggests that, whether humans are conscious of it
or not, bodies are already at the center of overcoming limiting dichotomies in the nature-human relationship.

Breaking down ideas centered around nature and animals as Others is one example of how using bodies as a common denominator between individuals can improve human understanding of the nature-human relationship. Jean-Luc Nancy’s Being Singular Plural proves helpful when considering this from a philosophical perspective. Though Nancy’s writing is dense and, consequently, difficult to excerpt without damaging the nuances of his argument and linguistic approach, there are a few concepts particularly useful in conjunction with Grosz’s application of the möbius. The focus of Nancy’s text is the “primordial, ontological condition of being-with or being-together,” which serves as the foundation for breaking down Cartesian subject-object dichotomies, solipsism, and the very concept of the Other (xvi). Whereas traditional Cartesian logic follows “I think, therefore, I am,” a Nancian approach understands the affirmation of existence as itself an affirmation of coexistence. If one can say, ‘I exist,’ then requisitely follows, ‘therefore, I coexist.’ That is, the concept of the ‘I’ cannot exist without the concept of the ‘not-I’ and vice-versa, so that neither can pre-exist the other; rather, they requisitely exist simultaneously, regardless of which comes first semantically. This extension I exist, therefore, I coexist radically alters the consequences of I think, therefore, I am in that solipsism is no longer possible. At the same time, the subject cannot be privileged over the object because, “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the with of this singularly plural coexistence” (Nancy 3). Neither can exist without the other, therefore, neither can preexist the other. This means that there cannot be a capitalized Other since “it is not a question of ... an other in general as the essential stranger who is opposed to something proper, but of an alter, that is, ‘one of the two’” (Nancy 11). When the two come together (and they are always with each other) they form a ‘we’
that must be understood as both singular and plural—a multiplicity of individuals recognized as a collective.

Nancy and Grosz are highly compatible when considering how all bodies relate to each other. Nature can be understood as a singular entity or concept; but, at the same time, its inherent plurality prevents its reification into anything wholly singular, stable, or fixed. Nature is not at one moment singular and at another plural, though the human mind may consider it one aspect at a time. Instead, like the möbius strip, each seemingly dichotomous aspect has the capacity to appear distinct, all the while being inseparably one. Grosz uses the möbius strip to clarify the nature of (rather than to ‘dissolve’ per se) seemingly contradictory dichotomies, and Nancy’s philosophy provides another perspective supporting the efficacy of Grosz’s model. This explanation of non-reified nature carries over to an explanation of the nature-human relationship. When Grosz says that, “Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives,” one can easily see nature and humanity explained the same way (xii). It is neither that humanity is interior while nature is exterior, nor that nature is solely interior and humanity exterior. The following extended passage from *Being Singular Plural* explores the complexity of parsing interiority and exteriority in the nature-human relationship, culminating with the necessity of recognizing shared materiality between bodies:

The difference between humanity and the rest of being (which is not a concern to be denied, but the nature of which is, nevertheless, not a given), while itself being inseparable from other differences within being (since man is “also” animal, “also” living, “also” physio-chemical), does not distinguish true existence from a sort of subexistence. Instead, this difference forms the concrete condition of singularity. We would not be “humans” if there were not “dogs” and “stones.” A stone is the
exteriority of singularity in what would have to be called its mineral or mechanical actuality [littéralité]. But I would no longer be a “human” if I did not have this exteriority “in me,” in the form of the quasi-minerality of bone: I would no longer be human if I were not a body, spacing of all other bodies and a spacing of “me” in “me.” A singularity is always a body, and all bodies are singularities (the bodies, their states, their movements, their transformations). (Nancy 18)

One of Nancy’s primary points in this passage brings to light a key distinction that I want to make, which is the difference between connecting nature and humanity metaphorically versus materially. Frequently metaphor proves key to ecocriticism and ecopoetry; understandably so, since metaphor is a powerful tool for bringing together two distinct conceptual realms. When two things are apparently dissimilar, showing how they are ‘alike’ can lessen the conceptual distance between them. However, in the case of nature and humanity, the connections ‘between’ them go far beyond metaphor, being rooted deeply in the material. The material of nature’s bodies is within the bodies of humanity just as the material of humanity’s bodies is within the bodies of nature. There is continual mōbial circulation between and within bodies that cannot only be explained through metaphoric webs or bridges between entities understood as conceptually separate. This corporeal circulation reinforces the usefulness of discussions that take bodies, rather than species or cognitive grouping, as their common denominator.

**Merwin’s Poetic Bodies**

Merwin’s recent collections⁹ give a clear picture of the significance that bodies gain over the course of his career. While initially bodies are simply figures in the poems, they quickly develop into a point of connection between nature and humanity. Merwin’s formal explorations reveal that

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⁹ Those published after *The Folding Cliffs*, my sixth grouping.
parts of the body become a common denominator between bodies, so that differences between species, as well as other categorizations, become secondary to the umbrella categorization of bodies. Bodies, then, become the common denominator between all things material so that humans, plants, animals, and the earth no longer need to be divided into stark categories belong to some sequence of binary divisions. Bodies are individuals but they are always part of collectives—Nancy’s concept of the singular plural. On the one hand, understanding bodies as individuals and as collectives (themselves collectives, as well as part of collectives) proves key to understanding the möbial relationships between them. In conjunction with the möbius strip, this simultaneous individuality and collectivity demonstrates how bodies can be seen as both independent and inseparable, with the plural collective also being a singular and the individual bodies also plural. On the other hand, Merwin’s use of thresholds amplifies the möbial aspect of individual bodies and collectives. That is, bodies cannot simply be thought of as being comprised of distinct pieces and as pieces comprising a larger whole. Rather, the distinctions between them are thresholds, allowing not only one seemingly to torsion into the other but, moreover, for each body itself to be the threshold between itself and other bodies. In this way, an individual body is both itself and other simultaneously. Binaries exist in that they acknowledge singular aspects of and in relation to bodies; but, they simultaneously dissolve, in Grosz’s sense, by revealing that each set of alleged binary opposites thresholds into each other.

Merwin’s recent collections are the landing point for his exploration of bodies, manifestations of the möbial corporeality he develops over more than five decades. The opening poem in The River Sound sets the tone for the collections following The Folding Cliffs, immediately coupling bodies and nature through the experience of the speaker having lost the tip of a finger. The first three stanzas of “Ceremony after an Amputation” do not reveal that it is the tip of the finger that is lost; rather, the poem’s “you” seems very much like nature, with “machines erupting
across the valley and elbowing up the slopes / pushing themselves forward to occupy you to be more of you / who remain the untouched silence through which they are passing” (13-15). The relationship between the speaker and the “you” is one of immense intimacy, as the speaker explains, “I try to hear you remembering that we are not separate” (16). After building up the seeming relationship between the speaker and a form of nature, the fourth stanza pivots, calling for “peace with each other let peace be what is between us” before determinedly defining “you” as the “now single vanished part of my left hand bit of bone finger-end index” in what would appear to be a major shift so that it is not peace but violent space between the speaker and “you” (27, 28). While the remaining stanzas appear to concretize the finger as the “you,” the sense that the finger is itself nature never disappears. The effect is that when, in the final stanza, the speaker seems to feel his finger as phantom limb and pervasive warning, so too functions nature, so that the loss of nature results in a corporeal ache akin to losing a piece of the body.

Hand in hand with The River Sound, The Pupil also centralizes bodies as it plays out the nature-human relationship in poems other than just “The Name of the Air.” Reading “Before Morning” alongside “To Echo” hearkens to a different ache than that of losing the tip of a finger, putting into dense relation names, air, darkness, and bodies through allusion to the mythological figure Echo but, also, through grounding in present reality. “Before Morning” begins with “A name in the dark a tissue of echoes” followed by “a breath repeated on the arch of my foot / the mute messenger / last one to have heard the music” (1-4). Immediately nature has body and that body seems inseparable from the speaker’s human body. The name is a word, an audible breath in the dark air touching the speaker’s body. An echo is then a responding sound, a responding breath through the air, a corporeal layering of bodies’ breath meeting. The speaker speaks, Echo speaks, the air speaks—together they create a communal tissue, a communal body. There is an earthly beauty to the exchange, with Echo as the “elusive wanderer speaking / when sound carries / over
a river” bringing with her “beauty too far / beyond the human” (“To Echo” 6-8, 11-12, original emphasis). The ache felt in this instance comes not from losing the tip of a finger but from an emptiness behind “the name in the dark,” a feeling that something has been chased away. If Echo as a personification of real and tangible aspects of nature only frightens “them / into passing judgment upon you / later from a distance,” then “they” are effectively creating separation between themselves and a part of their own body. In this way, bodily harm is not simply physical harm to an individual body but can include harm to the collective communal body.

Present Company opens with a sense of the corporeal being communal, “They know so much more about / the heart now but the world / still seems to come one at a time” (“To This May” 1-3). Here “the heart” is a singular found within many and “the world,” which has a strong association with the heart as a result of the line break, is a singular within which there are many. Following this poem, as well as several others that hint at the importance of the body to this collection, “To Lingering Regrets” presents an early tonal shift through a poem that not only introduces a sequence of poems “To” various body parts but in which even the regrets take corporeal form. In this sequence, “To My Legs” would appear by the title to focus on the human speaker’s legs, which it does in some ways; and, yet, the human legs turn out to be a gateway to the horse’s legs so that, by the end, all of the legs seem to run parallel to each other. Perhaps one of the most explicit invocations of nature-human thresholding comes with “To the Air” and “To a Mosquito,” which literally flesh out the corporeal connection between body and air seen in The Pupil’s “The Name of the Air.” The speaker admits to the air

    Just when I needed you
    there you were
    ........................................
    ... never
    could I live without you
    never have you
    belonged to me
    never do I want
you not to be with me
you who have been
the breath of everyone
and of each word spoken ("To the Air" 1-2, 15-23)

The air that each body breathes does not belong to that body; rather, it is part of a collective that circulates through all bodies as life and the words that express that life. The air, like other elements, brings bodies into conversation with each other even if the bodies are unaware of the connections, emphasizing the Nancian with—a möbial togetherness—that can be understood when the speaker says that he wants the air always to be with him. “To a Mosquito” is a perfect example of the air as link between bodies, as the speaker of the poem knows that “by my breath you find me” (23), querying whether the mosquito is then family, making “your many offspring / something to me / by blood presumably” (12-14). The corporeal connection between the mosquito and the speaker make for an intimacy that the speaker does not necessarily desire but that the mosquito takes as a given right. Turning around the usual presumption of entitlement, the speaker accuses the mosquito of believing that it can take the speaker’s blood as a matter of course, “I make the world right for you / it is as though you / believe I owe you something” (30-32). The question of corporeal debt between bodies becomes infinitely complex upon recognizing the ways that bodies incorporate each other, consciously or not.

Bodies are also inherently linked with creation and return, both in an artistic and biological sense. Echoing the close of The Folding Cliffs, The Shadow of Sirius begins with “The Nomad Flute,” a poem that uses breath as a connection between the speaker and the nomad flute. The breath, which creates the music, is the sustaining power behind life, so that the speaker will not ask “where you learned that music / where any of it came from / once there were lions in China” (17-19). Breath comes and goes, sustaining life and vanishing, so that the speaker “will listen until the flute stops / and the light is old again” (20-21). The passage of time is linked to bodies, though not always linearly. A few poems later, “Accompaniment” uses bodies again, this time through the
speaker’s hands, as a dynamic mode of connection across space and time. The speaker in “Accompaniment” feels both connected and disconnected from his own body in a way that renders the hands of an individual as a general connector. Expanding to a more universal connection (since hands apply only to a limited group of bodies), “Another Dream of Burial” nominalizes an act that inherently requires a body of some sort. The burial space is not a space of creation but one of return. At the poem’s close, as if coming back from a dream or meditation, the body comes back into focus as it “set nothing down / and turned and walked away from it / into the whole world” (12-14), leaving the “nothing” of the buried body behind and returning to the things of life. Of course, even the “nothing” is itself a thing, a measure of negative definition, just as, in “The Long and the Short of It” and “My Hand,” breath and bodies also take the form of measurement, so that in the process of creation and return, bodies become inextricably linked with the passage of time, linear or not.

The development of Merwin’s portrayal of bodies culminates in the möbial nature-human relationship manifested in Merwin’s five most recent collections. These collections clearly work in conversation with each other and one of the most striking examples of this conversation is “Weinrich’s Hand,” a poem from The Moon before Morning in which many of the earlier images and concepts come together. For example, the heart from “To This May” reappears as the source of “chords of the great chorale / ... / chords he had heard before he was born / the organ echoes of his mother’s heart” (9, 14-15). The continued revisiting of hands and fingers, with Weinrich holding “in his fingertips / the moment just before the beginning” (6-7), reads as Weinrich holding time literally “in[s]ide his fingertips.” The trees, of course, are also signs of incorporation, here with “the whole tree reaching / from its roots in the dark earth out through all / its rings of memory” (3-5) in language reminiscent of “To Ashes,” a poem in Present Company that aligns humans and trees as literally the same in origin and end. Significantly, a few poems before
“Weinrich’s Hand,” “Rule of Thumb” signals to the reader, if the reader was not already aware, that Merwin is opening an increasingly familiar door, “When my thumb touches my little finger / a door opens that I forgot was there / a door of air forgotten in the air” (“Rule of Thumb” 1-3). Air has long become one of Merwin’s primary means of demonstrating nature-human corporeal thresholding and, by this point, whenever air appears in any form, the reader should interrogate why, as well as what statement Merwin is making about the nature-human relationship. When thumb and finger meet in mutual touching, the recognition of simultaneous self and other open the door to the collective of thresholded selves and others.

Moving more deeply into “Weinrich’s Hand,” the body-air relationship takes a turn as Weinrich and his chorus are portrayed, literally, as the wind. The reader might assume that the relationship is figurative, given the poem’s opening image of the wind holding up the poplar branch, but one must ask why this relationship would need to be figurative. The easiest indicator that the relationship is meant to be literal comes in the final line, with the poem’s only simile in “silence fell out of the sky like rain” (20), whose figurative comparison comes in contrast to the direct statements in the remainder of the poem. In querying the possibility of a literal relationship, the reader might turn to the OED’s literal definition of wind, which states that wind is, “Air in motion; a state of movement in the air; a current of air, of any degree perceptible to the senses, occurring naturally in the atmosphere, usually parallel to the surface of the ground.” Certainly the “motion” and “movement” of the “current” stirred by the movement of Weinrich’s hand (through the troposphere) are perceptible to the senses through the resulting vocal intonations if the observer is not close enough to see the sheet music rustle. Whether the reader understands “naturally” as a result of nature or as a matter of course, there are few plausible counts by which to discredit the whole definition, given the context of the poem and larger corpus. A devil’s advocate might suggest that ‘human-made’ wind is, by definition, not naturally occurring, or that,
even if there is agreement to ignore self-perpetuating definitions of ‘natural,’ the chorus’ wind does not happen by chance but, rather, through planned and coordinated efforts—but of course, wind caused ‘by nature’ results from a series of coordinated actions that affect the type, duration, and effects of the wind. Putting semantics aside, understanding human bodies as literally capable of being the wind, alongside the individual and communal roles of bodies, creates a rich framework for Merwin’s corporeal approach to the nature-human relationship.

Merwin’s poetry illustrates the benefits of focusing on bodies rather than the complex criteria or imbalanced assumptions of personhood. From the very beginning of Merwin’s published career, his poetry centralizes bodies as a means of exploring the problematic relationship between humanity and nature. By the time he publishes the recent collections, Merwin has shifted from a human-nature portrayal to a nature-human one. It is important to note that this shift does not occur because Merwin sees an actual shift taking place in humanity’s relationship with nature. The violence that exists in the early poems exists in the later poems. The mistreatment of nature that exists in the early poems exists in the late poems. The struggle to understand how humanity can exist as it does is also in the early and late poems. It is this struggle—with the violence, the mistreatment, and the destructive selfishness of humanity—that pushes Merwin to reorient his and, consequently, his readers’ perceptions of humanity’s role in relation to nature. Bodies put into relation through thresholds are the primary means of pursuing this reorientation. Thresholds, like doors, are portrayed initially as existing between bodies, liminal spaces designating one from the other and indicating the desire to bring the bodies closer together, to reduce the perceived space between them. Eventually, however, Merwin realizes that the bodies are themselves liminal spaces. They are singular bodies that appear to exist independently of other bodies with space between them designating their boundaries. But they are also—not that they represent also—collective bodies comprised of more than one body,
continually exchanging *in a material sense* with other bodies so that each body is also the in-between-space that simultaneously designates and confounds its möbial boundaries.
Chapter 2

Merwin’s Möbial Corporeality

The Defeated

Beyond surprise, my ribs start up from the ground.  
After I had sunk, the waters went down.  
The horizon I was making for runs through my eyes.  
It has woven its simple nest among my bones.  

(The Moving Target, 1963)

* * *

As early as Merwin’s first published collection, A Mask for Janus, bodies mattered to Merwin. Over time, however, bodies shift from a matter of interest to the crux of Merwin’s nature-human relationship. The early collections create connections between the human body and nature through metaphor, metonymy, and other literary constructions that bring multiple bodies into conversation. Though the human-nature relationship differentiates between mind and body, Merwin quickly discovers that a more open approach to bodies offers a way to move beyond this limiting dichotomy. For example, Merwin’s third published collection, Green with Beasts, uses a sequence of poems from his unpublished bestiary to warn against the dangers of attempting to control animal bodies. This warning takes shape through the bestiary’s transformation from a Medieval form “infected with a rage to order that is opposite to curiosity” into a series of riddles that allow animals to express values that are, at this early stage, more about the human-nature relationship than about nature itself (Brunner 38). Riddles become a recurring rhetorical device in Merwin’s poetry because they require the reader’s engagement, rather than allowing the reader to consume the poem passively. This shift of reader responsibility is part of Merwin realizing a vision of the nature-human relationship that connects bodies möbially rather than metaphorically. In moving bodies from being interesting components to centerpieces, Merwin’s later work reveals a nature-human relationship that, in spite of continual human damage, may offer humanity the
opportunity to be a healthy partner. Paramount to this endeavor are the thresholds and liminal spaces that take shape across the collections.

Thresholds begin at, perhaps, the most literal place possible: in doorways. The initial invocations of doors and doorways is an example of Merwin enacting a mode of thinking not yet fully conceived in his mind. Merwin realizes that there is a power in these spaces and begins by using thresholds as a means to put different bodies in relation to each other, as when two lovers meet in the doorway of their home. Looking at Merwin’s full corpus, his use of thresholds and liminal spaces speak volumes (literally, full published volumes, for example, The Shadow of Sirius) about the role of bodies within the nature-human relationship and, in particular, the relationships between and within bodies individually. Parallel to developing thresholds in relation to bodies, Merwin also develops the role of light and darkness, eventually putting them in möbial relation just as he does other bodies. In both cases, liminality offers a way of conceptualizing the relationships between bodies. In the early poems, the ‘betweenness’ connecting bodies creates conceptual distance that, in ecocriticism, results in efforts to bring the bodies ‘closer’ together. That bodies are distanced from each other is explored through poetic representations that fragment bodies and that seem, even, to create experiences of disembodiment. A closer look at some of these instances, however, leads to the realization that what resembles disembodiment is actually a means of emphasizing not just the body but the möbiality of corporeal experience. That is, Merwin’s poems present a kind of corporeal experience concerned with experiences of bodies with other bodies. Merwin’s use of liminal spaces develops from extremely literal spaces of interaction to highly complex corporeal encounters that allow for diversity of experience within and across species.
Liminality: The Incorporation of Bodies

Elizabeth Grosz’s use of the möbius strip provides a model that reconciles two seemingly incompatible views: the idea that binaries are rigidly fixed and the idea that binaries are imposed constructions that potentially do more harm than good. That bodies exist individually seems like an observation so fundamental as to be undeniable. A piece of paper has two sides. At the same time, the fact that bodies interact—on a social level through communication, on a molecular level through physical touch, on a material level through exchanges like breathing in and out the same air—also seems fundamental, revealing that the distinctions between what constitutes each body are not as distinct as they appeared. That piece of paper, when revealed to be a möbius strip, transforms the vision of two binary sides into one side continually thresholding into itself (or the other). The body, too, is möbial—thresholding continually ‘between’ interior and exterior, itself and other. While the idea of bodies thresholding möbially is something of an abstract concept, Merwin’s starting place for exploring thresholds is imminently literal: doorways. Doorways are liminal spaces of interaction between bodies in the poems, spaces in which bodies come together and their interaction comes into focus. Alongside these poems, Merwin also explores light and dark, as well as presence, absence, and negation. This second exploration comes to merge with the exploration of bodies and thresholds so that light and dark are no longer binary opposites but möbial partners, torsioning to create a liminal space in which shadows are bodies resulting from bodies. Liminal spaces and thresholds, in particular understanding bodies as thresholds, eliminates the problematic distinctions between bodies, recognizing them instead as part of a möbial whole.

Merwin’s use of doorways as literal thresholds in poems foreshadows his later treatment of poems themselves as doorways, thresholds in a möbial partnership between writer and reader. The literal, early stages of this practice of liminality are perhaps best seen in a sequence of poems
in *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*, the final collection in *The Second Four Books of Poems* and what I would consider the first third\(^{10}\) of Merwin’s published career. Following a sequence of poems whose titles all contain the word “Summer,” this second sequence is a series of four poems each titled “The Door,” suggesting from the outset that each has the potential to lead the reader somewhere different. In the first poem,

> You walk on  
> carrying on your shoulders  
> a glass door  
> to some house that’s not been found (1-4)

setting up the poem as a discourse between the you and the skies, and the door as real but leading to a place not yet discovered and, therefore, potentially uncertain in its realness. While, in the first poem, the door might be a burden of sorts, in the second, the door is a blockage or an obstacle: “Do you remember how I beat on the door / kicked the door / as though I or the door were a bad thing” (1-3). The speaker struggles to open the door, to speak with the “you” of the poem, to dance with the “you,” and then ultimately to find the door again. Whereas in the beginning the speaker’s question was of kicking the door, at the end the speaker must ask of kneeling, “could I turn at all // now should I kneel // and no door anywhere” (38-40). The fragmentation of the language in this second poem plays out the speaker’s struggle to communicate. The third door poem carries out the threat of the closing line in the second poem, beginning with, “This is a place where a door might be / here where I am standing” (1-2). This third poem discards certainty in favor of a potential door, that is, what might possibly be a door or what might possibly be the “I” as door. Like the first stanza, the door into the shadow of the second stanza, “where now there is

\(^{10}\) As explained in the introduction, the first third would be those collections in *The First Four Books of Poems* and *The Second Four Books of Poems*. The second third is constituted by the collections in *Flower and Hand* continuing through to *The Vixen*. The final third begins with *The Folding Cliffs* through *The Moon before Morning*. 
me,” situates the door and the speaker in the same space, suggesting they might be interchangeable (7).

and somebody would come and knock
on this air
long after I have gone
and there in front of me a life
would open (8-12)

This final stanza shades the poem with additional complexity as the speaker describes being gone and there at the same time. The role of the air becomes significant as it, in lieu of the door as literal door or as speaker, becomes that on which “somebody would come and knock.” Metaphor, while increasingly possible to see in the third poem, is undeniable in the fourth, in which the door is clearly metaphoric and that metaphor—that “dead thing” (4), “chamber of your heart” (6), “thing” (8), “your heart” (9)—then becomes also metonym. While the first poem focused on the “I”; the second on “I, “we,” and “you”; and the third on the “I”; the final poem allows the presence of “you” in the initial querying stanzas, but then in the final twenty-two lines, allows only two uses of “us” and one of “we,” as though emptying the poem of human self or agency. Even in the instance where agency is permitted in, “we by then / recognize” (23-24), the human subject is separated from the verb not only by two filler words, but by a line break as well, as though to put as much space between subject and action as possible.

The series of “The Door” poems situates liminal spaces on a spectrum of real to metaphoric, creating a foundation for the use of thresholds as spaces of corporeal connection. Building off the door as literal and figurative threshold, “To the Hand,” which comes a little over halfway through Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, preliminarily brings together body, nature, and humanity, in that order.

What the eye sees is a dream of sight
what wakes it to
is a dream of sight
and in the dream
for every real lock
there is only one real key

and it’s in some other dream
now invisible

it’s the key to the one real door (1-9)

Beginning with the eye as body, the dreaming is not specified as human, and not until the entrance of the first person speaker can the reader say with any presumed certainty that humans are clearly present. Even then, there is nothing that requires the hand to be human and, in fact, counter to that is Merwin’s insistence on fragmenting the reality and ownership in relation to the hand. The one key that opens “the one real door” is now located in a dream different than the “dream of sight” in which the door exists.

it opens the water and the sky both at once
it’s already in the downward river
with my hand on it
my real hand

and I am saying to the hand
turn

open the river (10-16)

Thus, the key is already in nature, not in the sense of having been dropped in and consequently surrounded by nature but, literally, in nature, as a presence pervasive and invisible in the water flowing downward. Touching this presence has the ability to open access to the river and sky through what will later become möbial corporeality, which allows humanity to be “already in” nature in the same way as in this poem. The emphasis on the word “turn” is a reminder that this attitude itself is a turn from what came before, having the potential to “open the river” to a new, less anthropocentric understanding of the world. Likewise, two-thirds of the way through this collection, “In the Life of Dust” supports decentering the human through an extreme centering of the liminal. Life itself functions as a threshold between birth and death, and if, in the biblical
narrative in which Merwin is so deeply invested,\textsuperscript{11} life finds origin and end in dust, dust then can be seen as the bookends of life. In this way, the poem’s title can be translated into something like, ‘In the [Liminal Space] of [That Which Denotes Liminal Space],’ compounding liminal space on itself so that everything becomes a threshold in relation to everything with which it coexists. In both of these poems, liminality brings together body, nature, and humanity within a threshold space that permits the reconceptualization of relations Merwin desires.

In \textit{The Vixen}, the final collection in the second third of the published collections, the reader sees that the role of thresholds helps situate the collection as part of Merwin’s attempt to allow humanity the possibility of being a healthy partner rather than an inevitably destructive force. Merwin is fairly explicit in signaling to the reader that \textit{The Vixen} is concerned with liminal space, titling the third, fourth, and fifth poems of the collection respectively, “Gate,” “Threshold,” and “The West Window,” in unveiled references to thresholds. “The West Window” might gently remind the reader of “West Wall” from \textit{The Rain in the Trees}, signaling quietly the importance of walls in this collection also, in particular as liminal spaces. “Threshold” is, in a sense, a compound threshold—a threshold between two thresholds—aligning both nature and humanity as passers-through physical and temporal ground. The birds and speaker move “in and out” over “the stone sill smoothed to water / by the feet of inhabitants never known to me / and when I turned to look back I did not recognize a thing” (1, 7-8). Thus the stone threshold is a liminal space bringing together both nature and humanity, as well as past-nature and humanity with present/future-nature and humanity. All the while, the speaker is in what Jeanie Thompson would recognize as a Heraclitean stream of newness, perhaps suggesting that the present moment is always one of liminality, of fresh ever-changing experience only “render[ed] comprehensible” through “our

\textsuperscript{11} Merwin’s father was a Presbyterian minister.
attempt to shape it in acts such as poetry” (93). For the speaker, the moment of comprehension comes only at the end of the poem.

the swallows grew still and bats came out light as breath
around the stranger by himself in the echoes
what did I have to do with anything I could remember
all I did not know went on beginning around me
I had thought it would come later but it had been waiting (11)

The swallows and the bats exchange places over the threshold of daily time, and breath resides quietly in the background as a liminal exchange between the human speaker, stranger even to himself, and the scene. The residual sound of echoes is another point of connection on the temporal threshold, remnants of past events that seem both connected and unconnected to the speaker’s life. The gentle presence of humanity in this scene is such that the speaker finds himself unexpectedly implicated and, perhaps more unexpectedly, welcome.

Welcoming humanity may seem strange given its problematic role in relation to nature, and yet, the attitude is critical to addressing that role. A basic tenet of resolving problematic relationships is that, if one party feels that there is no chance they can rectify a situation, then there is no purpose in even trying to do so. To justify humanity’s attempts to engage fruitfully with nature, there must be the possibility of humanity’s being a healthy partner. “In The Doorway,” another of The Vixen’s poems of threshold, is a poem “dependent on a paradox,” according to Thompson, and “is itself a point of entry and leaving—a liminal space” (93). The ideas of “abiding / and not staying” (11-12), of night breeze “remembered / only in passing of fox shadow” (12-13), “of finding again” (14), of “knowing no more but listening” (15), of “touching and going” (15), and “of what is gone the smell of touching and not being there” (16), all contribute to the general sense of paradox to which Thompson alludes. Pushing further, one of the issues at stake is that of humanity’s position in relation to nature, which seems to climax in the final line’s paradox of “touching and not being there” but which actually is set up much earlier in the poem. Beginning
with physically creating space for corporeal encounter between the human and the stone in the doorway, the poem plays with a negative approach to building the poem and the relations therein—first through empty space of “breath” (2) and “the places between” (3), and then, through the repeated “without” in lines 4-6. This negative construction suggests the possibility of presence without domination, of touching without permanently scarring.

To understand the difference between presence and domination, one can turn their attention to the stone. Taken from the earth and crafted into a door frame, that doorway becomes the one that Cordóva sees between the natives and the forest in “The Real World of Manuel Cordóva,” a long narrative poem published in *Travels*, the collection before *The Vixen*. Stone is a direct connection between nature and humanity, should humanity choose to see it that way. But the stone doorway is not fixed, the space of the threshold, like Heraclitus’ river, is constantly changing. The stones to which the human palm can be placed, as in “In the Doorway,” can also return to the body of the earth. There are multiple poems in *The Vixen* that call to the forefront the stone walls of the French landscape, many of which are in various states of dilapidation. In these poems, like “Late” or “Old Walls,” walls can be seen as delineating boundaries that may complicate the nature-human relationship. Certainly walls are tied to problematic questions of property and ownership. In these poems, however, the walls are changing, are breaking down, and are, therefore, liminal dividers connecting humans attuned to the nature-human relationship. Seeing the walls dissipate back into the earth suggests that the boundaries between the earth and the human hands that touch it are transient. Once clear dividers and markers of human distinction, in “Late,” it becomes clear that

The old walls half fallen sink away under brambles
and ivy and trail off into the oak woods that have been
coming back for them through all the lives whose daylight
has vanished into the mosses there was a life once
in which I lived here (1-4)
The complexity of these lines and their delineations of nature and humanity break down not just the images of stone boundaries, but also linguistic and physical boundaries. The walls sink into the brambles and ivy, which trail off into the oak woods, which are working their way “back for them”—at which point “them” might be the walls or synechdochally the humans who created the walls. The lives of the humans or the human-walls seem permeated by the oak trees’ return, disappearing into the landscape as the light disappears into the moss. Syntactically, the integration of nature and human is strengthened by the line pivoting on the word “there,” so that on the one hand “there” is tied to the moss, while on the other and at the same time, it is tied to the speaker’s life. The speaker is not dead; instead, his life has changed perspectives so that he can “find it still here it seems to be a story / I know but no longer believe and that is my place in it” (11-12). Even in the speaker’s confusion, even in the human sinking somehow back into a seemingly nature-dominated landscape, the reader must realize that the speaker is firmly establishing, in that landscape, the place of the human.

Following this, it becomes necessary to make explicit the growing importance of a möbrial understanding of relationships of bodies with other bodies. Throughout The Vixen, there are moments when the merging of human bodies and other bodies seems possible, for example in “Untouched,” in which “Édouard bending into shadows to pick up walnuts” could read as though “bending,” like the word ‘turning,’ means becoming. The repeated admission “I left” seems at first to mean, “I left behind,” though “I left the stream running” sounds like the playful confession of one who has forgotten to turn off a faucet. Playfulness aside, the reader returns to this phrase and is struck by the possibility of an unanticipated thread of respect. The corporeal blending between human body and shadow in the poem’s only example of what might be seen as taking, suggests another aspect of “I left”—that is, to leave untouched either immediately or from a long-term perspective. “Bodies of Water” is, as suggested by its title, even more explicit in its presentation
of Merwin’s developing approach to shared corporeality between nature and humanity. The title recognizes bodies in nature, taking a familiar phrase as origin for expanding human conceptions of corporeality. Stones have already been established as part of The Vixen’s liminal corporeality; and, here, they become the basin reflecting faces, on the one hand, and incorporating them, on the other. Over the course of the poem, bodies are not simply water, but human, tree, earth, and even society. Most importantly, however, is the fluidity between bodies that the title intimates. Bodies are not starkly divided from each other but, rather, have the ability to be materially part of each other, as evidenced in part through the invocation of tree grafting in this poem.

Rounding out the importance of corporeality in “Bodies of Water,” the closing encounter with the soon-to-be ninety-year-old man under the lime tree (also known as a linden tree) is a perfect example of the material fluidity Merwin is trying to create between bodies. The linden tree is a sturdy tree good for hybridization and might be the rootstock the old man used to graft the walnut trees. The man’s statement that the grafted trees “give me something to look forward to” (29) likely references the time that grafting saves in comparison with raising from seed. Subtler, however, is the significance of literally combining bodies together. Supporting this possibility is “Legacies,” which occurs eight poems earlier than “Bodies of Water” and exhibits a notable overlap. Both poems feature lime trees and grafted walnut trees. Both suggest a connection between an aged cultivator and the grafted walnut trees. And both exhibit clear interest in corporeal description. “Legacies” paints a picture of the thin young man, the cultivator’s son, just as “Bodies of Water” paints the young walnut trees as “slender” bodies, creating a perceived overlap, while the image of the “wool waste” growing into the branches reminds the reader that the overlap between bodies is not meant to be seen only as figurative. That the cultivator in “Legacies” is a carpenter only adds another layer of complexity. Though a carpenter usually works with dead wood, in this case, Louis is building from living wood tissue, fusing two bodies together
rather than affixing two broken limbs. It is important to note, when thinking about the agency and role of the carpenter in grafting these particular trees, that grafting does not only take place at the hands of humans, but can happen as the result of other forces working in tandem. Thus, these poems are not simple representations of human intervention but, rather, examples focusing on the way that distinctions between bodies can become complicated.

Bodies of Light, Dark, and Shadow in the Early and Transition Collections

Merwin’s ongoing interest in the intersection between thresholds and bodies is better understood when taken in context with Merwin’s simultaneous interest in light, dark, and shadows. While doorways offer an obvious, though still complex, set of examples concerning thresholds and bodies, the role of light proves particularly useful because Merwin’s use of it changes significantly over time. Light can be understood initially symbolically, as representing facets of Merwin’s human-nature exploration. In tandem with Merwin’s shift towards a corporeal nature-human relationship is a movement towards a more material understanding of light and darkness and their relationships with bodies. Light, at times, consists of particles and, as such, constitutes a material body that exists in relation to other bodies. At other times, it functions as a wave, creating a need to explain how light can be both particle and wave. Einstein explained that, “It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do” (263). Like interior and exterior, self and other, or nature and human, the dichotomy breaks down, revealing the complex thresholds at the core of liminality and möbiality. Moreover, when light is understood as a body, it is able to interact with other bodies, becoming incorporated into human bodies, for example. Shadows, too, become important, in part because they are
themselves products of bodies and, therefore, exist directly in relation to those bodies. In conjunction, light, dark, and shadows reveal a type of corporeal coexistence that becomes critical to Merwin’s later endeavors to address humanity’s ethical obligations in the Anthropocene.

In Merwin’s early work, light is aligned with nature and nature’s well-being. “Fog,” from Merwin’s third published collection, *Green with Beasts*, and “The Herds” from Merwin’s sixth published collection, *The Lice*, both use light as a symbol of knowledge. In the foggy coastal scene of the first poem, lights on shore might seem to be signs of hope; however, the speaker reveals that, “This landfall is not vouchsafed us for / We have abused landfalls, loving them wrong / And too timorously” (15-18). Abusing land leads directly to the land rejecting their desire for harbor. The rhetorical question, “What coastline / Will not cloud over if looked at long enough?” builds on the land’s rejection of the sailors as a means of generalizing that human action counter to nature also runs counter to human survival. The question, in the poem’s narrative and beyond, is what to do. “Drifting itself now is danger,” warns the speaker, who calls for a return to the deep waters that test human ability to survive since “whether we float long / Or founder soon, we cannot be saved here” (23, 32-33). Humanity must not simply find the light; it must earn it. The opportunity for humanity to open its eyes to this necessity exists, though the whole of humanity may not yet be capable of acting as it should, even if some humans individually are. The speaker in “The Herds” works his way up the mountain and “would stop by the stream falling through the black ice / And once more celebrate our distance from men” (3-4). Whether the “our” is the speaker and the animals or the speaker and other humans with similar mindsets, there is a clear distinction between humans who have the ability to see the problem and those who do not. Among the stones the speaker hears the hoofs and sees against the backdrop of the late sun “the flocks of light grazing,” exhibiting a sensitivity and attunement lacking elsewhere. Earlier in the
collection, the speaker in “April” critiqued those exemplifying such lack, “You that can wait there
// You that lose nothing / Know nothing,” suggesting that all humans are losing something (6-8).

That light is associated with knowledge and, moreover, that this knowledge eludes even those attuned to its existence is reinforced in poems like “Invocation,” from Merwin’s fifth collection, *The Moving Target*. This six-line poem appears, in the first stanza, to address nature and, in the second, the human poet speaker. The vision of nature presented to the reader vaguely stirs remembrances of “The Wakening,” from *Green with Beasts*, in which light was also visualized as water.

    The day hanging by its feet with a hole
    In its voice
    And the light running into the sand (“Invocation” 1-3)

The bodily personification of nature in the first stanza is not one that proves immediately logical, suggesting a relationship between nature and humanity but refusing to clarify the precise essence of this relationship. The reader at least suspects, though, that the light flowing into the dark crevices of the sand results in some way from the hole in the day’s voice. The second stanza begins also with the body, clarifying the significance of the light:

    Here I am once again with my dry mouth
    At the fountain of thistles
    Preparing to sing. (4-6)

Bringing the first stanza into conversation with the second, the speaker’s also limited voice becomes a point of connection between nature and humanity. If light as knowledge (and water) might quench the poet’s thirst, the fountain of thistles initially seems to recall God’s words to Adam in Genesis 3:17-3:19 paired with the potential destruction of of Hebrews 6:7-6:8, though tempered by the possibility of Hebrews 6:9. Is it possible that the poet’s song could be the starting point for salvation? The reader might also think of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s *A Few Figs from Thistles*, which draws on Matthew 7:15-7:17 and the subversive possibility of trusting in that which
seems too dangerous to trust. This begs the question, if the voices of both nature and humanity are limited, at least as presented to human ears, to which prophet should we listen? The quest for light in these early poems is a quest for an elusive understanding that is present but that even the poet cannot access. Light is not yet pivotally connected to thresholds, though, as in “The Herds,” it is already being connected preliminarily to bodies.

Critical to Merwin’s bringing together his interests in thresholds and bodies through light, dark, and shadows, is that this endeavor is not exclusive to humanity. Through Merwin’s changing representations of animals and human relations with animals, the reader sees also that Merwin’s use of light and darkness is changing, moving towards a juncture with his explorations of thresholds. This shift is particularly visible in the notable differences between the bestiary poems in *Green with Beasts* and poems like “The Animals” (the opening poem in *The Lice*) and “In Autumn” (later in *The Lice*) in which light and darkness shift towards life and death. “The Animals” immediately puts the reader on notice that the poet’s awareness is changing. There is a recognition that humanity has not been seeing all that is present and that there is a darkness resulting from this blindness. At the same time—and this might easily be forgotten as the collection progresses—there is also hope, or even inevitability that, “We will meet again” (10). For all the darkness of *The Lice*, there is arguably always a thread of certainty that some as yet unknown solution will prevail. This solution cannot be taken for granted, however, and “The Animals” is immediately followed by the sting of “Is That What You Are.” The possibility of solution also does not minimize that which has already been lost. In the opening of “In Autumn,” the speaker mourns those animals lost, as dead stars whose light slowly fades from view and memory:

The extinct animals are still looking for home
Their eyes full of cotton

Now they will
Never arrive
The stars are like that (1-5)

Extinct animals, perhaps only visible as cotton-filled objects of taxidermy, cannot look to the future but can only fade from memory, their eyes windows into a fruitless preservation that shifts animals from participants in a relationship to mere objects of history. There is no light in their eyes, figuratively as life or literally as they take in the light from the stars through their eyes.

Arguably, in discussing light, dark, and shadows, one of the most important shadow poems in the whole of Merwin’s corpus is “The Last One,” also from The Lice. This apocalyptic poem offers both threat and consolation to humanity. That is, there is the threat of self-inflicted extinction and, at the same time, the geologic promise of dark consolation, for those concerned about the destruction of nature, that nature itself will never disappear; rather, humans will simply push the environment to a point that no longer supports human life. In this narrative, shadows are treated as bodies—bodies that are at moments independent of the bodies that initially created them. When “they cut everything because why not” (6), the result is that “it fell into its shadows and they took both away. / Some to have and some for burning” (8-9). Taking both away indicates that body and shadow can function independently of each other in spite of the human assumption that they cannot. The tension between having and burning—that is, keeping and destroying through the creation of light and dark smoke—quietly reveals the competing nature of humanity’s actions. In response to these actions, the shadow representatives of nature take on a dual role of appearing passive and reclaiming agency in order to take revenge. The pivotal moment of decision takes place after “they” have decided that tomorrow they will cut the last one:

    The night gathered in the last branches.  
    The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.  
    The night and the shadow put on the same head.  
    And it said Now. (13-16)

The night gathers in the branches, perhaps in the sense of being nestled in the branches. But it also might be in the sense of actually being in the branches, dark sap functioning as an inextricable
piece of the tree’s body. Likewise can the reader understand the preposition in the following line when the two shadows mix as one on the water. This is an early illustration of the way bodies can be understood as one being in another while also being seen as distinct, both from each other and the water. The interaction and interconnection between bodies also develops out of the fragmented body (a focus later in this chapter) that is typical of Merwin’s early work. That the night and the shadow each have a head and that, at will, they can choose to “put on the same head,” emphasizes the corporeality of the poem, as well as the way that corporeality is not rigidly stagnant but rather, in some ways, fluid as Merwin begins his exploration of the way that bodies can incorporate each other. This exchange of and between bodies takes place in language that sounds very much like the passage of time, as night creeps through and overtakes the light before giving way again to light in the morning. One hardly thinks of night fall as an act of agency but “The Last One” requires the reader to understand this natural cycle in a new way, just as the reader is also forced to rethink the relationship between shadow and body for both tree and human. “The Last One” unquestionably takes care to develop the shadows as bodies, making it clear that, from this poem on, shadows, as well as light and dark, should trigger in the reader’s mind a strong sense of corporeality and the necessary question of how these bodies interrelate.

In exploring the developing progression of light, dark, and shadows as connected materially to bodies, *The Carrier of Ladders*, published right after *The Lice*, makes clear that significant transitions are underway. Brunner makes three observations about *The Carrier of Ladders*, each of which, while interesting as he presents it, become particularly useful in relation to Merwin’s shifting approach towards liminality in the human-nature relationship. Brunner’s first observation is that the poems in this collection work to withhold a sense of closure from the reader, suggesting that there is something that must be done but allowing any decision or action to take place after the poem has ended. Second, while *The Lice* was clearly characterized by a
generally acknowledged sense of pessimism, *The Carrier of Ladders* occupies a space between optimism and pessimism, what I read as a liminal space “pinned agonizingly between denial and affirmation” (Brunner 155). Third, while earlier collections forced choices into an “either/or” dichotomy, *The Carrier of Ladders* tests out and then settles into an alternative choice of “both/and” (Brunner 163). Merwin’s inclusionary approach to the problematic usage of nature comes to contrast Morton’s exclusionary approach, and indicates Merwin’s developing interest in coexistence rather than simultaneous existence. As implied in the title’s reference to the body that carries the ladders, as well as the epigraph’s to the body that carries bodies, the corporeal again comes into play in the exploration of relationships. From the very beginning of the collection poems like “The Owl”—in which the human-nature relationship is revealed as a lie and the uncertainty of the “I” helps decenter the human—make it clear that a major change is imminent: namely, that the shift from considering a human-nature relationship to a nature-human one is underway.

The both/and shift taking place in *The Carrier of Ladders* aligns with the trajectory of liminality coming together with light, dark, and shadows. What Merwin finds in this collection is that, more than ever, it is not one place or another that provides answer but, rather, the threshold in between, the emptiness that gives space for possibility. “As Though I Was Waiting for That” very much gives the sense of being in a moment of in-betweenness, that moment of waiting at dusk as “it is getting dark.” As Merwin develops his usage of liminal spaces, shadows develop as the space in between what appear to be binary opposites but which appear so with the distinct sense that this is also a facade. In the poem “Lark,” shadows have not yet been defined as threshold but there is a clear sense of that later threshold’s origin. In the first stanza Merwin contrasts the black of night with the light of the star burning, though the word black is placed such that it might refer either to “voice” or “star” giving the sense that light and dark are not set states but rather porous
spaces that intermix somewhere in the middle. When, in stanza two, the reader is asked, “where and at what height / can it begin,” the question of boundaries or delimiters is raised before finishing with the possible antecedent for “it” in the closing lines: “I the shadow / singing I / the light” (13-17). The implication of threshold comes in the invocation of spatial proximity, of light and dark, and also of the ambiguous “I,” which could be human but could be nature. Thus, the thread of light, dark, and shadows begins a definitive entanglement with the thread of liminality that becomes inextricably central to Merwin’s möbial corporeality.

At the same time that the relationship between liminality and light, dark, and shadows is being brought into focus, the relationship between the bodies of nature and the bodies of humanity is also being strengthened. These two developments are key to understanding the formation of Merwin’s möbial approach to nature and humanity. As might be construed from the title, the conflicts and relationships explored in Opening the Hand, published thirteen years after The Carrier of Ladders, have both liminal and corporeal aspects to them, in particular as they relate to the nature-human relationship. “Palm,” the first poem in the final section seems, at first, to be a poem about plants but, given the collection’s title, there is little doubt of the palm’s parallel significance. As a plant (seed, then flower, then palm come into itself full-grown) there is only a sense of presence, no consideration of future or past, no worry about identity or purpose. If the reader’s eyes wander down the page to the hand holding the book open to this poem, what parallel train of thought might arise concerning the human palm? The hand is a corporeal accessory to the mind but it does not itself struggle with the thoughts of humanity. Instead it exists as part of the body, growing as the body grows, suffering as the body suffers, existing as the body exists—a singular piece of the collective body. Such certainty of existence and presence might be the sentiment behind the opening lines of “The Night Surf,” two poems later, when Merwin writes, “Of tomorrow I have nothing to say / what I say is not tomorrow” (1-2). Instead of that which is
tomorrow, as delineated in the second and third stanzas, the core of the poem is expressed in the closing line of the third stanza, as introduction for the fourth, shifting the emphasis from ‘tomorrow’ to “what is between us and tomorrow” (9). That threshold between now and tomorrow is what Merwin sees in the body of the palm, both as plant and as human.

The correlation between plant and human body in “The Palm” can be paired with a correlation between insect and human body in the final poem of Opening the Hand, “The Black Jewel,” in which the cricket becomes the body of all. In the darkness portrayed, the sound of the cricket surpasses the body of the cricket, and all that is understood to be encompassed by that darkness is also encompassed by that sound. The collective of crickets becomes a single cricket as the plurality of voices are comprehended as a single voice. In this way the corporeal collective encompassed by the darkness and as the darkness can become a singular collective body within the darkness. This figurative coming together is one of many presagers of the progression towards the material and möbial coming together that takes place in Merwin’s recent collections. The poem makes clear that, at this point, the connections between bodies are figurative, since “mice too and the blind lightning / are born hearing the cricket / dying they hear it” and, tying in the corporeality of the scene, “bodies of light turn listening to the cricket” (22-24, 25). Ultimately, the figurative role that the cricket plays in connecting the whole scene means that “the cricket is neither alive nor dead / the death of the cricket / is still the cricket” (26-28). The individual is a representative of the whole, and one becomes representative of the other. This interest in pairing human body and insect body, along with thinking that “the whole cricket is the pupil of one eye” (8), is an important sign in closing Opening the Hand because it signals the movement out of Merwin’s foundational explorations. Beginning with the pivotal collection The Rain in the Trees, followed by Travels and The Vixen, Merwin’s practice of liminality enters its final stage of development—this time resembling the möbial corporeality articulated fully in The Folding Cliffs.
The first collection of Merwin’s final transition, *The Rain in the Trees*, provides a clear glimpse of Merwin’s attempt to bring bodies and light and thresholds together. Jonathon Weinert writes that, over the course of the collections published in *Flower & Hand*, “Merwin increasingly brings the actual and imaginative landscapes into relationship, superimposing the one upon the other until, in *The Rain in the Trees*, they fuse into a new conception of home” (11). Weinert is interested in questions of place and the way that Merwin’s identity and biography become increasingly inculcated in his representations of the landscape around him. In a manner similar to what Weinert observes in terms of place, Merwin is thinking about bringing together the bodies of nature and humanity by superimposing them on each other. One of the opening love poems, “West Wall,” illustrates this point perfectly, as Merwin layers, and peels away, and relayers the leaves, air, shadows, apricots, light, and human skin so that one becomes the other in a stunning meeting of nature and human. An important distinction to note here is that, though physical bodies are coming into closer proximity and are in the early stages of a transformation that will become the mutual incorporation of nature and humanity, at this point, the corporeal connection is still figurative rather than literal. To explain, the light in the apricots in the lover’s skin is, in some sense, a way of saying that the speaker sees aspects of nature in the lover’s body. But, view this in contrast with the discovery in “Sight” that

> Once  
> a single cell  
> found that it was full of light  
> and for the first time there was seeing (1-4)

which illustrates the material incorporation of the light in the cell, which, in the eyes, results in seeing. Likewise, the logical step in “West Wall” would be to realize that, in a sense, the apricots and the light are actually part of the lover’s skin through consumption and absorption. Merwin has not reached this stage yet, though, and the focus at this pivotal juncture is bringing out the
significance of bodies coming together as the final stepping stone to a full incorporation of möbiality in the nature-human relationship.

**Möbial Corporeality in the Recent Collections**

That which is presaged in *The Rain in the Trees* is seen without doubt in Merwin’s recent collections. *The Folding Cliffs* is the turning point, using its extended narrative form to make explicit the arrival of Merwin’s möbial corporeality. Two collections beyond *The Folding Cliffs*, *The Pupil* is situated in the heart of this approach, fully incorporating the thresholds explored since the 1950s. Life itself is a liminal space between birth and death, a reality of which one becomes aware when one is reminded of that threshold’s limits. Merwin himself is standing in that doorway looking in the direction of death, knowing that it is closer to him than birth. In *The Pupil*, “The Hours of Darkness” portrays the speaker “looking / into the eyes of an old / man” (3-5), the shadow of whom interrogates the speaker in a tone reminiscent of “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Plantation” from *Opening the Hand*.

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have you considered
how often you return
to the subject of not seeing
to the state of blindness
whether you name it or not
do you intend to speak of that
as often as you do
do you mean anything by it (11-18)
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Invoking the continual invocation of not seeing and blindness also hearkens to the role that light and darkness, as well as shadows, play in Merwin’s recent poetry, reminding the reader again of the collection title’s significance as connection between light and dark, seeing and not seeing, and the shadows that allow differentiation between the two. If this connection was not clear already, the title also sets the stage for all subsequent references to light to be understood as references to material incorporation between bodies. Without the incorporation of light in the pupil, there
would be no vision, no seeing, no color, no shadow. The interrogation that takes place in “The Hours of Darkness” itself answers the questions posed about intention, as does the sustained exploration in subsequent collections. “Eye of Shadow,” from *The Shadow of Sirius*, is there
down on the dark threshold
a shadow waiting
..............................................
while the sky is turning
with the whole prophecy (6-7, 13-14)
potentially referencing the opening poem of *The Pupil*, “Prophecy,” in which the Sybil “sings of the darkness she can see” and “the dark she cannot” (3, 5). In the darkness, that is, the state of being in the dark or the absence of light, other senses take over, as when the speaker in “Eye of Shadow” ends with the lines, “I touch the day / I taste the light / I remember” (25-27). Not only do these lines remind the reader that corporeality and bodies are of primary concern in liminal spaces, the second line should remind the reader of “West Wall,” from *The Rain in the Trees*. The reader, then, can understand *The Pupil* as Merwin bringing the investigation of bodies in conjunction with the liminality of light, dark, and shadows, as well as presence and absence, to fruition. No longer mere interest, nor even active investigation, *The Pupil* exemplifies the way that Merwin’s recent collections serve as the landing place and space of continued development for Merwin’s möbial corporeality.

The earlier examination of corporeality and liminality focused on their foundational contributions to möbiality; here, I unpack how they function within it. Considering Merwin’s own awareness of life as a threshold-overlooking-death leads into an exploration of, first, the connections between liminality and bodies, in particular, the material incorporation of light into the body through the eyes (a reminder that one also takes in light through the skin) and, second, shadows as a result of bodies. In “This January,” the closing poem *The Pupil*, not only does Merwin
portray human bodies as embodying the stars but he also acknowledges the science behind human bodies being comprised partially of stardust.

    the winter stars
    ................................................
    ... are still forming
    the heavy elements
    that when the stars are gone
    fly up as dust finer
    by many times than a hair
    ................................................
    ... traveling
    at great speed and becoming
    our bodies in our time
    looking up after rain
    in the cold night together (2, 5-9, 11-15)

Through processes more complex than necessary to lay out here, stars are continually moving through the cycle of elements that they produce until, as a supernova, their cores collapse and they explode. Thus, the dust from which humans come can be thought of not simply as the dust of the earth but as the dust of the stars, which formed the earth. The human body, then, is a combination of stardust and water, explaining why “Flights in the Dark” (which appears much earlier in The Pupil) and “This January” would begin with “After nights of rain” and “So after weeks of rain” respectively. These notably similar lines cannot be separated from the invoked science of the human body’s molecular makeup. Since the body is made up of elements all found in stars except for hydrogen, which is not found in stars but is a primary component in water, rain is a logical background for focusing on the elemental makeup of bodies. Given how much of the human body is comprised of water, the rain also offers another reminder of ways that human (and animal and plant) bodies incorporate nature. Closing the poem with the word “together” invokes the withness developed in The Folding Cliffs, so that the poem (and collection) leave the reader with a strong sense of coexistence coming out of corporeal proximity and shared origin.
While “This January” addresses stars as heavenly bodies of light, “Flights in the Dark” instead positions moths as the heavenly bodies, complicating the narrative of bodies and light.

I watch their eyes
on the door near midnight
memories of the sun
near the solstice

and their wings made of darkness
the memory of darkness (5-10)

The visibility of the moths is not light that they themselves produce but is, instead, like the moon, a body reflecting the light of another body. The cyclical state of darkness associated with the solstice and the moths functions alongside the passage of days and years, as well as the traveling of starlight to create an association between time and the body. “To the Dog Stars,” a potential presager of *The Shadow of Sirius*, questions the presumed singularity of the Dog Star, which the speaker concedes, “may even be true / one moment at a time / along the journey of light” (3-5).

But time is comprised of continuous moments, for both star and human bodies, though the speaker in “Long Afternoon Light” in *The Shadow of Sirius* explains that, “we trust without giving it a thought / that we will always see it as we see it / ... we believe it as the moment slips away” (7-8, 11). The speaker seems to be taking a Heraclitean approach, in the sense that, just as no person can step twice in the same river, neither can they look twice at the same star; yet, even as the moment slips away, we still believe that it is present and unchanging. Time does not only change individual bodies in relation to themselves but it changes their relation to each other, as seen when the “lengthening shadows merge in the valley / and a window kindles there like a first star” (12-13). Neither body, nor shadow, nor kindled window remain static even if they appear not to change.

Poems that explore the importance of bodies frequently use the sense of presence and absence inherent in the liminal space created by light and darkness in order not only to make
bodies present, but to make them present through absence. “The String,” in *The River Sound*, opens with the affirmation, “Night the black bead” (1), pairing the darkness (absence of light) of the night with the bead’s presence so that the absence of night becomes a form of presence. The poem continues on to use the darkness as framing for the light of the stars. The focus on the morning and evening stars as being the same confirm the necessity of the darkness for seeing that star (actually Venus). In “The Marfa Lights,” which follows “Flights of Darkness” in *The Pupil*, the speaker elucidates that “there is no explaining / the dark it is only the light / that we keep feeling a need to account for” (66–68). If light is presence, then dark is the absence of presence, except that such absence is necessary in order to understand presence. Complete absence or complete presence eliminates the liminal space within which humans perceive and participate in life. In this poem, the dark appears to be the canvas and, the light, that which creates the relevant liminal space for human inquiry; but, the speaker’s recognition that “we” do not feel the need to explain the dark is a reminder that the darkness plays a role equal to that of the light. Supporting this assertion that the darkness is critical to creating the liminal space in which other bodies exist, “Migrants by Night,” the subsequent poem in *The Pupil*, positions other bodies as both necessitating and acting as liminal spaces in the darkness as well. Through careful syntax, Merwin makes his way through a series of bodies, each of which function as a threshold for another, until he arrives at the plovers, the presumed migrants by night. The poem circles around, though, so that the reader realizes that the other bodies and, ultimately, time itself, are also migrants and that the night provides the framing of absence to reinforce their presence.

Moreover, “Flights in the Dark,” “The Marfa Lights,” and “Migrants by Night” all contribute to the shifting association of light with time rather than with knowledge, as was the case in earlier collections. In “The Marfa Lights,” those interested in seeing the lights appear “only when the curtain of light / is fading thin above the black Glass Mountains / and the first stars are glittering”
and “Flights in the Dark” and “Migrants by Night” use the solstice in addition to the direct appeals to light and darkness as temporal markers to make clear that references to light are also references to the passage of time. “Migrants by Night” begins “Weeks after the solstice / now in the winter night” (1-2) with a focus on journeys. The waves and the birds both begin with

the first motion
that was in no place then
out of no place began
gathering itself in turn
to become a direction
under the clear wind
from the place of origin (16-22)

The focus on origin, motion, and motion as subsequent origin creates cycles within and between the bodies of the poem. Pushing a step further, Merwin circles around, returning to the opening images of the swells crashing on the mountain, one after another coming from and returning to the sea, except this time, he applies the images to waves of light.

and the waves of light flow in
from the first motion
bringing it with them
all the way to the moment
when the cry comes again
again before it flies on (37-42)

The motion to moment relationship is more than a clever layering of images; it is a statement about the liminal nature of bodies and spaces as origins, and in particular the ways that light and darkness connect to the passage of time through presence and absence. Absence is the inverse of presence, making more evident that which is present and the passage of time associated with that presence. By revealing waves of light as time, Merwin adds another layer of dynamism to the cycles taking place. Rather than happening within a static space of abstract repetition, there are concrete perspectives on time, though this does not preclude differences between individual perceptions.
Individual perception is actually quite important to understanding the role of shadows as threshold between complete light and complete darkness, in particular in Merwin’s two most recent collections, *The Shadow of Sirius* and *The Moon before Morning*, both of which inherently address shadows. *Present Company*, the collection between *The Pupil* and *The Shadow of Sirius*, also counts shadows among its addressees and “To the Shadow” gives a sense of the importance of individual perception leading into the final two collections. The continual use of “you” and “we” creates a sense of the individual, as well as a collective of individuals. The speaker’s voice addressing you creates an inherent ‘I’ that is then couched in the collective “we.” “To the Shadow” takes the central ideas from “Migrants by Night” and translates them from a third person observer to first person experience, taking as its explicit focus shadows rather than darkness.

Only as long as there is light
as long as there is something
a cloud or mountain or wing
or body reflecting the light
you are there on
the other side
twin shape formed of nothing but absence
made of what you are not (1-8)

The speaker explicitly lays out the necessity of having light and a body in order to have a shadow. The negative is what creates the positive and there is a twin relation between absence and presence. The shadow is “not the self we know / from night to night” (16-17), but neither is the self, since when one steps in the river, it is not simply the river that is constantly changing. In this way, both the self and the negative image of the self are continually changing, just as the waves of light (recognized in this poem “when we wave”) are also constantly changing. In *The Shadow of Sirius*, “Night with No Moon” plunges the speaker into darkness “darker than I can believe” so that “it is not wisdom I have come to” (1-2). It is not knowledge that the speaker has reached, nor is it a lack of knowledge through lack of light, “but this absence that I cannot set down” (4). The light is not gone; the cycles of the moon make it clear that time will bring returned visibility. Instead,
the sense of absence at hand is one that creates rather than is created. This is a shadow that seems to bring the body into existence rather than the body creating the shadow.

In *the Moon before Morning*, “Duo as the Light is Going” retells this story of creation through absence as the parable of Painted On and Burned In. By the time of this collection, Merwin has established his use of narrative as a means for conveying explicit lessons to the reader. His longer narratives, like *The Folding Cliffs*, “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” and “The Real World of Manuel Cordóva,” have more room to explore these lessons, but even in shorter narratives, like this 8-line poem, Merwin is able to compress his message into the space of the narrative. “Duo as the Light is Going” begins at the end of the day, on the cusp of light and dark.

With and without words, Painted On and Burned in tell the story of creation:

> Those two go on with what they are saying  
> at the ends of their long  
> lengthening shadows  
> while the sun sinks in silence  
> the one gesturing is Painted On  
> boasting even in silhouette  
> to Burned In who in response  
> says not a thing (1-8)

At this point in time, indicated by the changing light, both Painted On and Burned In are moving to shadow and darkness—positive Painted On is the body turned silhouette by the setting sun and Burned In the counterpart coming into presence as Painted On fades into absence. When Burned In “says not a thing,” “not a thing” is itself a thing created from the absence. The sense of folly that the reader gets concerning Painted On through the verb “boasting” likely stems from Painted On’s lack of understanding about the relationships in the threshold space between absence and presence. While Painted On sees power in the positive (even as the fading light undermines the visibility of that which is Painted On), Burned In recognizes the creative power also in the negative. Two poems before “Duo as the Light is Going,” “The Wonder of the Imperfect” tells the same story from the perspective of the artist who is constantly struggling to escape the liminal realm of the
unfinished and, yet, who understands that, as with a shadow, “I am made whole by what has just / escaped me as it always does / I am made of incompleteness” (8-10). Just as the artist sees the creative capacity of incompleteness and absence, so too does the speaker in “The Latest Thing,” a poem in The Moon before Morning that suggests somewhat darkly “that the cities are made of absences / of what disappeared so they could be there” (2-3). Here, what is created by absence may not always be preferable to what might otherwise be there. Thus, negative creation cannot be viewed simply as good or bad. Rather, it is a tool for understanding and representing the complexity of the corporeal thresholds between and within nature and humanity.

The Corporeality of Merwin’s Disembodied Narrators

Merwin’s early work characteristically employs fragmented bodies as a means of showing the division between humanity and nature that must be overcome. Conceptually humans and nature are separated through distance that needs to be counteracted metaphorically. Prime examples of this are “The Wilderness” from Green with Beasts, “Some Last Questions” from The Lice, and “The Sadness” from The Carrier of Ladders. In these poems, bodies are broken down into their parts in order to emphasize a lack of cohesive whole, implying brokenness and disconnection from other bodies. In this early stage, bodies are of importance but they function as points of division rather than connection. Thus far, I have argued that Merwin develops a corporeal approach that recognizes bodies not simply in liminal spaces but as thresholds themselves. By understanding bodies as being in möbial relation to each other, one is able to recognize the apparent independence of these bodies while simultaneously recognizing that these bodies are connected through material exchange that complicates presumed boundaries. The next step is to understand how this argument can be reconciled with the persuasive one that Jane Frazier makes about Merwin’s disembodied narrators, which would seem to align with his early interest in
fragmented bodies. However, disembodiment proves considerably more complex. *Travels*, published in the important transition period between *The Rain in the Trees* and *The Folding Cliffs*, clarifies that what appear to be examples of disembodiment are not remnants of old thinking about fragmented bodies but, rather, are illustrations of Merwin's centralization of bodies through both presence and absence.

Poems like “After Douglas,” “Cinchona,” and “The Real World of Manuel Cordóva” constitute what Frazier calls the “misguided enterprises” of “naturalists who journeyed to the New World on botanical quests” (99). “After Douglas” provides a vision of humanity’s violence circling back, as Douglas is unsuspectingly caught in a bull trap with a bull who has been forgotten there, bringing bull body and human body into all too intimate proximity. Forgetting humanity’s violence leads to surprise upon rediscovery, “I could not have believed how my life would stop / all at once and slowly like some lead in air” (1-2). But even with the violence that takes place, Merwin is not separating nature from human, but rather bringing them together, as in the lines,

> to call it as people of the trees call
> me Grass Man Grass Man Grass Man having heard that
> from me and I neither turn nor am stirred
> but go on (9-12)

in which Man surrounds Grass and Grass surrounds Man. There is also recognition that humanity is not of central importance. The lives of importance are all lives.

> gulls flash above sea cliffs albatross
> bleats as a goat I see that the lives one by one
> are the guides and know me yes and I
> recognize (49-52)

Forgetting the lives of others ultimately leads to self-destruction. He says he has forgotten McGurney’s, as well as McGurney telling him about the human-made “pits on the mountain and there unchanged / is the forgotten bull standing on whatever / I had been” (62-64). Sharing in the sense of violence and self-destruction at the feet of nature is “Cinchona,” a poem that tells the
story of bark from which quinine was produced to fight malaria. Throughout the poem, however, it is clear that the sickness is not only malaria but a “fever of unknown origin / and boundless ambition” (42-43), an “undetermined / fever” (42-43) that caused such desire that

though bitter its taste it was sought stripped shipped
to be sold in Spain carried by
missionaries defended fought over
killed for (61-64)

The greed and desire continually for more, for turning nature into profit without respect for the trade or its effects on the body, brings the reader to “The Real World of Manuel Cordóva,” a long narrative poem detailing Cordóva’s captivity with a native Amazonian tribe, during which time he becomes accepted into the tribe, learning the arts of healing from the chief and eventually becoming chief himself. Cordóva’s journey exemplifies the differences between Frazier’s readings of the explorers’ experiences and mine.

The struggle portrayed in Cordóva’s narrative is not that of accepting the ways of the native people; that plays only a minor role. On the contrary, the struggle comes when the native traditions and values—strongly connected to bodies of nature and humanity—are compromised in Cordóva’s eyes as a result of growing desire for firearms. Cordóva, at first, is the one who shows them “what they could take from / trees that would buy them / guns” (220-222), but Cordóva realizes “through those days after / the first guns were slung in their / rafters” (276-278) that something has shifted out of balance and that a way of life was tipping in a new direction. Now the men were

spending their time doing
what he had taught them working
to change something living
there into something
else far away putting
their minds that far away wanting
guns guns becoming
more ardent still after a raiding (281-288)
There is power in guns and power in domination over the landscape. Perhaps not knowing where such actions would lead, lost in the ardor of their desire, the tribe works against the falling value of rubber and rising prices of guns, struggling under heavier loads going out and lighter loads coming back. Córdova is so invested in all that he learned from the chief that, not knowing the tribe’s true motivations, he accepts their desire to have him as chief. But he subsequently becomes “repelled by the frenzy / of their celebrations,” grappling in his mind with the contrast between

the human-blood hungry cannibals before him and

they
who so delicately
when hunting could make the
odor of the human body

one with the unwarned
air of the forest around
them (500-501, 501-507)

Unheeding of the seasons, forcing themselves to work through conditions that are not suitable for traveling, these native people who continue to hunt in the traditional methods bring to Córdova the realization that their desire for guns is

only
for humans such as the enemy
tribes with their angry
language but principally
for the aliens every
change of season so many
more coming up the rivers he
was taken on a winding journey
to see a succession of empty
names in the forest where they
had lived at some time before
the aliens had come with blades for
the white blood of the rubber
trees and guns (383-396)

Both the aliens and the natives, Córdova realizes, are in self-destructive circles, with the aliens selling the weapons of their own destruction and the natives forcing themselves into a role of
dependence on the very people they wish to destroy. Neither group of people carries with them adequate respect for the other or for the world that supports them. Words that once had meaning, as the natural world around the natives had meaning, become empty items of trade.

The destruction of native ways of life, and especially native languages is a major concern for Merwin. Frazier observes the same correlation within the nature-human relationship that Cordóva senses as his investment in the native culture crumbles with their crumbling tradition of respect for the earth: “As the physical world becomes increasingly removed from the lives of these peoples ... so the language that they have used to refer to their surroundings has been disappearing” (Frazier 76). To have “empty / names” requires that meaning once inherent to those names has been compromised. There are direct connections in “The Real World of Manuel Cordóva” between loss of language and loss of respect for the body. Cordóva tries to guide the natives, warning them of the end they would surely face against the aliens, but

even as
he spoke they had no peace
for the living and no place
for reason so the restless
passion for guns invaded the days
growing as the gashed trees
dripped and the smoke rose
around the rubber and the cargoes
were shouldered for the wordless
journeys where each time his
exchange with the trader yielded less (437-447)

Cordóva learned their language and tried to learn about their way of life; but, in exchange, he had shown them “the one thing // he had known to show them” and he discovers that the desire for power comes to outweigh the history that preceded the guns. In this passage, words have less value than the passion for guns, and violence becomes a necessary and, subsequently, desired consequence. The bodies of the trees are gashed with as little respect shown to them as the bodies of those humans that the native men eat after a raid. Cordóva is shown “every / overgrown scar”
and, ultimately, when he comes to the full understanding of what has happened and is happening, he must escape from the disrespected forest onto an ironically already dead ship, where he waited
in the dark for midnight with his head
afloat above the floating wood
from the limbs of wood
from the forest falling into the loud
firebox watched the trees of sparks fade
overhead as the boat started
out into the river his mother was dead
whatever he might need
was somewhere that could not be said
as though it had never existed (422-423, 592-602)

These closing lines encapsulate the story of the following centuries, leading to humanity’s current situation in which returning to the familiar is easier than fighting to change the mindset of the masses. The fragmented body from Merwin’s earlier work returns in the fragmented bodies of Cordóva and the trees. The reference to his mother being dead refers, on the one hand, to his mother having died of influenza but also, on the other, to the loss of a figurative mother in nature. If there was something in the native culture that had fulfilled a need, there was no language for it and no one to share the words with even if he could have formulated them. Thus, he returns to his own society with a knowledge of human transgression but no immediate hope for recovery. The bodies of humanity have been forcibly detached from the bodies of nature represented through the rubber trees.

This brings the reader to Cordóva’s own body and reconciling my argument for a mūbial corporeality with Frazier’s devotion of an entire chapter to the role of disembodiment in Merwin’s poetry. Frazier’s explanation of the disembodied narrator is that, “To achieve the participation in nature that they desire, Merwin’s narrators betray little or no personal identity and often seem as if they are voices speaking free of the body,” which is hardly the case with Cordóva, whose biographical and historical contexts echo through the narrative (54). Likewise, the narrator in
“After Douglas” might be described in Frazier’s terms and, yet, as I showed earlier, his tale is deeply rooted in his own body and the relationship of that body with other bodies. Frazier’s narrator is one who struggles between the body and an essential self, working to empty the self since, “To reach outward situates the self in the universe, rather than the opposite” (56). This is essentially what Cordóva is learning to do and, yet, what might easily be seen as his moments of disembodiment can also be seen as moments of möbial nature-human corporeality. Drinking from the communal bowl with the natives, Cordóva “came to each tree ... and they / were its name” (81, 83-84) waking in the morning “with the others in a ring / around the ashes knowing” (89-90). It seems at first that the emphasis is on Cordóva leaving himself behind but it soon becomes clear that the real importance is the material withness of he and nature.

they drank from the bowl and lay
down he thought it was the same day
that he knew but he could see
through each of them an entry
to the forest (150-154)

He imbibes the liquid of the forest and, through that, comes to understand the material connection between the body and the earth. The doorway here is not yet an economic doorway; it is a fluid connection of words, mind, and bodies. Cordóva learns the connection between human bodies and nature’s bodies, both being able to take in the bodies of medicinal plants for healing and learning “in the dark how poisons / wait how the snake listens / how leaves store reflections” (129-131). The ring of humans around the tree is a material extension of the tree, another ring of the trunk indicating life and the passage of time. Of course, the tree is fragmented into firewood and burned, a reminder that the ring is also an indicator of death. This fragmenting of the tree’s body, however, does not indicate separation between tree and human, but, rather, the inevitability of shared ends as a result of the corporeal relation between the two.
Cordóva ultimately learns the concept of möbial corporeality. When the natives are dreaming and he is dreaming,

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they were all dreaming
together flowing
among the trees entering
cat fur monkey voice owl wing (159-162)
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so that the individual is part of the collective whole and the whole is made up also of individuals.

In Cordóva’s eyes, it is the natives’ connection to the natural world that makes them different from the aliens. But he also learns what the natives know, sees them differently from the aliens, and comes to expect that difference. The natives, perhaps unknowing of the full consequences, are willing to trade some of that essential connection with nature in order to gain the material items they believe will preserve their way of life. Cordóva soon learns that the natives believed that they must have somebody to guide them who already understood the deadly aliens steadily withering their way into the only forest somebody who had been alien and knew the outer words and how to turn something of the forest into what could save them to trade part of their life for the new death an outer person who could teach them how to have guns yet someone who had gone with them into the dream flowing through the forest and knew (190-208)

Cordóva had been alien. But then he became something else. Something part native and part alien, positioned in a liminal space between the two worlds. He had been alien and they native, but each is on a threshold and from Cordóva’s perspective only one side or the other can win and he knows it will be the Europeans. Cordóva’s realization that the body is the gateway into the
forest is underscored in the final image of the fragmented human and natural body in the closing lines, when his disembodied head “afloat above the floating wood / heard the limbs of wood / from the forest falling” (594-596). Though the fragmentation signals a disconnect, it also reinforces that physical connection between human bodies and the bodies of nature. When one is fragmented so too is the other. Most important, going into The Vixen, the final collection before The Folding Cliffs, is the realization that what Frazier reads as disembodiment does not detract from the material incorporation between nature and humanity. Yet, the lack of certainty about how to address the challenges of that relationship leaves the speaker, the reader, and humanity as a whole, on a precarious and uncertain threshold.

The critical role that bodies play in Merwin’s corporeal approach to nature-human reconciliation clearly begins in his earliest published poems, developing from interest, to investigation, to investment. That the liminal spaces in Merwin’s poems align with the Grosz’s application of the möbius strip is no coincidence. Grosz herself is committed to understanding better the nature-human relationship, countering entrenched divides between false binaries in order to help humanity understand its place in the world. Merwin’s ecopoetry is the core of a new way of thinking about the nature-human relationship. His poems spark the reader to reconsider their own place in the world, creating a foundation for more ethical behavior. Merwin’s exploration of thresholds becomes essential to his developing poetic corpus, allowing him the space to explore his own thinking about the nature-human relationship through the act of writing. His work with light—in particular his associations of light with knowledge, as well as, later, time and the body through its simultaneous status as wave and matter—opens another opportunity for him to explore the relationships of time and bodies. Merwin’s möbial corporeality also gives ecocriticism a new way to talk about relationships between bodies, one that does not depend on literary constructions to collapse artificial distances. Because Merwin’s möbial corporeality does
not have to fight against entrenched dichotomies, it allows the tension between bodies to express a corporeal circulation of coexistence. Merwin offers a vision of a möbial nature-human relationship developed over a lifetime of poems. Poems that express hope and frustration. Poems that allow the reader to recognize fear and possibility. And, more than anything, poems that remind the reader that it is not too late for nature and humanity to put on the same head and say Now.
Chapter 3

Doing Thinking: Intersections of Ars Poetica, Form, and Ethics

Separation

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle
Everything I do is stitched with its color.
(The Moving Target, 1963)

* * *

W. S. Merwin’s poetic career develops along a möbius of thinking and doing. Each of these acts feeds into the other so that they are simultaneously distinct and inseparable undertakings. In this cycle, praxis opens up thinking as metapoetic revelation. As Merwin’s poetry pushes the boundaries of his thinking, his thinking also pushes the boundaries of his poetry. In particular, Merwin’s poetry manifests the ongoing development of his thinking about the nature-human relationship and the ethical obligations that humans face and, often, fail to meet within this relationship. In his essay “The Future of the Past: The Carboniferous & Ecopoetics,” Forrest Gander asks, “But can poetry be ecological? Can it display or be invested with values that acknowledge the economy of interrelationship between human and nonhuman realms? Aside from issues of theme and reference, how might syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page express an ecological ethics?” (216) Through Merwin’s doing thinking, the answers to these questions emerge: Yes, poetry can be ecological and the poet, as someone invested with the power to engage and affect the thinking (and consequently acting) of his readers, is under ethical obligation to explore, through theme and form, the possibility of human reconciliation with nature. In addition to clear thematic trends, Merwin also employs ars poetica poems and extreme formal shifts to indicate that humanity must transition from passive repentance to engaged ethics if it wants any hope of healthy coexistence with nature. While there is seemingly inevitable cynicism
associated with traditional portrayals of humanity’s expulsion from Eden, Merwin’s refusal to accept that there is no hope for humanity proves key to shifting towards an engaged ethics. Merwin’s solution is not a desire for some prelapsarian state but, instead, that knowledge—the very basis for humanity’s fall—is also that which can allow humanity to coexist with nature. Knowledge but not dominion. Awareness without mastery.

In conjunction with Merwin’s exploration of ars poetica and ecological ethics, Merwin’s revisioning of the Edenic narrative lays the foundation for his later revisioning of the epic form that allows him to create, in *The Folding Cliffs*, a twenty-first-century epic that has a place in the ecological crisis of the turning millennium. In the Edenic narrative, knowledge leads to the fall of Man, followed by permanent expulsion from Eden. In Merwin’s continuation of this story, humanity learns that the very knowledge that caused the fall can be transformed into the means for return, not in the sense of ‘going back,’ but in the cyclical sense of ‘re-turn’ as turning again. Humanity cannot erase what it has done, particularly in the age of the Anthropocene; but, it can learn and change. Remaining ignorant rather than choosing knowledge results in expulsion in the form of eventual extinction. Key to the efficacy of the revisioned Edenic narrative is the reader’s participation. Robert Scholes’ article “Reading W. S. Merwin Semiotically” supports my argument that Merwin uses thematic and formal changes to increase his reader’s engagement as part of his ongoing *doing thinking* of ecological ethics. The desire for an active reader whose “role is held to be a creative, productive one, in which the reader helps to make the poem” ties directly into the dissatisfaction that Merwin feels in relation to humanity’s interaction with nature (Scholes 65, original emphasis). Change requires *doing* and a passive reader represents the passive repentance counter to healthy coexistence. In particular, the formal shifts that Merwin’s poetry undergoes through the mid-1980s are all indicative of and rooted in a desire not simply to give readers
interpretive options, but to coerce a readerly engagement that would allow them to be affected by the poems.

An active reader is the crux of Merwin’s ecopoetic project. Jane Bennett points out in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, that ethics “require[s] both a moral code and a deliberately cultivated sensibility” (29). Alone, “rules of behavior” are not enough, requiring also “an aesthetic disposition hospitable to them, the perceptual refinement to apply them to particular cases, the energy or will to live them out, and the generous mood that enables one to reconsider them in the face of new and surprising developments” (29). Bennett’s mood of enchantment and the habits of mind associated with it overlap with Merwin’s ongoing investment in cultivating particular habits as a means of achieving ethical behavior. The habits with which Merwin is interested are apparent in his thematic foci, for example, corporeality and liminality; in his formal evolution, as in his much discussed relinquishing of punctuation and turn to free verse; as well as in his explicit use of *ars poetica* to disclose his process of doing thinking. Each of these endeavors imbues Merwin’s poetry with the elements necessary to support the central tenets and responsibilities of ecopoetry. Ecopoetry can be understood as a möbius of aesthetics and ethics, and the ecopoet’s task, to maintain and perpetuate this möbius. In this way, aesthetics must maintain ethics and ethics, aesthetics. Merwin’s *ars poetica* poems, in particular, indicate the ecopoet’s responsibility: the metapoetic quality of these poems becomes pervasive in other non-expressly *ars poetica* poems, resulting in continual reminder of the poems’ construction by both poet and reader. As an interpretive tool, then, *doing thinking* explores Merwin’s text as the liminal space between doing and thinking, a space in which theme, trope, and form intersect as the poetic substance of Merwin’s ecological ethic.
**Ethics in Practice**

Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life* works to counter both “the image of modernity as disenchanted” and “the image of ethics as a code to which one is obligated, a set of criteria to which one assents or subscribes” (Bennett 3). Such a narrative of disenchantment “ignores and then discourages affective attachment to [the] world,” a key component in the efficacy of ethical codes, which, on their own, can do little to ensure morality. Effective ecopoetry, then, must do more than enumerate humanity’s transgressions against ‘Nature,’ instead, creating experiential connections between the reader and the ethical obligations to which the poet wants the reader to commit. According to Bennett, “The disenchantment tale figures nonhuman nature as more or less inert ‘matter,’” and can center around selves, culture, or nature, for example, when “a spiritual dimension once found in plants, earth, sky is now nowhere to be seen” (7, 8). Bennett’s “counterstory” of enchantment “seeks to induce an experience of the contemporary world—a world of inquiry, racism, pollutions, poverty, violence of all kinds—as also enchanted—not a tale of reenchantment but one that calls attention to magical sites already here … in the sense of cultural practices that mark ‘the marvelous erupting amid the everyday’” (8). Bennett, like Merwin in his revisioning of the Edenic narrative, is not seeking a former condition in need of reinstatement. Nor is she denying the horrors or injustices of the contemporary world. On the contrary, amid these ethical setbacks, she sees the necessity of recognizing moments distinguished from the assumed world-state of disenchantment. To be entirely disenchanted would mean yielding to apathy. Instead, as both Bennett and Merwin demonstrate, humanity must respond to the challenges of coexistence with a conscious effort to change its own habits.

In the traditional Edenic narrative, knowledge causes human transgression. Yet, even in societies that have the example of this story, humanity continues to pursue knowledge as central to what makes homo sapiens *human*, while simultaneously continuing its transgressions against
nature. In spite of humanity’s purported intelligence, there is still considerable knowledge either lacking or being misused. In an exhibition of anthropocentricism, the speaker from “The River of Bees” admits that, “Men think they are better than grass,” a belief that only illustrates a lack of understanding about coexistence. Earlier in the same poem, the lines “I took my eyes / A long way to the calendars / Room after room asking how shall I live” echo Merwin’s admission in the 1960s that, “if I were to be asked that moment what I thought would be a good life I would not have a clear answer or one that would convince me” (“The River of Bees” 21, 9-11; Second 3). Even Merwin, with his careful consideration of the human-nature relationship, does not know how to counter the burden humanity bears as a result of its transgressions. The knowledge that he does have appears more of a burden, weighing down his conscience. “We remain barbarians,” Bennett explains, “because we call upon intellect to carry more moral weight than it can bear. No matter how ‘forcibly’ arguments convince us of moral truths, Schiller says, only a cultivated disposition can bridge the gap between ‘acceptance’ of truth and the ‘adoption’ of it” (139). Knowledge is useless unless it empowers and is empowered by experience. Herein resides poetry’s ethical potential. The struggle for Merwin, as ecopoet, is not merely to have knowledge of humanity’s ethical responsibilities to nature but to be able to create connections between reader and responsibility through the poem, all the while maintaining the poem’s status as poem.

In order to overcome the limitations of passive repentance encouraged by the Edenic narrative, humanity must eliminate the stigma of knowledge and the restraints it places on human moral capacity—in particular the divisions that it creates between and within bodies. *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment* brings out both the division brought on by knowledge, as in the poem “Division,” as well as the idea that humanity is in a period of learning, as in “A Wood” and “The Second Time.” The knowledge demonstrated in these poems does not yet lead to the possibility of redemption, as will happen later, but it indicates the importance of knowledge in
transforming humanity’s role within the revisioned Edenic narrative. In a corporeal account of
division and attempted reunification, “Division” tells the story of human division resulting from
“the finger god / named One” who “was lonely / so he made for himself a brother like him //
named Other One” (2-6). The loneliness that takes place when all is unified does not dissipate
after the first or subsequent divisions but, rather, transforms into a simultaneous fear of
separation, which leads to the creation of more parts and separation. The culmination of the
division is the creation of the single heart.

they said between two arms
there is always a heart

and the heart will be for us all

but the heart between them
beat two ways (17-21)

The creation of the metonymic heart is meant to unify; but it serves only to reinforce the division
as it beats “for whoever / was to come” and “for whoever would / come after” in a perpetual
division of the future. Reconciling this division of the heart would seem to be the solution but
humanity does not yet have the means to do this. Instead of being able to reconcile division, in “A
Wood,” division continues when the speaker admits, “I have stood among ghosts of those who
will never be / because of me / the oaks were darkening,” so that division occurs not only within
the actual but within the possible as well, and not only within the realm of the human but with
and within that of nature (1-2). The speaker wonders or fears where he learned the division that
manifests itself corporeally and unceasingly, so that learning is not escape but entrapment
because it is the wrong learning. It is possible that humanity could learn otherwise, as suggested
in “The Second Time,” but, even in this poem, salvation is not promised, merely placed as a
possibility.
To counter-balance the cynicism of poems like “Division,” which seem to bind humanity to the traditional fate of the Edenic narrative, Merwin provides a counterstory that continues beyond knowledge as impediment. “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” from The Dancing Bears, foreshadows the importance that long narrative poems will have in revealing Merwin’s thinking through his poetic doing. While the story of the white bear prince whisking the youngest daughter away to be lovers only in the darkness of night might resemble the story of Cupid and Psyche, Merwin diverges from the traditional version by transforming knowledge from obstacle to advantage. Merwin’s bear prince justifies the odd living arrangement through the explanation that, in this land, love, “Must wander blind or with mistaken eyes, / For dissolution walks among the light / And vision is the sire of vanishing” (13-15). Concerned that her lover’s explanation might be a deception, she longs to return to the world of mortality to ascertain which world is real and which that of dreams.

“But what it is,” she said, “to wander in silence, Though silence be a garden. What shall I say, How chiseled the tongue soever, and how schooled In sharp diphthongs and suasive rhetorics, To the echoless air of this sufficiency?” (131-135)

This world of silence is the girl’s garden of Eden and the tongue the serpent. In this passage, it is the girl’s own tongue that she cannot trust and, in others, the prince’s. Words cannot always be trusted but neither can the silence that displaces those words. Moving within “the echoless air of this sufficiency”—which feels like a static state of aural oppression, if not suffocation—are the moving undertones of sub and facere, so that hovering under the surface is the ongoing action of ‘making’ in order to maintain that state of sufficiency. That the air is echoless might be disconcerting to one searching for love, since Echo’s love remains only in the sound conveyed through air. In this world of perfection

All songs drop in the air like stones; oh, what Shall I do while the white-tongued flowers shout
Impossible silence on the impossible air
But wander with my hands over my ears?
And what am I if the story be not real? (139-143)

Rather than riding the air like Echo’s words, the songs are heavy objects reaching no one and eliciting the denunciation “impossible,” with its emphasis on the negation that denies possibility. Searching for some sense of agency leaves the girl’s hands over her ears in spite of the silence, her mind continually returning to the question, “what am I if the story be not real?” which she repeats at the end of four stanzas before the prince agrees to let her return to her family for a visit.

Before she returns, the white bear makes her promise, “‘Lest a malicious word undo us both, / Never to walk or talk alone,’ he said, / ‘With your mother, who is as wise as you’” (180-182). The girl, consciously choosing knowledge, talks with her mother and is advised to return with a bit of tallow to light after the prince is sleeping, but not to let the tallow drip. Again, this resounds with the advice of Psyche’s sisters and, yet, differs significantly in intention. Where Psyche’s sisters were motivated by jealousy and a desire to seek knowledge for mischief, the girl and her mother both seek knowledge for positive ends—that is, to posit the reality of the situation and choose with free will how, then, to proceed. The girl follows her mother’s suggestion but when the prince’s beauty is reflected among the crystal facets of the room, the girl is so overtaken with love that she kisses him three times, dripping three spots of tallow on his white linen shirt, awakening him and shattering the enchantment that allowed them to remain in that world of perfection. She has chosen to seek knowledge from her mother and to use that knowledge to gain more knowledge. However, she lacks the experience necessary to manage that knowledge and, moreover, to act appropriately in spite of her mother’s warning. Rather than despairing, as Psyche did, and attempting to throw herself into the air to die, only to be saved by divine intervention, the girl takes the newfound knowledge into her own hands, seeking more knowledge to augment her incomplete understanding.
“Oh love,” she cried,  
“May I not learn the way and follow you?”  
“There is no way there that a body might follow;  
Farther than dreams that palace lies,  
East of the sun and west of the moon, girt  
With rage of stars for sea. There no one comes.” (242-247).

The position in which the girl finds herself is a standard one: ignorance would have allowed her to stay but her choice of knowledge has resulted in exile. The first difference for the girl, however, is that her acquisition of knowledge is always intentional. When faced with the conscious choice to accept blindly what might be a dream or choose instead the sight of reality, she could not rationalize the “curious patience” that would have saved her and the prince (237). The second difference is that her solution to the sense of loss brought on by knowledge is more knowledge, specifically, intentional knowledge—that is, she will “learn the way.” Ultimately, her experience and endurance reveal abilities that allow her to triumph over the rival princess and restore herself and her prince to happiness.

This restoration is not, importantly, a return to a prelapsarian state, whose “echoless air of this sufficiency” was motivation for genuine inquiry. The girl began in innocence and fell from that state but, then, arrives at a new state of being that can only be gained through experience. Later in Merwin’s career, this transformed experience becomes one of coexistence between bodies. In “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” the female protagonist sets the groundwork for Merwin’s later state of coexistence, modeling the knowledge-informed action that supersedes passivity or apathy as the means for overcoming humanity’s fallen state. Enchantment also plays a role in the girl’s decisions. Returning to Bennett for a moment, the reader is reminded that

enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage.

Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more unheimlich
(uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged... (5)

The girl is undoubtedly enchanted by the way she experiences the world with the bear-prince but this is not blind enchantment, nor does she wish it to be. Her father has empowered her to explore experience and then make her own choice. Her mother subsequently gives her the knowledge that she needs in order to remove any remaining impediments to choice. While the journey she undertakes in order to find the prince requires considerable help from others, including help of the magical sort, what matters is that the girl continually asks for knowledge and follows an arduous and uncertain path to find that knowledge in spite of the fact that, for all the knowledge she gains, she does not have the answer. Ultimately, there is a limit to how much she can accomplish with her own knowledge. Like Psyche, the girl is aided not only along the way by others such that, without the intervention of people in the castle who overheard her crying next to the sleeping prince, the prince would never have come into the knowledge that the girl was there. In this way, restitution through knowledge is requisitely communal rather than individual. However, diverging from Cupid and Psyche, this communal endeavor cannot take place without the individual one.

“East of the Sun and West of the Moon” comprises unstable boundaries, protean divisions that enchant both protagonist and reader. The prince moves between bear and man; the girl between states of knowledge; the world between reality and dream; and, even, the shirt between no tallow, tallow stained, and tallow removed. In each metamorphosis, whatever is changing always moves towards a new state, never returning to a previous state. Even the shirt must be understood differently after the tallow has been removed than it was before it was stained, in
spite of their visually appearing the same. It is these crossings, rather than the states themselves, that enchant—the experience of product as dynamic process. Bennett explains that

To the extent that crossings have the power to enchant, what about them is responsible for this effect? I pursue the line of thought that their magic resides in their mobility, that is, in their capacity to travel, fly, or transform themselves; in their morphing transits (primate toward other primate, terrestrial toward solar, silicon toward carbon, living toward dead—and toward new formations exterior to the relation between each of these sets of terms.) Metamorphing creatures enact the very possibility of change; their presence carries with it the trace of dangerous but also exciting and exhilarating migrations. To live among or as a crossing is to have motion called to mind, and this reminding is also a somatic event. (17-18)

These crossings, metamorphoses, and transformations are reminders that boundaries are dynamic and möbial, rather than static and dichotomous. Boundaries are thresholds between bodies and enchantment takes place in the movement between those bodies. In “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” the girl's fear at the end that she “fall utter prey to mirrors” hearkens to the separation of bodies that mirrors reinforce. On the one hand, mirrors provide a means for gazing at the self; but, at the same time, even that self-reflection comes at the cost of division appearing to be real. Self-reflection through the protagonist serves as a primary rhetorical tool, emphasizing the pedagogical nature of Merwin’s narratives. There are clear metapoetic whispers in this poem; and this poem being followed by an undoubtedly ars poetica poem, “On the Subject of Poetry,” clearly signals that the reader should be thinking about these two poems’ relationships to poetry, if the reader was not already certain of this.
**Ars Poetica and the Poet’s Obligation**

Bennett argues that “a focus on the energetics of ethics also enables more reflective arts of the self and more creative uses of the lines of flight opened up by the gap between the semantic and sonorous dimensions of linguistic forms” (155). The metapoetic qualities of ars poetica allow Merwin’s ars poetica poems to become a locus of ecological ethics. George Santayana suggests in “The Elements and Function of Poetry” that “poetry is speech in which the instrument counts as well as the meaning—poetry is speech for its own sake and for its own sweetness.” All poems turn instrument into song. Ars poetica, however, returns the song to itself, conscious of its own instrumentality and the relationship between the lyric voice as instrument and the reading listener, whose mind and corporeal senses the poem must engage in unison. There is an element of ethics inherent to all ars poetica. Poetry must not yield to “the pyrotechnics of the intellect” at the expense of “the glow of sense” and “the grace of expression”; rather, poetry is “at its best ... when it initiates us, by feigning something which as an experience is impossible, into the meaning of the experience which we have actually had” (Santayana). In other words, poetry’s fundamental ethical obligation is to poetry itself since, if it lapses into the space of prose, it compromises the very foundation of its efficacy. Moreover, poetry must not recreate but, rather, create experience that the reader could not have without the poem by engaging the reader’s experiences from outside the poem. Ars poetica poems face a double challenge: they must be, on the one hand, metapoetic and, on the other, poetic. Merwin demonstrates that the ethical obligation of ars poetica need not be limited to questions of form as end but that, as Gander suggested, ars poetica can use form as a means to ecological ethics. The ecopoet must risk the poem’s integrity in order to push the form to its limits. When successful, ars poetica amplifies the poet’s ethical message by not only providing commentary on poetic praxis but, as seen in Merwin’s case, entangling itself in the quest for ethically active poetry.
The turn to ars poetica in “On the Subject of Poetry” provides the reader a direct glimpse at the möbial circulation taking place between Merwin’s *doing* and *thinking*. The poem’s exploration of the human-nature relationship, the riddle form that recurs throughout Merwin’s corpus, and the requisite corporeal agency of poetic ethics all work in tandem to demonstrate Merwin’s desire to push the poem’s form to its extremes as part of his ars poetica endeavor. “On the Subject of Poetry,” through an admission of complexity and perplexity, immediately calls in the role of the poet:

I do not understand the world, Father.
By the millpond at the end of the garden
There is a man who slouches listening
To the wheel revolving in the stream, only
There is no wheel there to revolve. (1-5)

The scene begins with “the world,” a space of both nature and humanity with no named differentiations. But it is this world that confuses the speaker. Zooming in, the millpond is a fusion of human and nature, in that order. The speaker continues to build the scene in lines 3 and 4 but then pulls the rug out from under the reader in line 5 with the discovery that there is no wheel. The importance of this linguistic destabilization cannot be overstated, as it is a warning to the reader that language cannot be trusted to convey experience, nor even can perception be trusted as a record of actuality prior to language. The scene as it is, as it is experienced, and as it is conveyed are all different. The poem progresses through a cyclical series of contradictions, of which the speaker is not certain he is “fond” (16).

He sits in the end of March, but he sits also
In the end of the garden; his hands are in
His pockets. It is not expectation
On which he is intent, nor yesterday
To which he listens. It is a wheel turning.

When I speak, Father, it is the world
That I must mention. He does not move
His feet nor so much as raise his head
For fear he should disturb the sound he hears
Like a pain without a cry, where he listens.

I do not think I am fond, Father,
Of the way in which always before he listens
He prepares himself by listening. It is
Unequal, Father, like the reason
For which the wheel turns, though there is no wheel.

I speak of him, Father, because he is
There with his hands in his pockets, in the end
Of the garden listening to the turning
Wheel that is not there, but it is the world,
Father, that I do not understand. (6-25)

With the final stanza, the poem comes full circle. There is a defined image that comes out of the negative constructions. Throughout the intervening three stanzas Merwin continually employs negative words, circling around what is actually there, creating value in absence. For Merwin, naming is dangerous, as is assigning words to experiences. The corporeal component arises both from restraint and fear of restraining something desired. The man’s body is defined through his lack of movement and continual listening, even as he listens in preparation for listening. This extreme form of action through inaction suggests that the reader of the poem might emulate the same pose, listening—being ethically obligated by ars poetica to listen—as a precursor to listening. That is, listening first to the poem and then to the world and, following the world, again the poem, in a möbius of perceptual and conceptual exploration that takes place within the möbius of poetic and actual.

The möbial approach observed in a thematic understanding of the poem is indicative of similar patterns in form, recalling Gander’s question about, “how ... syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page [might] express an ecological ethics” (216). Though “On the Subject of Poetry” precedes Merwin’s major formal innovations,12 at every turn Merwin is pushing

12 Green with Beasts and The Drunk in the Furnace precede The Moving Target, in which the most visible formal changes were solidified.
this poem’s form a little beyond its limits, so that, cumulatively, the poem seems literally bursting at its seams. The repetition of the subject “I” and its verb, along with the repetition of words like “wheel” and the prepositions “to,” “in,” and “on,” are a few examples of the linguistic and syntactic choices that create a general sense of parallel and cycling. In lines 3 through 5, “listening / to” uses the parallel ordering of wheel/revolve, while stretching and contracting the verb by having “listening / to the wheel revolve” resolve into the infinitive “to revolve.” Line 4 sets up the wheel and movement through “revolve” and “flow,” only to have line 5 negate the wheel, creating tension between the logically subsequent negation of action and the undertones of agency that linger in the positive construction of the infinitive. Merwin likewise creates tension with the opening line of the poem, “I do not understand the world, Father,” by altering the repetition in stanzas 3 and 5 just enough to alter the line’s potential meaning.

When I speak, Father, it is the world /  
That I must mention. He does not move  
………………………………………………………………

I speak of him, Father, ...  
………………………………………………………………
... but it is the world,  
Father, that I do not understand. (11-12, 21, 24-25)

The opening line’s initial statement belies the syntactic complexity that unfolds over the course of the poem, as well as the ambiguities of meaning folded therein. In the third stanza’s iteration, the speaker claims to focus on the world but the line break after world does not so much emphasize the importance of the world as it suggests distraction from that importance. This sense is only underscored in the following line, which could easily be read as a statement independent of the world. There is also the effect of blurring the lines between the world and the man so that the reader struggles to parse the riddle of the wheel, world, and man. The final iteration complicates this riddle even further by blurring the lines between “him” and “Father,” as well as “the world” and “Father,” using both proximity and the same line break that occurred in the third
stanza, which, again, permits the final line to be read independently of “the world.” The whole of the poem’s confusion seems neatly packaged in the final line’s statement, “I do not understand.” However, as with the lingering agency in “to revolve,” the final word takes on the dual function of explanation and imperative, urging the reader not to succumb to that which is not there, but to understand that which is.

In order to recreate for the reader the struggle of understanding the world (whatever “world” actually signifies), Merwin uses “On the Subject of Poetry” to create patterns and then stretch those patterns just beyond their limits in an effort to create, rather than mimic, experience. Turning to the question of the “world,” the reader must parse the relationship between world and wheel. The repetition of these words over the course of the poem falls into perfect symmetry: world, wheel, wheel, world, wheel, wheel, wheel, world, wheel, wheel, world (1, 4, 5, 10, 11, 20, 20, 24, 24). This symmetry might initially suggest an ideal form but, as the line references indicate, this symmetry is staggered so that it falls short of the ideal. This pattern also invokes the inversion of chiasmus, which Merwin uses several times in the poem. The final two lines of stanza 3, for example, present the reader with hear-pain-cry-listen and, the final lines of stanza 4 unequal-Father-reason-no wheel. In each of these examples, there are meaningful tensions in the pairs. Hearing and pain can both be passive, while cry, even in the noun form, and listen require action. The negative phrasing “no wheel” pairs with the negated “unequal,” while the Father seems to be a desired source of reason, even as he is also a silent source of added confusion. The tension between the Father and reason is amplified by the line break after “reason” and the grammatically unnecessary, inwardly turning “for which” that separates “the reason / ... the wheel turns.” The gaps between these linguistic pieces suggest that Merwin’s wheel/world pattern is meant to resemble the chiasmus used elsewhere but is also meant to illustrate the shortcomings
of the forms within which Merwin finds himself working. The static chiastic crossings contrast the later möbial turns, again revealing the limitations Merwin faces in these early forms.

There are also noticeable patterns and tensions in this poem’s linguistic strategy. “End” provides a basic example of how Merwin shifts the meaning of words, in this case through a simple line break shift that changes “at the end of the garden” to “in the end / of the garden” (2, 22-23). In line 2, the short-lived appearance of syntactic simplicity makes it unlikely that the reader would pause at “end,” reading its locational meaning as the primary and, perhaps, exclusionary significance. By the final stanza, however, the reader has realized that nothing can be taken at face value and the line break becomes the most noticeable indication that “end” now likely signifies place, purpose, and finish. Subtler than the line break, the prepositional shift indicates one of the most prevalent linguistic plays in this poem: the use of prepositions to create a centripetal sensation of moving inward into the poem as world toward “understanding.” In the second stanza, the speaker plays with the dual functionality of the preposition to destabilize the experience of the reader, drawing out the interplay between space and time, as well as between bodies by extending the play to his hands.

He sits in the end of March, but he sits also
In the end of the garden; his hands are in
His pockets. It is not expectation
On which he is intent, nor yesterday (6-8).

At first read, the previously mentioned shift from “at” to “in” when referencing the end of the garden might have seemed like a shift for the sake of variety but, the more one delves into the poem’s prepositions, as in the second stanza, the more “in” comes into focus as intentional choice. “In” is statistically the most prevalent and, even when other prepositions are used, they pull towards “in,” as with “at” and, in line 8, “on.” The initial syllables of “intent” and, even, “yesterday” quietly suggest that “in” is in the shadow of “on,” becoming part of the expectation on/in which the reader is intent. The only other use of “on” (so visually and sonically similar to “in”) is the title,
whose construction is reminiscent of occasional poems, the role of which as mediators between reader and world experience would seem highly relevant to this poem. In the shadow of this connection, however, is Merwin’s suggestion of moving inward, circularly, through the “O” of “On,” into the heart of the experience. The poem is not about poetry and its relationship to “the world.” This poem is the experience of poetry and its relationship with the world. And Merwin’s use of prepositions only, then, to stretch the preposition beyond its typical function calls into question the relationships that the prepositions might otherwise have stabilized.

The linguistic destabilization and struggle to get to the heart of experience in “On the Subject of Poetry” gives the poem the previously mentioned riddle-like quality that is one of Merwin’s earliest strategies for engaging the reader. In this poem, the reader is the fourth figure, in addition to the first-person speaker, the “man who slouches listening,” and the Father (3). While there is no single or simple unriddling, the relationship between the speaker and the man listening to the wheel (that is not there) revolve can suggest a great deal about the role of Merwin’s ars poetica poems, as well as the ethical role of the poet. The impulse is to assign the poet role to one of the figures in the poem, likely either the speaking speaker or the listening man. The reader could also think about the two figures as two different types of poets, learning from their differences. The speaker seems driven by the motivation to understand. At the same time, the speaker never does or asks anything that would directly increase his understanding. Instead, he makes observations about the man listening and about his own lack of understanding. (“I do not think I am fond, Father,” he claims, in seeming defense against criticism of his world view, until he undermines his own statement with the subsequent preposition, “Of the way in which always before he listens / He prepares himself by listening,” turning his reflection, again, to the man instead of himself.) Indeed, he makes so many observations that he allows no room for listening, even if the Father were to respond. The contrast between these two figures reveals that the
speaker’s discomfort with listening is self-perpetuating, continually circling unproductively. To understand the world, one must be open to it. One must listen to it. One must acquiesce to the moral necessity of listening. Poetry, then, is not merely speaking but listening. What I call Merwin’s doing thinking is Merwin’s life-long möbial enactment of listening as doing, thinking as acting, and engaging the reader as ethical necessity.

Echoing “On the Subject of Poetry,” “Some Winter Sparrows”\(^\text{13}\) shows how Merwin’s overt *ars poetica* moments hover in the background of other poems, extending their metapoetic and ethical elements beyond the realm of *ars poetica*. The opening line, “I hear you already, choir of small wheels,” directly recalls the wheel that is not there, suggesting immediately that this poem has things to say on the subject of poetry. With the recollection of *ars poetica* in the opening line, the first line of the second stanza, “On a bitter day I juggle feathers,” suggests a reference to quills and, thereby, writing (5). Poetry continues to sit quietly in the wings of the following lines, “My hands hatch, I am better / Answered than puppet masters, / With small winds at my fingers” (6-8). The line break after “better” causes a strange metaphoric connection between the birds’ bodies and the speaker’s own body, making the reader wonder whether human or birds are being privileged. The subsequent lines raise the question of the direction in which the role of the puppet master flows. Are the winds at the speaker’s fingers strings controlled by the speaker’s hands or are they the strings that ultimately move the speaker? Or is there a sort of reciprocity between the speaker and that which is connected by the wind? That the metapoetic concerns are simultaneously ethical ones is easily seen in the third stanza.

> You pursue seeds, wings open in the snow
> Coming up then with white
> Beak, speaking; in my deep footprints
> You vanish, then you flower. (9-12)

\(^{13}\) *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960).
Knowing that Merwin has the art of poetry firmly in mind as he is writing, the pursuit of seeds should sound suspiciously like Pound's advice to Merwin that seeds, rather than twigs, should be the focus of his studies. The bird here takes on a poet's visage. The admission of lines 11 and 12 recognizes that human involvement affects the life cycle of the birds. Human impact may cause the bird to vanish and, from the body of a dead bird, nature can bring forth new life. The ethical responsibility herein is considerable and, in the final stanza's question of trust, Merwin reinforces humanity's moral obligation to animals and nature. The relationship of obligation is complex, not simply a one-to-one relationship of humanity and nature. The poem's opening line sets up the "you," first as presumably singular but subsequently as plural; in stanza IV the familiar, "you are quicker, / Girl, than the catch in my breath," as though he were talking to a human friend or lover, shifts the "you" back to the singular with the plurality of possible "Girl" referents in the background (15-16); and stanza X uses the line, "You shriek like nails on a slate, one of you," to make visible the gap between the first, plural "you" and the second, singular "you" (37). This recognition of plurality reinforces the multiplicity of bodies even within the singular sounding human-nature relationship, hearkening to the multiplicity of thresholds between and within the bodies, each a fruitful space for ethical meeting.

The Poet's Blessing

Poems become thresholds between bodies, textual spaces in which lived experience forms into sinews of connection. This process of creation and recognition, meeting of mind and body, of bodies and other bodies, is one of mutual discovery—not of chance encounters but of unexpected encounters that derive from the poet's careful cultivation of strangers meeting. Perhaps the best poem through which to explain this paradox is one that Paul Carroll defines as, itself, a paradox. "Lemuel's Blessing" is the third poem in The Moving Target, the collection that
many scholars view as one of the most important of Merwin’s career because it is in this collection that Merwin formally relinquishes punctuation,\textsuperscript{14} at the same time, exchanging traditional rhyme and meter for free verse. I have argued that Merwin’s doing thinking is an ongoing mönial process that leads from a human-nature conceptualization to a nature-human one in which bodies form the primary units of interaction. In this development, The Moving Target plays a key role in using form as precursor to later thinking through current praxis. “Lemuel’s Blessing” anticipates the nature-human relationship that it would take Merwin several more decades to articulate fully. The poem both hearkens to the ars poetica tradition and utilizes the metapoetic and ethical components that tradition offers. It is a poem that explicitly calls on liminality, situating the reader on a threshold of understanding that Carroll suggests the reader can never cross. Moreover, in combination, the metapoetic and ethical elements of “Lemuel’s Blessing” foreshadow, for the duration of this poem, Merwin’s later realization that humanity cannot live ethically in the human-nature conception of its relationship with nature. For a brief moment, this poem desires a nature-human space that would allow for the coexistence of bodies.

“Lemuel’s Blessing,” even in title, begins with ambiguity: on the one hand, suggesting a prayer on Lemuel’s behalf or conferred upon Lemuel and, on the other hand, a blessing that Lemuel provides to others, either through the possessive or the present progressive. This multiplicity of potential meanings before the poem has even reached its first “You,” is only complicated further by the epigraph. The excerpt from Christopher Smart’s \textit{Jubilate Agno} introduces the figure of the wolf, the central component of what Carroll views as the poem’s paradox. The epigraph has another major function, however, to introduce the importance of the ars poetica tradition and invoke its various aspects towards the poem’s ends. Smart’s stint in St.

\textsuperscript{14} This excerpt, of course, “The Last One” in The Lice, in which Merwin pointedly reintroduces periods at the end of every line, regardless of sentences, in order to drive home the constructed, stapling quality he believes punctuation to embody (Second).
Luke’s Infirmary invokes a sense of liminality. As he was thresholded somewhere between public hospital space and individual private space, so too is the speaker in a threshold between community and what what Carroll calls the “anti-communal” (145). Daniel J. Ennis argues that *Jubilate Agno*, which Smart wrote while at St. Luke’s, “is a poem about poetic expression” that uses “relative freedom from rhyme and meter ... counterbalanced by grammatical restriction” as formal norm in order to situate itself firmly within the *ars poetica* tradition (2, 9). The history and formal tradition of the epigraph inform “Lemuel’s Blessing,” but so too does the content, which confirms that Lemuel is the biblical figure (his name means “belonging to God”) and introduces the figure of the wolf, whose traditional characteristics run counter to those of Lemuel’s like the warp and weft of a poetic tapestry. Though a reader might be tempted merely to glance at the epigraph before moving on to the poem, ignoring the foundation that Smart and his *Jubilate Agno* create for “Lemuel’s Blessing” through its liminal and metapoetic components denies the poem some of its greatest power.

Trying to read the cross threads of relationships in “Lemuel’s Blessing” plays an indispensable role in understanding the paradox that Carroll claims comprises this poem. First, there is Lemuel; then, Smart; the wolf; the speaker; and, of course, Merwin. This cast of characters must somehow be reconciled with those named in the poem: you, I, and “those who would track me for their own twisted ends” (60). Carroll’s reading assumes that the speaker is Lemuel, though he admits the strangeness of Lemuel’s wolf-like characteristics. “You,” then, would be the wolf, who inspires Lemuel’s figurative likeness. This is where the invocation of Smart’s occupation of a liminal space functions as a signal that Merwin’s frequent invocation of threshold status is again at play. The reader would be able to reach this conclusion even without the epigraph, given Merwin’s commitment to thresholds in other poems, but his choice to use Smart’s representation of Lemuel invokes not just the qualities of the quoted poem, but those of the quoted poet as well.
The reader now has the freedom to understand the speaker as both Lemuel and wolf, without having to privilege one over the other. Merwin’s pre-1980s collections typically keep a stark division between humanity and nature, emphasizing the struggle that humanity faces in its degradation of nature. This poem, however, foreshadows Merwin’s later attempts to break down the boundaries between nature and humanity. It is questionable whether Lemuel is or ever fully becomes the wolf—though a strong argument could be made—but, what matters, is the way that the speaker moves beyond the restrictions of a stark human-nature dichotomy. The speaker’s identity remains in a threshold that allows an invocation of both the human and the wolf in liminal coexistence that could not be portrayed from strictly one perspective or the other.

Part of what Merwin does with thresholds is break down conceptual boundaries, as in the case of the speaker, and, elsewhere, Merwin displays a desire to break down boundaries reinforced by his own language. Following the psalm structure that Carroll lays out, the speaker begins with a sequence of “I bless your” statements, each of which contains a metaphor for that which is being blessed, until the speaker reaches the eyes, “for which I know no comparison,” when the conceptual distance enforced by metaphor fails (8). Antonio Barcelona’s *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective* sheds light on why metaphor becomes so unsatisfying for Merwin that he makes a statement of such open rejection. Barcelona differentiates between metaphor and metonymy as, generally, a difference between the types of conceptual projections a reader is asked to make. Metaphor requires the reader to consider a target and a source from two different experiential domains as being related; as a literary device, metaphor aims to uncover seemingly concealed commonalities, thus revealing previously unnoticed connections between the experiential domains in question. Metonymy, by contrast, on its most basic level, “is a conceptual projection whereby one experiential domain (the target) is partially understood in terms of another experiential domain (the source) included in the same
common experiential domain” (Barcelona 4, original emphasis). The relevance of metaphor and metonymy to the nature-human relationship, then, is that the former would consider nature and humanity separate experiential domains while the latter would understand them as the same. Like the Möbius strip, metonymy sets up humanity and nature to be viewed *both individually and together*.

The end of the first stanza of “Lemuel’s Blessing” signals both the limitation Merwin finds in metaphor and his attempts to circumvent that limitation by augmenting his use of metaphor.

I bless your eyes for which I know no comparison.
Run with me like the horizon, for without you
I am nothing but a dog lost and hungry,
Ill-natured, untrustworthy, useless.

My bones together bless you like an orchestra of flutes. (8-12)

Merwin underscores the failure of metaphor in line 8 with a blatant transition from simile to self-proclaimed identity defying metaphor in line 11. The parallel between “for which I” and “for without you / I” creates both an echo of metaphor’s failing and a sense of dissatisfaction with the divide between “you” and “I.” “Together” reinforces the desire to dismantle the conceptual distance enforced by metaphor and the orchestra of bone flutes is, perhaps, one of the most quietly important lines in the poem. The word bones should immediately conjure up Merwin’s poem “The Bones” from his previous collection, *The Drunk in the Furnace*. “The Bones” is an incredibly important example illustrating how Merwin uses metonymy to create literal and material connections where metaphor would only have created figurative ones. Through the speaker’s admission that, “For years I had hardly / Considered shells as being bones,” Merwin creates connections between bodies by saying that shells and bones are *actually*, rather than metaphorically, the same (“The Bones” 8-9). “The Bones” works to make bones—actual bones—into a common denominator for all bodies in the poem. That is, Merwin has not yet reached a point when the material of the body is physically the same, which would be the case if the poem
were to argue that all of the bones originated in dust, stardust, or ashes and therefore were of the same essence, as Merwin later argues; but, this is an important prefatory step by which all of the bodies in question are seen to have a common element.

The big wind had peeled back the sand grave
To show what was still left: the bleached, chewed-off
Timbers like the ribs of a man or the jawbone
Of some extinct beast. ...

... There was a man sitting beside it
Eating out of a paper, littering the beach
With bones of a few more fish, while the hulk
Cupped its empty hand high over him. (20-23, 25-28)

While the timbers of the ship might have been seen as obviously metaphoric had it not been for the speaker’s early admission about shells, the reader is now forced to consider whether the boat’s bones are, in a sense, actual bones. The ship (one of the fish to which “a few more” are added), then, would have a body just as the human speaker has a body and the fish being eaten has a body. If this is the case, then the reader has the chance to see the relationships between bodies in a broader way than before. Returning to “Lemuel’s Blessing,” the invocation of bones carries with it Merwin’s growing concern about how to put bodies into relation, in particular the early stages of doing thinking that would eventually lead to his mőbial conception of the nature-human relationship.

Pushing “The Bones” to its limits reveals another significant connection to “Lemuel’s Blessing” and the poetry that followed it. Though I have proposed metonymy as a counterbalance to metaphors limitations, line 12 of “Lemuel’s Blessing” appears to feature, again, the use of simile when the speaker’s “bones together bless you like an orchestra of flutes.” Another look at “The Bones,” however, reveals yet another cross-reference between the two poems. The speaker in the earlier poem admits that

For years I had hardly
Considered shells as being bones, maybe
Because of the sound they could still make, though
I knew a man once who could raise a kind
Of wailing tune out of a flute he had,
Made from a fibula; it was much the same
Register as the shells’; the tune did not
Go on when his breath stopped, though you thought it would.
Then that morning, coming on the wreck,
I saw the kinship. (“The Bones” 8-17).

Using the bone-flute, Merwin implicates air in the relationships between the bones scattered throughout this poem. Flutes play a central role in Merwin’s later poetry, especially The Folding Cliffs, functioning as literal demonstration of corporeal exchange through air. This poem’s flute is made from a fibula, the bone that connects with the tibia to form the lower portion of the human leg. Etymologically, “tibia” derives from the Latin for flute and, so, might have seemed a more logical choice in comparison with the fibula, whose Latin origin means “brooch,” a type of decorative fastener used in ways similar to safety pins. Given the prevalence of these brooches in the medieval period, it is highly likely that Merwin was aware of the choice that he was making. The fibula’s proximity to the tibia draws in the flute etymology but the functionality of medieval fibulae as fasteners supports the metonymic significance of bones. Combining metonymy and etymology, the fibula-flute makes clear that Merwin wants to connect bodies and is using air as a means to do so (a critical move throughout Merwin’s process of doing thinking).

That the flute is made from a leg bone echoes in the walking reference later in the poem when, of the man eating fish, the speaker explains that

Only he
And I had come to those sands knowing
That they were there. The rest was bones, whatever
Tunes they made. The bones of things; and of men too
And of man’s endeavors whose ribs he had set
Between himself and the shapeless tides. Then
I saw how the sand was shifting like water,
That once could walk. (28-35)
One strategy that makes the sense of metonymy work is its contrast with the poem’s moments of metaphor, as seen in the question of whether to read the ship’s bones metaphorically or literally. While Merwin wants to bring the bodies of birds, fish, humans, and even things like the wreck, into the same domain, part of how he has to make this clear is by contrasting it with the metaphorical connections he makes in setting up water and sand as being from different domains. Even the attempts to bring sets of bodies into the same domain fall short because it requires, at least in “The Bones,” naming the bodies that are included at the expense of others. In this poem, Merwin labors to expand the conception of bones as a means of showing that humanity and nature share commonalities beyond metaphor, but even this endeavor is limited by its own constructed nature. The problem, then, is that the relationship being created between humanity and nature continues to center around human construction; and, as the reader learned earlier, “the tune did not / Go on when his breath stopped, though you thought it would.” Thus, the human-nature relationship is limited by an approach that relies on the poet-piper rather than one that decenters the human poet; and metonymy, in conjunction with metaphor and other literary devices, underscores rather than undermines the sense of human control. What this analysis indicates about “Lemuel’s Blessing” is that the simile in line 12 does not reference the flutes but, rather, the orchestra. Instead the bone flutes embody the qualities from “The Bones,” working in tandem with the ambiguity of the speaker’s identity. By allowing the speaker not to be like the wolf but, at moments, to be perceived as the wolf puts humanity and nature “together” in a manner with which it will take Merwin’s other poems a long time to catch up.

Beyond the cross-poem references in line 12 of “Lemuel’s Blessing,” a close look at the “I+verb” constructions indicates that Merwin, like Smart, uses grammatical structure to control the poem’s commentary. The blessings that led to the failure of metaphor all take place in the present tense and are followed in the next few stanzas with the present perfect. Carroll considers
the verb tenses in relation to the traditional psalm, observing that the “Lament Psalm ... is almost an exact blueprint of the prayer said in ‘Lemuel’s Blessing’” (145). In addition to these parallels, Merwin’s choice of grammatical structure supports a reading in which the human recognizes a need for coexistence with nature and is actively working against any sort of domination. This is particularly visible in the shift from the present tense blessing to the present perfect descriptions and actions. The verb “to have”—an obligatory component of the present perfect—is frequently the banner “of possessed and possessors” (16). Each time “I have” is repeated, the reader may be more inclined to ask, “What do you have?” than “What have you done?” Even in establishing the present perfect as a pattern, the sense of possession cannot be erased. In this way, the present perfect is a means to having certain qualities without the sin of possession. The tension between dog and wolf that surfaces is, in part, a question of possession. A dog is domesticated, “An habitué of back steps, faithful custodian of fat sheep” (27). This tension provides one indication that this poem has not yet reached the possibility of coexistence that the later poems do, in spite of its forward thinking nature, since the later poems allow for the possibility that humans might be able to have a variety of healthy relationships with nature.

The final verb tense shift for the first-person speaker ties into the metapoetic aspects of the “Lemuel’s Blessing. The metapoetic trajectory of the poem begins with the blessings that make the speaker sound human, suggesting through the prompting of the epigraph that the speaker may also be poet. The end of the first stanza through the sixth stanza develop the ambiguity of speaker as wolf, though the fifth stanza speaks of music and construction, sounding as though it might be discussing a poem in addition to a wolf. The lines “I have hidden at wrong times for wrong reasons. / I have been brought to bay. More than once” seem to signal a quiet shift moving out of the “From the ruth of” stanzas. That stanza ends with the soft anaphora of blessing, recalling the poet-like voice of the first stanza and the repetition throughout that maintained the poet’s voice
even as the wolf shifted into focus. The poet’s voice truly resonates, though, as the present tense returns:

Let the memory of tongues not unnerve me so that I stumble or quake.

But lead me at times beside the still waters;
There when I crouch to drink let me catch a glimpse of your image
Before it is obscured with my own.

Preserve my tongue and I will bless you again and again (48-51, 56).

“You” has seemed, almost indisputably, wolf and, yet, there is no reason why this “Spirit” should not be able to inhabit the same threshold as the speaker, taking on both human and wolf qualities (2). The present tense “I crouch” is couched, albeit with a sense of certainty, in the possibility of future happening. The adverse future possibility in the present tense verb is the speaker’s own image obscuring the “you”; this fear likely stems from the knowledge that the poet’s human instinct, if not necessity, will be to return to human form. The speaker is recognizing that centering the human perspective is detrimental to a healthy relationship with nature. The mutability of the “you,” like the mutability of the speaker, allows Merwin to shift the reader into the role of “you,” of wolf, and of ethical compatriot in the poem’s message.

What that final message is perplexed Carroll, whose article, “The Spirit with the Long Ears and Paws,” focused on tracking biblical connections (for example, the “orchestra of flutes”) without considering the ecological ones. In Carroll’s reading, the paradox is that “one who is an archetype of civilized tribal values petitions in a traditionally communal form of prayer that he be allowed to exist outside of civilized communal values, categories, definitions, approval, and rewards, and come to share as deeply as possible the nature and characteristics of the wolf” (146-147). A metapoetic and ecological approach makes Lemuel’s actions (and identity) less paradoxical. That Lemuel speaks in a way that sounds “anti-communal” is more a commentary on the nature of his desired society than on his desire for society at all. He speaks against possession,
domination, and complacency. Together, these form the convenience of human society that continually nettles Merwin until, in *The Moon before Morning*, he writes “Convenience”:

We were not made in its image
but from the beginning we believed in it
not for the pure appeasement of hunger
but for its availability
it could command our devotion
beyond question and without our consent
and by whatever name we have called it
in its name love has been set aside
unmeasured time has been devoted to it
forests have been erased and rivers poisoned
and truth has been relegated for it
wars have been sanctified by it
we believe that we have a right to it
even though it belongs to no one
we carry a way back to it everywhere
we are sure that it is saving something
we consider it our personal savior
all we have to pay for it is ourselves (1-18)

Here is the problem with the human-nature relationship that Merwin struggled to escape and that, in this poem, Lemuel struggles to escape. That it took Merwin nearly fifty years to articulate this discomfort as he does in this poem indicates the depths of the lingering dis-ease caused by humanity’s commitment to ease. It is not a question of human survival, of the life of the human or the life of the wolf—but the acceptance of human convenience that would privilege that convenience of the human over the life of wolf. When the speaker calls for preservation in the second to last stanza, it is preservation of the body essential for life, a metonymic blazon of blessing.

What is crucial, however, is that petitions the speaker makes are neither demanded nor one-sided. The “dependent plea” of the final two lines that Carroll claims separates Lemuel from the wolf is only a dependent plea when considered independent of the promise before it.

Let my ignorance and my failings
Remain far behind me like tracks made in a wet season,
At the end of which I have vanished.
So that those who track me for their own twisted ends
May be rewarded only with ignorance and failings.
But let me leave my cry stretched out behind me like a road
On which I have followed you.
And sustain me for my time in the dessert
On what is essential to me. (61-65)

The poem’s wolf-human speaker prays for and blesses the wolf-reader with the opportunity to follow the cry of the wolf-poet, leaving behind the old lessons and ways of thinking, denying knowledge to those who do not seek it properly. The speaker’s mistakes, he hopes, are ones that will fade so that what he will “have,” in the end, will be an impermanent marker on the earth. The final two lines work strongly in conjunction with the two lines before, creating a plea of interdependence. The poet will leave his voice in exchange for temporary sustenance—temporary because, ecologically speaking, all things are temporary. Even this exchange, however, demonstrates the forward thinking desire for coexistence that makes “Lemuel’s Blessing” such a crucial poem to understand. “But let me leave my cry” might appear like all of the other lines of blessing in the poem and in the psalms to which the poem hearkens; but, this line transforms all of the “Let” constructions from commandment to request. The “But” signals passion, emotion, and commitment to a respectful and impermanent existence on earth but with the requested condition that the poet’s song might last long enough to do the work essential to the poet. For the ecopoet does not write to preserve in poetry the beauty of the world; but, to preserve in the world the beauty found in this poem.

At the end of “Lemuel’s Blessing,” Carroll ultimately “decide[s] to leave the poem in this mystery in which it clearly asks to remain,” leaving unresolved Lemuel’s paradox of communal relations, the speaker’s relationship with the wolf, and whether the poem’s prayer is answered. Had Carroll considered the poem’s ars poetica tradition or its proposed ecological ethics, he would have been able to explain further that the end of the ars poetica poem, as it sits in the end of the garden, is precisely that it does not need to be explained. Experience is the poet’s ethical
obligation to poetry. The mystery of “Lemuel’s Blessing” is the experience too complex to be neatly packaged in explanation. Merwin experiences a great deal of discomfort over the relationship between humanity and nature, as well as what he, as poet, can or should do about it. This discomfort is revealed again and again in its various metamorphoses through Merwin’s poetic praxis. Merwin’s explicit ars poetica poems send ripples of metapoetic consideration through the pool of Merwin’s poetry, lending all of them the powerful commentary of the tradition and compounding all of the poems into a textual manifestation of Merwin’s poetic development. By using ars poetica poems as a foundation for ecological ethics, Merwin uses form both to express and evolve the corporeal and liminal relationships critical to his poetry. Merwin’s ecological ethic, developed through mőbial exploration of form and theme, continually exceeds each as they grow from and nourish each other. Likewise, the poem and the reader exist mőbially so that each time the reader returns to the poem, they bring new experience with which to augment their understanding of the poem.

The poet promises the reader, “Preserve my tongue and I will bless you again and again.” Preservation is not passive and neither can reading be. Doing thinking is not only the charge of the poet and the poem but of the reader, the critic, the scholar, and every human being. Merwin charges that humanity must acknowledge its use of convenience as excuse and engage the knowledge necessary for healthy partnership before the cry of the road has faded from the page and humanity has only a pain without a cry.
Chapter 4

Unfolding Forms in *The Folding Cliffs*

Why do you think that man came
to see me Did he think I would tell him something else
after all of the others he has listened to
what does he know now about what I remember
maybe he only wanted to see for himself
whether I was the one in the book he had been reading
where he told me that some of the words were too crooked for him—

(*The Folding Cliffs 7.40*)

* * *

At best, *The Folding Cliffs* is an ecopoetic epic tailored for a human species in the midst of its own epoch of destruction, outlining a path of recovery through reader engagement; at worst, it is a masterpiece of literary colonialism. One might say that little, other than a semi-colon, separates these two possibilities from each other. From the perspective of form, *The Folding Cliffs* takes on the immense task of understanding whether and how the epic form has a place in the ecological crises of the twenty-first century. It takes the forms that Merwin explored, stretched, and wrestled with, from the 1950s through the 1990s, and pushes those forms, again, to their very breaking point. It asks, what happens when you tell a narrative of monumental proportions while staunchly opposing the stapling constraints of prose that creep into poetry, as well as strict conceptions of what comprises a poetic epic? “Epic” derives from the Greek *epos* meaning word, narrative, or song and might be understood, at a basic level, as a long oral or written poem combining history and mythology to speak of heroic action, often in the name of a nation state.

The poet-audience dynamic in the epic tradition is one of creator-receiver, so that the audience reads or listens passively. John Clark contends in *A History of Epic Poetry* that “people who say that all poetry is ethical, that ethics is in it plainly” forget the “irreconcilability of the didactic and the epic” (76, 77). Given Clark’s purported ethics-epic paradox, the epic form may seem at odds with
the exigency of Merwin’s poetic ethic. Yet, after considering for ten years what the form of *The Folding Cliffs* should be, it was the epic poem that Merwin took as his model (White 6). Appropriate, on the one hand, because epic traditionally elevates its subject to a status of greater importance and greater respect; on the other hand, Merwin’s status as white male American of European descent transplanted to Hawaii, threatens to limit the efficacy of the traditional epic approach in achieving the goals Merwin has for *The Folding Cliffs*.

Critical reception of *The Folding Cliffs* was largely positive and Merwin received a variety of praise about the poetic accomplishments of this text. One Hawaiian critic, however, raised a litany of concerns and frustrations not found in most circulated discussions of the text. Kapalai‘ula de Silva, a graduate of the University of Hawaii, has long studied the inextricably linked languages of hula and Hawaiian. She works with a variety of organizations and projects in Hawaii to protect, as well as advance the study of the Hawaiian language, and the culture and history it embodies. In her review of *The Folding Cliffs*, entitled “The Literary Offenses of W. S. Merwin’s *Folding Cliffs*” published on the Ka‘iwakīloumoku Hawaiian Cultural Center’s Virtual Archive, de Silva takes Merwin to task for everything from the opening endorsements on his dust jacket to the closing lines of the final page. Among Merwin’s offenses, the most egregious in de Silva’s eyes is Merwin’s lack of fidelity to what de Silva views as Pi’ilani’s true narrative. She expresses frustration that Merwin appears to veil his sources, as he claims simultaneously that there are fewer facts than there are but that he should be understood as being true to those facts. de Silva cites numerous examples illustrating Merwin’s divergence from the narratives already available. These divergences include the unforgivable offense of simultaneously stripping Pi’ilani of her deep Christian faith and failing to follow through with his purported native Hawaiian alternative. In

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15 It may seem a small omission to remove “The” from the title. But it should be noted that this is not good practice when referring to poetry, in particular in a discussion in which language itself, and its subtleties, are as central as they are in this one.
short, de Silva reads *The Folding Cliffs* from dust jacket cover to dust jacket cover as appropriation, commercialization, and colonization. Her conclusion, which opens the review, is that, “For this Hawaiian, at least, there is little truth in *Folding Cliffs* and way too much originality. If it is a masterpiece, it is a masterpiece of literary colonialism.”

Merwin is aware of his precarious position in relation to *The Folding Cliffs*. By the time Merwin writes this text, his indisputably ecological poetry is committed to upholding an ethics-aesthetics möbius. Thus, *The Folding Cliffs* is obligated by Merwin’s ecopoetics to engage in ethical practice whatever other formal elements it exhibits. Because of this sine qua non, Merwin labors to revision the traditional epic form in order to account for the ethically fraught relationships inherent to *The Folding Cliffs*. Drawing on his innovative uses of liminality, poetic form, and möbial corporeality, Merwin avoids slipping into easy dichotomies. He recognizes shared culpability among humans, using möbial corporeality to reevaluate relationships. He centers the nature-human relationship, exploring the ecosystem as a nation state shared by all bodies, focusing largely on relatively recent times, rather than glorifying an era long past. And, most important, he addresses the imbalance of the traditional epic’s poet-reader paradigm. Unlike the audiences of early epics, this epic’s audience is not an illiterate class that needs the poet to bring them knowledge they cannot access on their own. Instead, the poet’s role is to engage the reader and the reader’s role is to engage the poem. No longer a passive consumer, the reader who agrees to read *The Folding Cliffs* agrees to share active responsibility. Not all readers understand Merwin’s terms; and the initial critical response, though largely positive, had readers either swept away by the narrative or resisting Merwin’s attempts to elevate history to legend. Readers are not used to bearing the burden this text demands, in particular, of any outsider who wants to enter the Hawaiian landscape as anything more than colonial day-tripper.
What de Silva’s answer would be to her semi-rhetorical question, “How real is Merwin’s purported respect for the people of these islands?” is clear, as well as extremely important in understanding the fragile intersections between revisioned epic form and ethics in *The Folding Cliffs*. Merwin recognizes the instability and danger of his position in writing this text, given the extent to which the text itself engages such dangers. The interesting question, then, is not simply whether Merwin is successful in writing a text that engages a respectful ethic, but also, and perhaps first, what the text reveals about why he makes the authorial decisions that he makes. Having no means by which to determine why there are no Hawaiian voices included on the cover or dust jacket flaps—a glaringly obvious absence—I will focus only on Merwin’s text, a space in which he is ultimately responsible. This engagement of Merwin’s text should not be understood as a defense of Merwin or *The Folding Cliffs* but, rather, an exploration of his decisions and their effects on both *The Folding Cliffs* and its various audiences. Audience and an understanding of Merwin’s lifelong poetic praxis towards engaging his audience in active participation in the text are both crucial to any true understanding of the respect that Merwin demonstrates, or fails to demonstrate in *The Folding Cliffs*. Keeping de Silva’s criticism close at hand, my consideration of Merwin’s twenty-first-century epic centralizes the gaps between history and poetry, questioning not simply the reality of Merwin’s respect for the people of Hawaii but whether Merwin’s attempts at respectful, ethical poetry is sufficient to assuage the risks and shortcomings of his revisioned epic narrative.

**Revisioning the Epic Form**

Merwin’s revisioning of the epic form is, arguably, meant to demonstrate respect for the history, personal story, and Hawaiian culture Merwin is engaging. If Merwin is so diligent, why, then, does de Silva feel so alienated by *The Folding Cliffs*? The place to begin an answer is in the
question of form. Looking back for a moment to Opening the Hand, Merwin has another narrative poem focused on Hawaii, the publication of which did not long precede Merwin’s early thoughts of what would become The Folding Cliffs. “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Field” illustrates what Merwin called his broken back line, a variable mid-line sequence of spaces with origins in the Middle English poetry he was translating in the 1950s. While Brunner notes that some of Merwin’s contemporaries were using similar mid-line caesuras, unlike Merwin’s persistent use throughout the poem, others’ usage was dominated by the demands of syntax (316). The sequence of spaces disrupts the line, forcing the reader to pause momentarily not only at line breaks but mid-line as well. In “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Field,” the broken lines drive home the pointed questions, subverting the role of the tourist through interrogation and implied culpability. The questions seem to begin out of courtesy before taking an immediate turn in line 2, questioning the tourists’ knowledge, calling out certain responsibility on their part.

Did you like your piece of pineapple would you like a napkin who gave you the pineapple what do you know about them do you eat much pineapple where you come from how did this piece compare with pineapple you have eaten before what do you remember about the last time you ate a piece of pineapple did you know where it came from how much did it cost do you remember the first time you tasted pineapple do you like it better fresh or from the can what do you remember of the picture on the can what did you feel as you looked at the picture which do you like better the picture or the pineapple field did you ever imagine pineapples grow somewhere (3-12)

After the first two lines, the stanza continues in a series of questions that, at this point, strike a balance between innocuously curious and slightly invasive. The third and fourth lines of the poem might be small talk but the fifth line causes that same sense of discomfort as the second line, with the tourists potentially being forced to respond, ‘I don’t know,’ only to be asked why not. But there is no response and the silence that the reader experiences should parallel the discomfort the
reader feels in trying to answer the questions. The reader must consider the economic situations connected to pineapple, the fruit as an object to be sold and marketed and consumed, as well as the landscape from which the pineapple originates and how that reality compares with the comfortable image on the marketed can; that is, the poem asks the tourists—and the reader—to think about pineapple as more than a product to be consumed and, rather, as a connection between nature and humanity. The barrage of question words, including the midline break offering a second opportunity in each line to emphasize the vocabulary of interrogation, as well as the repetition of “you” at least once in each line, all push the reader into the space of the “you,” form forcing them into a defensive stance.

The importance of this poem’s form, especially as precursor to The Folding Cliffs as a revisioned epic poem, should not be underestimated. After Merwin’s move to Hawaii in 1975, he discovered a need to reconcile colonial destruction with the rich history that had preceded this invasion. “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Field” takes a more barbed, less forgiving approach than The Folding Cliffs, and the second stanza’s repetition of the pointed question “Do you know...” drives home, through passive-aggressive anaphora, the ignorance of the tourists regarding the natives who live on the islands, the natural habitat and ecosystem, as well as the effects of outsiders and outside species and methods. Merwin is neither tourist nor native, occupying an in-between status that requires, perhaps, even more self-scrutiny in order to justify his presence. Interwoven throughout, at first subtly and then blatantly, are references to economics, with the growing sensation that, in a turnabout of retribution, it is the tourist being exploited. The discomfort caused by the prying questions concerning life on the islands gradually transforms into a discomfort over questions that hit a little closer to home for the reader-tourist.

do you drink more or less than at home
how do you like the place where you live now
were you born there how long have you lived there
what does the name mean is it a growth community
why are you living there  how long do you expect to stay
how old is your house  would you like to sell it (90-95)

The contrast with the deceiving small talk of “Did you like your piece of pineapple” lends a sinister tone to the penultimate stanza. The reference to drinking at home implies unhappiness, while the questions about “home” (which culminate in inquiring whether “you” would like to give up your home) suggest threat against the backdrop of Hawaiians who were forced to relinquish their homes, their language, and their way of life. The final stanza, with its assumption of a business-like tone, brings the reader around into either a defensive position of guilt in which the reader does not want to admit to perpetuating the colonial economy or an enabling position in which the reader is roped into justifying that economy. The sensitive reader might take the final question, “Do you think there is a future in pineapple” (101), as an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of changing ways of life resulting from one group of people subverting another’s established practices, only then to fear that their own may be in jeopardy. This is a question of futurity broader than the addendum “in pineapple” would suggest. Instead, it is the conflict within humanity, as well as between humanity and nature. The caesura here and those elsewhere in the poem function as ruptures within the lines, putting each line fragment in relation with and yet at a distance from the others. The ruptures compound in their effect to engage the reader in active, even if uncomfortable, participation.

One obvious but easily overlooked aspect of “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Plantation” is audience. This poem is written for tourists, a group that—regardless of demographic—is inherently comprised of outsiders to the Hawaiian community. Connecting this knowledge about intended audience with The Folding Cliffs, brings to mind an observation that John Wythe White makes in the introduction to his 1999 interview with Merwin about The Folding Cliffs. His argument that, “The Folding Cliffs should be distributed (or, better, read aloud) to every Hawai’i resident and visitor—especially those who find it difficult to relate to the profound anger
and disillusionment of many contemporary native Hawaiian activists,” seems to preclude Native Hawaiians from the audience of *The Folding Cliffs* (6). But there is nothing anywhere in *The Folding Cliffs* that limits the scope of the audience the way that Merwin did in “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Plantation.” However, the form suited to the foreign audience is, at times, ill-suited to the native one. For example, a primary purpose of Merwin’s concision in the introduction to *The Folding Cliffs* is to make the reader take responsibility for acting. But a resistant or suspicious reader will view this concision as omission. For native Hawaiians, reading this text without resistance may feel like accepting reconciliation too quickly, that is, while wrongdoing is still occurring: readers have not yet understood, let alone begun to act on their ethical responsibilities, and may never do either. It would be easy to consider Merwin an outsider appropriating Hawaiian voice in *The Folding Cliffs*, which, simultaneously, “isn’t derivative of a Hawaiian voice … [but] has its own voice” (White 7). The Hawaiian reader may be too frustrated to give Merwin the benefit of the doubt necessary to find the threads Merwin has woven into the poem questioning and addressing his own role as poet.

As poet, Merwin is extremely careful about what he claims *The Folding Cliffs* is or does. The conservative subtitle *A narrative of 19th-century Hawaii* simultaneously does not explain what the text is while subtly telling the reader what it does. “One assumes that narrative will be done in prose,” Merwin explains to White, and, “There must be some reason for doing it in verse instead of prose. I know what my reason was, which is that you want poetry to be or do something that prose cannot do” (6). Though *The Folding Cliffs* appears, in many ways, to be Pi’ilani’s tale, the title, dedication, and introduction all signal to the reader that Merwin has a bigger poetic project at hand. The title helps clarify the scope of Merwin’s project. de Silva vents in a footnote that, “‘Toothed cliffs’ – along with marching cliffs, ridged cliffs, rowed cliffs, sheltering cliffs, and ridge-pole cliffs – is one of Pi'ilani’s own expressions. ‘Folding cliffs’ is not.” Merwin’s voice melting into
the echo of Pi’ilani’s indicates that he is not merely repeating Pi’ilani’s story. “Folding,” apart from the material aspect of the book folding, suggests that there are many stories and meanings coming together, being folded into a larger narrative. The issue of accuracy can, in part, be explained through a short excerpt from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which clarifies that it is not the function of a poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen.... The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose ...

The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophic and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. (17)

In this way, “though it affixes proper names to the characters,” poetry is able to expand the story beyond those characters. Merwin’s revisioned narrative blends historical singulars and traditional epic universals, reaching for a balance between individual perspectives and generational, or even geologic ones. He avoids the pitfalls of universalizing by adding depth to individual voices through echoes of other voices. “Poetry really becomes something else,” Merwin explains. “Prose is always ‘about.’ It is in relation to its subject. Poetry is not only in relation to something else. It’s a whole new thing” (White 8). That *The Folding Cliffs* is poetry can hardly be doubted, even if it is a strange poetry that pushes its form in ways that no other poets have done in order to create that “whole new thing.” Pi’ilani is an individual, one whose ‘true’ story has been documented from her perspective in a way that no other version will ever be able to claim as being more authentic. In this version, Merwin is looking for another kind of authenticity—not a master narrative that is truer than any other version, but a multi-voiced narrative that brings in perspectives not represented in any other version. This is not because, as individual, Pi’ilani’s story is not interesting enough. Rather, by folding in echoes of other stories (for example, the story of Olivia
Breitha, to whom Merwin dedicates *The Folding Cliffs*), Pi’ilani’s story comes to resonate with a chorus of voices—an orchestra of bone flutes through the voice of one piper.

Merwin does not call this text an epic poem; however, the recurrence of the flute (both “word” and “song”) suggests that *epos* is precisely the origin from which to understand *The Folding Cliffs*. Merwin’s admission that, before he had begun writing *The Folding Cliffs*, “the story kept nibbling at me,” resonates with the opening line of “Some Winter Sparrows”—“I hear you already, choir of small wheels”—which, itself, resonates with all the metapoetic power of the ars poetica “On the Subject of Poetry” (Amen 152). It is simply impossible to understand *The Folding Cliffs* without thinking about how it folds in the remainder of Merwin’s career alongside the choir of historical voices from his research. Merwin’s choice to centralize the flute must also recall his use of metonymy to question the purported boundaries between nature and humanity. The flute’s appearance in poem’s like “The Bones” and “Lemuel’s Blessing” reinforced the corporeal connections between bodies, air, and other bodies. Even in poems that center around air but not the flute, the metapoetic threshold that the flute calls forth from the air still lingers. In “Air,” which follows later in the same collection as “Lemuel’s Blessing,”

Naturally it is night.  
Under the overturned lute with its  
One string I am going my way  
Which has a strange sound.

This way the dust, that way the dust.  
I listen to both sides  
But I keep right on.  
I remember the leaves sitting in judgment  
And then winter.

I remember the rain with its bundle of roads.  
The rain taking all its roads.  
Nowhere.

Young as I am, old as I am.  
I forget tomorrow, the blind man.
I forget the life among the buried windows.
The eyes in the curtains.
The wall
Growing through immortelles.
I forget silence
The owner of the smile.

This must be what I wanted to be doing,
Walking at night between two deserts,
Singing.

The betweenness in the poem comes both from the metapoetic references of the speaker’s narrative and from the intersection of nature and human, for example the crisscrossing of the wall and the immortelles—impermanent human divider amidst mortal flowers speaking of immortal abstracts. The poem’s structure of remembering and forgetting pivots around the epistrophic perception of age as measure, so that it is the perception rather than the essence of the speaker that shifts. The moon is lute, smile, mouth, source of sound and music through the air, counterpart to the singing poet. The air surrounds all of the words in the poem and on the page, whether the reader is expelling air as poem or merely breath around it. That air and song and word are so explicitly brought together means that when Merwin returns, again, to the flute and air in The Folding Cliffs, the connections between air (in all its meanings) and epic should resound all the more clearly with the metapoetic echoes of ars poetica.

The sense of threshold in “Air,” as well as “Lemuel’s Blessing” and “The Bones,” returns in The Folding Cliffs’ invocation of the flute. In the closing poems, Makaweli relates a story that her sister told her of the Ewarts, a family near Kilauea, and the Bertelmanns, a German family whose son the family hid away because he had contracted leprosy and, even after traveling to Japan, could not be cured. The Ewarts would play music at night and occasionally heard a flute playing even after they had stopped. Eventually Mr. Ewart discovered that it was Christian Bertelmann, who “had / represented Kauai in the legislature” (7.39). Makaweli concludes the story by saying that he had died and “that happened / not long ago and she said that only the
family / knows where he is buried—And she stopped” (7.40). In “The Bones,” one of the major lessons of the human-nature relationship was that, when the human stopped, so too did the music of the flute. Here, however, in this epic constructed entirely without punctuational stops, in the pause between Makaweli and Pi’ilani speaking, they sit silent

hearing the long low wave ending on the shore—A flute—
Pi’ilani said—There was a man in Kalalau
down by the stream who played the flute and when I heard it
I would go on thinking I heard it all the next day— (7.40)

Merwin’s sole concession to punctuation in The Folding Cliffs are the dashes he uses around speech but he is not lazy about how he uses these dashes and his choice to use them is not because he could not express speech without them. “—A flute—” becomes a visual representation of the instrument on the page, connected with the sound, movement, wind, and life-supporting water of the wave. The wave is “ending” but that ending is part of a möbial circulation of water, itself part of the möbial circulation of life. It is almost a return to the scene in “The Bones” except that when Christian’s flute stops playing, the music does not stop. In fact, there are no stops. Not merely in punctuation but in the möbius that explains experience. Even death is not an unfortunate turn to stoppage, but a re-turn to nature. The music continues because a flute’s air is not comprised only of individual notes. That air is part of a möbially circulating partnership of all material bodies in communion, one element of the nature-human relationship of coexistence. Each time Merwin uses “—” to indicate speech, he is indicating the flow of breath. David Mason says that, “In one sense Merwin has found the logical purpose for the epic in our time, to represent the stories not of the victors, as Virgil does in The Aeneid, but of the defeated, the victims of modern imperial and corporate schemes” (592). What makes The Folding Cliffs not simply an epic poem, but an epic poem revisioned for the new millennium, is that Merwin takes the traditional role of the singular hero and gives Pi’ilani’s single voice a polyvocal depth through the echoes of others’ stories, other poems, and, moreover, the
experience of möbially that he instills in his representations of the nature-human relationship. Merwin is not idealizing a single historical figure, as de Silva might have him do; instead, he is recognizing that Pi’ilani’s story, voice, and breath are in concert with the story of the new millennium, the voice of ecological ethics, and the communal breath within which humanity is inextricably bound.

Taking “Note” from a Threshold

Merwin’s brief introduction to The Folding Cliffs says a great deal about his motivations before the poem has even begun. In the context of a poetic career highly skeptical of “the rational protocol of written language, and of prose in particular,” it is unsurprising that Merwin’s introductory “Note” would err on the side of concision (The Second 1). Three short paragraphs of two or three sentences each and one longer paragraph of five sentences comprise the not even full page of prose that contextualizes, apologizes, thanks, warns, chastises, informs, and pays homage. To understand what this introduction actually says between the heavily condensed lines, the reader should keep in mind Merwin’s goals for this text. His longer poems have always allowed him the space to explore, through various types of narrative, his ongoing möbious of doing and thinking. Merwin’s exploration of the human-nature relationship, transformed into a nature-human one during the late 1980s, allowed Merwin a new way to think about relationships, bringing together his exploration of bodies and thresholds. He explains in an interview that he had a story that he wanted to tell but that, in the telling of this story, there was an intersection of developing form and thinking.

I realized that the poems in The Vixen had made it possible for me to find a form to tell the story of The Folding Cliffs. I was thinking about the characters all the time. I realized the point in the story where I wanted to start. I was thinking about
it one night and just started writing. I worked at it for about two years until I had it written. But it was a number of things coming together. I didn’t sit down and decide I was going to write a poem, and this is going to be the story, and so on.

All of those things connected on their own, in a way. (Amen 152)

In another interview, Merwin states even more explicitly that, *The Folding Cliffs* “took about two years to write, but I had been thinking about the story for about 10 years prior to that—without knowing how I could handle it. Various things happened. I suppose I was planning it in my unconscious, but I didn’t know that” (White 6-7). *The Rain in the Trees* initiated the shifts that worked through to *The Vixen*, allowing Merwin to reach the familiar point of longer narrative. And, yet, once again Merwin used the opportunity to take forms that he had been using and building, and push them until they seemed to have reached a new limit. These collections manifesting the first fruit of Merwin’s new stage of thinking, revealed through praxis, finally realized the means to reconciliation with nature that had been hovering on a threshold of possibility since his revisioning of the Edenic narrative. *The Folding Cliffs* becomes the manifestation of this changed possibility, demonstrating a nature-human (and within that, human-human) coexistence that is neither ideal nor impossible. Short as it is, Merwin’s opening “Note” speaks volumes about his approach to form, content, and context of *The Folding Cliffs*.

The opening paragraph explains that, “The central events of the story all happened and the principal characters existed but the evidence for both is fragmentary and most of it second or third hand, refracted and remote. This is a fiction but it was not my purpose to belie such facts as have come down to us. Some of them have been moving toward legend since they occurred” (ii). These sentences might be mistaken for a standard ‘based on a true story’ disclaimer but, in this compressed context, there is considerably more at stake. Merwin is reminding the reader that a narrative is a construction, be it memoir or history, and that untangling the “truth” of those
constructions is precarious. Given Merwin’s standing, it is unlikely that anyone would accept him as authority on truth in *The Folding Cliffs*. This raises the question: what, then, is the purpose of this version? Merwin’s goals are complex but among them is not the goal of writing a history textbook. The accounts of Pi’ilani’s story are all just that: accounts. Even her own is a representation shaped by the passage of time and the hands that helped write it. Merwin recognizes that his version may be viewed as less truthful because of the narrative liberties that he takes and the introduction’s second sentence issues an apology for that. It states explicitly that Merwin is fictionalizing a true story, as the genre of historical fiction does, but that he does not do so with the intention of belying (that is, to deceive by lying or to betray) any of the facts. Even more than this, the final sentence quietly explains the status in which *The Folding Cliffs* wishes to recognize Pi’ilani’s story. Merwin’s continuum of legend and history provide the experiential framework for enacting the ethics-aesthetics möbius of ecopoetry.

Like the first paragraph, the second might be discounted as generic ‘thank you’s and, the third, as a justification of terminology. However, each contributes to Merwin’s folding together of history and legend. When Merwin says he is “profoundly indebted first to Frances Frazier, whose editing and translation of Pi’ilani’s account told by Sheldon was my own introduction to the story,” this runs counter to de Silva’s assertion that Merwin “seems intent on masking the existence of” his two most important primary texts (*TFC ii*, de Silva). Merwin’s specificity about broader historical interests is not simply because he needs to contextualize Pi’ilani’s narrative; it is because part of what Merwin’s text must do, in order to differentiate its value from that of Sheldon’s account, is to use Pi’ilani’s story to tell Hawaii’s story. When Merwin speaks of facts handed down, he is referencing figures like Judge Kauai and Stolz, not only Pi’ilani, reinforcing that his poetic fiction is not meant to distort Pi’ilani’s story but to weave together a cultural text that takes into account a multiplicity of voices and experiences (White 7-8). That Merwin
mentions Sheldon and Frazier but not their texts’ titles indicates two non-exclusive interpretations: first, that these texts are so foundational that they can be easily identified without being named; and second, that the reader has an obligation to engage in the process of learning. de Silva also takes issue with Merwin thanking Agnes Conrad for “[conjuring] up startling treasures” (TFC ii). Merwin’s lack of documentation about the specifics of these resources and their relation to his text earns a footnote expressing de Silva’s extreme frustration in reading “his narrative without being able to separate research from invention, fact from fiction.” The paradox is that de Silva criticizes Merwin for literary colonialism while, simultaneously, calling on him to act in a way that would push him precariously close to that role.

The stark reality is that, in exploring the archive, these treasures are not Merwin’s to claim. Merwin is not a discoverer, a colonizing cartographer of the archive. He is not a historian or a scholar. He is a poet; one who wishes to engage with the experience of Hawaii and draw his readers into their own experience, rather than reify and impose his. His task is not to show a mastery of the subject matter or the resources that inform the stories. His task is to create an ethical epic that respects the Hawaiian people and culture by not only looking at histories of the past but to the stories of the future. This eye towards the needs of the future, entwined in the actions of the present, helps explain the importance of representing the broader historical context surrounding the approaching-legendary story of Pi’ilani’s experience with leprosy. “The word ‘leper,’ of course, is offensive in any modern reference. I have used it throughout simply because it was the ordinary usage at the time of the story, part of the appalling cruelty of the history of what Hawaiians came to call ‘the separating sickness’” (TFC ii). Merwin is committed to telling this history “from the Hawaiian viewpoint. I wanted to treat the story well from their point of view, without sentimentalizing or loading it” (White 7). Merwin’s priorities are not that different from de Silva’s—Merwin also seeks a kind of “truth”—but each approaches truth from a different
direction. One of the “startling treasures” from the “trove” of the archive might have been Olivia Breitha’s story. The active reader would easily find that Breitha was diagnosed with leprosy at age 18 and lived most of her life in Kalaupapa. Merwin could have explained this reference; however, the actual experience of finding Breitha’s memoir (folded between her 1983 letter to Alan Alda and his somewhat unsatisfying 1985 response) or even an article documenting her life and death, more strongly impacts the reader’s experience.

The final paragraph of the introduction seems to strike a different tone and, yet, it is merely carrying out the same point that Merwin makes in the rest of the introductory paratext. Merwin implies that the diligent scholar would include a careful pronunciation guide indicating their own research, which, in all likelihood, the reader will ignore. But Merwin refuses to do this, showing his distaste for the actions and mindset of “Americans especially,” who he views in Hawaii as having come “from somewhere else and displaced cultures, peoples, languages, and much of the natural world” (White 7). Through the self-conscious tone of his position, his words are loud and clear: he will encourage learning but not enable passive consumption.

A note of any complexity about Hawaiian pronunciation would probably be ignored, and for those who are interested one can easily be found. But it might be useful here to say that if the vowels are accorded individual attention and sounds roughly resembling Spanish or Italian, and double vowels pronounced with a glottal stop between them (as in ‘oh-oh’) it will at least be a courteous if faltering step toward a rich, subtle, ancient and elegant language. (ii)

More candid than his choice not to reveal the “subtle treasures” of his own exploration, this near-chastising explicitly calls out readers who skip cultural notes, background information, and other context that the author provides. Merwin’s lesson here is not merely the basics of Hawaiian pronunciation but the basics of choosing to be an engaged reader. Even if the reader only, then,
makes an effort to utilize the brief guide that Merwin does include, it will keep them thinking about the importance of language and their engagement with it throughout the text. The reader will also be unable to deny, after this, their own implication in the text when it discusses the subject of foreign pronunciation of Hawaiian. The statement that Merwin makes in this less-is-more approach is more powerful than had he inundated the reader with pages of information and notes. The final words of respect are more than lip service. They are a reminder at the end of a prose passage, in the way that the final word of a poetic line resonates after the poem is finished, that, as the reader moves on to the poem, active engagement is requisite to being an ethical reader.

**Forms of Respect**

Accepting *The Folding Cliffs* as revisioned epic reveals several key differences in form between this text and earlier narratives, like “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Plantation.” Most important is the way that Merwin handles his role as poet. Regardless of his intentions, Merwin belongs to the colonial power and, therefore, the colonial problem. His very presence in Hawaii is vexed, even before speaking on behalf of people whose ways of life his presence displaces. *The Folding Cliffs* must address this head on to be of any value. Length is a second key difference between the two narratives. The challenge of writing a poem of this magnitude is rivaled, perhaps, only by the challenge of reading a poem of this magnitude. While the earlier narrative was easily digestible in one sitting, like a can of pineapple or a sampling of fresh fruit on the plantation, by contrast, *The Folding Cliffs* requires many sittings, and pausings, and revisitings. The reader cannot be half asleep in reading this text or, like Pi’ilani climbing out of the valley, they may turn their ankle on a loose stone and awake stabbed by fear. Or worse, they might miss altogether the feeling of being stabbed by fear. *The Folding Cliffs* is not
skimmable. Every line, every line break, every pairing of words offers the opportunity to destabilize meaning and require the reader to experience the poem. To address the ethical responsibilities of his revisioned epic, Merwin must destabilize the traditional roles of poet-speaker and reader-consumer, coercing the reader into willing engagement, in part through linguistic and syntactic moves, and in part through an expansion of the “text.” Ultimately, the reader must understand that their engaged reading obligations do not end with the printed page, but include continual reading of language, bodies, and nature beyond the final page.

Just as removing punctuation required a more intense commitment from the reader of the poems beginning with The Moving Target, the formal choices Merwin makes in The Folding Cliffs push the reader to such a high level of engagement that he risks losing the attention of readers who cannot, or are not willing to make that kind of commitment to the text. In fact, the attention Merwin’s epic requires of the reader pushes Mason to admit that, in spite of the initial praise that he gave to The Folding Cliffs when it was published, he “cannot concentrate on the text anymore with the kind of attention it requires” (592). His critique of Merwin’s language stems from what he calls Merwin’s combination of “a kind of cultural piety with verbosity,” providing a passage that exemplifies the “clumps of language” in which, “information deadens narrative, and ... the relationship of the line and sentence feels so arbitrary that I begin to lose interest” (592, 592-593):

he had managed to obtain one tentative permit
to take care of those on Kauai whom the doctors there
were convinced had leprosy and already he was providing
care for them at Kekaha while those who had gone
across into Kalalau to whom he had been sending
such medicines as existed had signed petitions
asking for their treatment to be made official (592-593)

At first glance, this passage indeed appears full of information intended to forward the narrative. On second look, though, Mason’s critique of an “arbitrary” treatment of line in relation to
sentence is short sighted. Consider the final word of each line: permit, there, providing, gone, sending, petitions, official. Opening and closing with words hammering on the bureaucracy of the situation (and I say hammering because of the repetition of “d” and “t” sounds that literally hammer throughout the passage) creates a contrast with the actions “sending” and “providing,” which are alternated with place words to create a feeling of movement. “Permit” could be a verb but its use as a noun reinforces a sense of bureaucratic stagnation, especially in comparison with the action in the following lines. Breaking the line after “gone” allows it to refer to those alive “who had gone / across into Kalalau” but also, more contemplatively, to those simply “who had gone,” a nod to those unable to receive treatment who died, as well as those who had been forced to leave and were never heard from again. Counterpart to the hammering consonance of this passage, the repetition of words that echo with “air”—care, there, care, their—remind the reader that every word, every space, every line break, every turn is an inhalation, an exhalation, or a threshold of breath in between. Resolving the assonance with “their” attempts to let the breath linger in the body of another, until it is swept away again by the flow of bureaucracy. Through the whole epic, Merwin demands the same micro-attention that he asked for in earlier poems. The result is an exhausting process of reading that risks saturating the reader’s sensitivity to nuance. That is, hyper-awareness of the poem’s air risks suffocating the reader in its density, refusing to yield its folding to the through-line that narrative typically provides. But this is the mutual commitment that needs to be made in such an epic: that poet and reader will take equal responsibility for creating a text that, at every turn of and within the line, enacts its ethical promise.

That poet and primary readership are both outsiders to Hawaiian language means that any form of respect must begin at the level of language with a recognition of the limitations that non-native Hawaiians will face in participating in this story. Words signify meaning and, given
Merwin’s non-native status, there is a self-reflective quality to the text when it dwells on the tensions between speakers of English and Hawaiian. In “Born,” the Hawaiian children are astute observers of a wrongness between usages of Hawaiian, describing the gap between Reverend Rowell’s experience and their own, apparent in his conversations with them at school.

> whatever words the pastor uttered from the moment they walked through the door onto the dead wood each syllable of their own language articulated so carefully that it did not sound like their own language at all ... because those words although they were like the words of their own were really arriving out of some distance that existed for him but not for them (3.20)

When Reverend Rowell speaks, he is harvesting words that are then dead, just as the wood for the floor boards was harvested and shaped in dead form. The non-native children who learn Hawaiian do not speak it with the mechanical awkwardness of the Pastor “and even so they were only / partly in what they were saying and the rest somewhere / out of sight like hands making shadows” (3.20). The reader is reminded that language is rooted in corporeal experience and that history and ancestry are part of what shape corporeal experience. Though Merwin, by the time of writing The Folding Cliffs, had spent two decades in Hawaii, his experience of Hawaii will always necessarily be different from those born and raised there, and from those whose Hawaiian ancestry is inseparable from their corporeal identity. Merwin also acknowledges that the advent of English changed the relationship even between Hawaiians and the Hawaiian language.

> Even when the Hawaiian chant has been kept alive as it has, and there are many people who chant very well, you can hardly say their first language is Hawaiian. Most of their life experience is in another language. And so to continue, to keep it going, they’re not doing it in the same way that the pre-contact Hawaiians did it. They can’t, there’s no way it can be done. Those Hawaiians had only one language. They did everything in it. And that’s a problem for singers, for chanters.
The language they’re using for chanting is not the language they’re speaking. It’s hard to keep a tradition vital when it’s not in your subconscious. It’s wonderful, but it’s not the same as it was 300 years ago. (White 7)

This comparison does not diminish the work of contemporary chanters in Hawaii. But it does recognize the effect of English on Hawaiian, a critical admission given Merwin’s treatment of Pi’ilani’s and Hawaii’s stories in English. It also reinforces the importance Merwin ascribes to experience in relation to language, and vice versa. The language the chanters speak shapes their experience, and their experience shapes their chanting. Part of The Folding Cliffs’ task, even as it does so in English, is to reinforce the value of Hawaiian not merely as history or text, but as experience.

One choice that Merwin makes to mitigate the experiential gaps between audiences of the linguistic text is to expand the poetic text beyond language. Reading the body and the environment as texts pays homage to the complexity of Hawaiian language and recognizes that Merwin is not master of any of these texts. Considering Ko’olau’s, the Judge’s, and Reverend Rowell’s bodies as inconcealable texts that reveal knowledge about that person raises questions about the right to consent, or deny consent, to having your corporeal text read. The closing scene in “There” makes this explicit, with Dr. Smith saying that he can read the disease on Kaenaku’s face even if neither she nor her husband, the Judge, have yet noticed it. The same thing happens later, in “There,” with Stolz reading the disease on Ko’olau’s face, and Ko’olau and Pi’ilani reading it on their son Kaleimanu. Even before this explicit revelation by Dr. Smith in the final poem, Ko’olau has discovered the body as text, reading both the Judge and Reverend Rowell. When he visits the Judge, Ko’olau notices that the Judge’s face seems to have “changed in the course of the summer he searched / shadows under the broad brim and they seemed to be melting” (2.37). While Kaenaku questions Ko’olau about the leper colony in Kalalau
the Judge was sitting at a table on the deep lanai
in his hat with the broad straw brim and the band of pheasant
breast feathers around it that he seemed never to
take off now that his hair had turned white and Ko’olau
saw how heavy he was becoming the chairs complained
when he sank into them and the floor gave when he stood up (3.10)

On the one hand, the Judge’s weight is not something that he can hide; it is readily apparent to
any who choose to observe. On the other hand, his white hair is also apparent but the Judge
chooses to cover this portion of his body, an alteration of the text or, at least, the presentation of
the text. The shadows on the Judge’s face are harder to read, as they might be a play of light,
markings of time, or visible manifestations of a reality that the Judge and Kaenaku can only talk
around at this moment. The line breaks here suggest division, bringing into the body of the text
the separation that each of the three people present are quietly considering. That the Judge is at,
on, and in at the same time has already destabilized the sense of place, while breaking the body
of the pheasant, the infinitive verb, and Ko’olau’s ability to see across the line break creates discord
that parallels the fear of unspoken thoughts. The break as “the chairs complained” asks the reader
to pause for a moment in the chairs’ onomatopoeic and involuntary reading of the Judge’s body.

While the Judge is aware of his changing body and how others can read it even without
his consent, when Ko’olau reads Reverend Rowell’s body, it is entirely without the Pastor’s
knowledge. Ko’olau is riding behind the Pastor to the church after Reverend Rowell has promised
to help get a box to Ko’olau’s sister. “Ko’olau’s eyes / kept returning to the black coat moving ahead
of him / under the black hat and he saw nobody inside” (4.4). At first, it seems as though Ko’olau
wants to deny Reverend Rowell as even having a body to read but, later, at Reverend Rowell’s
funeral, the reader learns of the transition of feeling Ko’olau was undergoing during that ride. The
slow recognition of body that, once acknowledged, allowed Ko’olau to see the inner struggle that
could be read on the body’s exterior. Moving beyond the metonymic black coat, Ko’olau

looked at the Pastor’s body in its box
white faced under the flowers this dead foreigner
who had seen him born and whom he had looked up to
and had disliked most of the time until the day
he had ridden up to the garden with the box
for Niuli and then back down by the river seeing
the Pastor’s back riding ahead of him and knowing
from watching the back of the Pastor’s head under its black hat
what the man was feeling about Niuli it was there
in the lines across the back of the neck (4.19)

Removing the garments of his religious station reveals a body not acknowledged in the first encounter. Ko’olau’s general dislike of Reverend Rowell colored his initial reaction to the Pastor the day they were riding. The day of the funeral, however, listening to the Christian hymns he had always resented singing in school, “the schoolroom he had longed / to get away from woke up inside him burning through him,” and he

stood not singing looking at the lid
of the coffin and he thought that he felt nothing now
for the man whose body was lying in it but only
a strange ache that had come from the schoolroom and he began to sing with the others and suddenly his throat grew tight (4.19)

Ko’olau does not want to feel something for Reverend Rowell, just as he did not want to sing the hymns that required him to obey a stranger. What he finds, though, is that he does care and that he knows that the Pastor cared. The relationship they knew was complicated by their colonial relations but embodied real emotional investment, which reveals itself through both the Pastor’s body and Ko’olau’s. As Pastor Rowell’s coffin echoes Niuli’s box, Ko’olau struggles with the corporeal collision of logic and emotion, evidenced in the symbolic gesture of singing. Both wooden boxes house the corporeal (body or effects of the body) while the body is a music box for the song of epos. The poetic text, with its material lines on the page in perpetual movement and journeying, and rolling in and out of tides, runs parallel to Ko’olau’s riding “up” and “back down.”

The body as text and the text as body demonstrate Merwin’s choice to expand The Folding Cliffs conception of text as a way to mitigate his own “courteous if faltering step toward a rich, subtle,
ancient, and elegant language” (ii). That this is also a lesson for the reader is clear as well, as when the Judge asks Koʻolau about Reverend Rowell’s children and whether they ever play with the Hawaiian children. Koʻolau responds that they used to play sometimes

But they were not allowed to and he gave them beatings when he caught them and he will not let them speak Hawaiian because they speak it better than he does—
—Do you think that is the reason—the Judge asked—Keep reading— (3.30)

Reading leads to knowledge, which translates to power when used properly. Koʻolau thinks that he understands the möbial relationship between language and experience and, in all likelihood, so too does the reader. But even as the reader thinks that they understand the story, the relationships, the inevitability, and the purported solutions, Merwin repeats the Judge’s request, “Keep reading—”

Reading nature as text also works to coerce the reader into a more engaged coexistence with the world around them by demonstrating approaches to this relationship applicable beyond the poem. Merwin illustrates that reading and engaging nature does not require idealizing nature or humanity’s relationship with it. In “The Cliffs,” there is provision in nature for those who understand how to read the natural bodies around them. While hiding from the soldiers, Kaleimanu and his cousin Ida are playing near the water and notice that the fish appear to be swimming upstream. Kepola hears their excited voices and listens as Kaleimanu explains to Ida that it is not just the fish swimming upstream.

It is the water too—and she said—Maybe it is Just turning around—and he said—Yes it is turning but it is going back up look there—and he pointed —It is going up—he said—The soldiers are coming—
and Ida started to cry—It is going up—he shouted and then he looked at Ida and said—You must not cry—
and he put his arms around her—They can never come up here—he told her—It does this so that we will know about them— (6.15)
In this passage, in which the dashes and short phrases resemble the swirling water, it would be tempting to read Kaleimanu’s explanation in the final line as anthropomorphizing the stream on behalf of nature. At the same time, Kaleimanu’s constructed narrative is not entirely constructed. That the stream rises when the soldiers walk in it is true; that Kaleimanu is able to read the rising water as effect and understand the cause is also true. In this sense, the causality between Kaleimanu’s knowing that the soldiers are coming and the water rising has nothing to do with the agency of the stream. That is, “so” functions like “therefore” and the future tense of knowing reassures that as long as you are able to read the natural text, you will be able to read your place therein. Where this goes wrong is when the texts change in such a way that reading them becomes difficult, that is, when it becomes apparent that nature “malfunsions.”

Pi’ilani explains to Ko’olau that

the leaves
that I have been putting on the sores on Kaleimanu’s feet
seem to be doing no good now maybe they were only
for the old sickness before the haole came bringing
all of the new things to die from and turned them loose on us
to get rid of us but I keep putting those leaves on him
the right way with the prayers and still the sores are no better (6.32)

Trained by Kawaluna, Pi’ilani knows the old ways but she finds that the medicine she knows cannot combat the effects of new diseases. The old diseases existed long enough that responses could be developed, tested, refined, and passed down. But the new diseases are so different and powerful that no one can seem to develop an effective medical response fast enough. The new diseases are not attributed to nature, as earlier Hawaiians had attributed the diseases to the animals having betrayed them; instead, the diseases are attributed to the people who carried the diseases and who control and profit from the devastation the diseases reek on the Hawaiians. Though the old ways seem imperfect in the wake of the new diseases, the answer is not abandoning or accusing

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16 See Morton and chapter 5 discussion in the context of the Anthropocene.
nature, or even the newcomers, but rather continually trying to learn how to read the new texts and bodies as texts.

Though Merwin’s points about the positive power that humans can gain through reading nature are highly relevant in the third millennium, so too are the dangers should humans choose to abuse that power. Just as the corporeal exchange between the Hawaiians and the explorers manifested in violence visible on human bodies, the interactions between humans and nature manifests on the bodies of nature. The opening poem in *The Folding Cliffs* involves a subtle reference to blood that invites the reader to consider how blood is defined as the poem works to make the blood a literal life-blood, “Climbing in the dark she felt the small stones turn / along the spine of the path whose color kept rising in her mind / burned-in color moment of rust dried blood color other color” (1.1). However, the subtlety of color and blood gives way to graphic description in “The Mountain” when the reader enters “the time of the hairless ones and of blood on the leaves” (2.4). Gentle explanations of the foreigners discovering “big birds that could not fly away / and feared them so little that it was easy to catch them / so they feasted on them until there were none of them left” (2.6) are replaced with graphic depictions of sea cows that feared humans so little that

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    a hunter could walk up to them in shallow water and lay
    a hand on them large hooks were put in them and rope parties
    of thirty dragged them ashore with those in the boats
    beating them to exhaust them while they groaned
    and the blood shot up in fountains and the others
    would come to try and help by unhooking or breaking the ropes
    floundering after them and staying near them even when
    they had died and all with no voice but the breath they groaned with (2.24)
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In this poem, the sea cows are not personified but, rather, described so that the parallels with humanity become clear in a way that privileges neither but allows the human perspective to attempt to understand the sea cow’s. The breath and groans align with air as connecting force, so that when “they groaned” it must be understood not only as the sea cows but as humanity
suffering alongside through exertion that will lead, ultimately, to extinction (of sea cows and, subsequently, humans). The explicit violence and animal cruelty sets the reader up for the following poem, which casually mentions the furs of the also easily killed sea otters as items of unimaginable value in Europe, as well as the traders making the connection between a memory in which “in Macao they smelled wood dust burning / with a fragrance they thought familiar” and the realization that it was “from the fires beside houses / in Waimea” that they had smelled it, and they discover that this sandalwood is worth a great deal to the merchants in Macao. The poem closes with the pivotal moment of the traders returning to Kauai and letting “the chiefs know that they were looking / for the fragrant wood and the payment could be in guns” (2.25). In this way, “The Mountain” clearly establishes that the abuse of nature, seen in both the examples of violence towards animals and towards the trees, becomes understood not as independent cases of violence against nature leading or led to by violence against humanity, but rather, simply as violence against bodies. Critical to this, again, is that it is not only the foreigners who engage in this violence but the Hawaiians as well; believing the animals had betrayed them and caused the new illnesses, the Hawaiians, too, enact a betrayal that, once begun, cannot be undone.

Humans are not the only ones capable of reading texts. “The Valley” explores togetherness and separation through the human-animal relationship, in particular as it illuminates its interrelations with the human-human relationship. Especially clear examples are the dogs who live at Pi’ilani and Ko’olau’s house, as well as Ko’olau’s parents’ house next door. Mentioned as early as the very first poem of the book, the dogs are generally noted either because they are barking or because they are staying silent. Silence generally means that there is no appearance of threat. In the first poem, Pi’ilani quietly leaves for Kalalau while it is still dark out and “even the dogs in the moonlight never barked when she went past / looked up and watched and never
barked knowing who she was” (1.1). In contrast, before discovering that Ko'olau had leprosy and leaving for Kalalau

one day in Kekaha Pi’ilani heard the dogs
sounding serious in front of the house and she stepped out
and saw the tall man whose long face she remembered
from beside the open grave of Pastor Rowell he was
sitting his horse looking down at the dogs in front of him
and she could see what he thought of them but when he looked up
he smiled without raising his hand and he called out (5.5)

Stolz is looking for Ko’olau with no good in mind. He likely does not yet know that Ko’olau has leprosy but he is still plotting to use Ko’olau to capture other lepers for his own benefit. Not finding Ko’olau at home, “he rode off with the dogs barking after him” (5.5). In a second encounter, after Ko’olau and Pi’ilani have left for Kalalau, Stolz comes looking again for Ko’olau but instead finds Kaleimanu, Ko’olau’s father, who insists he does not know where Ko’olau is. Stolz persists and, all the while he is asking his questions, “the dogs kept barking at him” (5.33). Finally, he asks Kaleimanu, “Are these dogs / all yours or are they his—They get along together—” responds Kaleimanu, and in this explanation rests the crux of understanding the dogs’ role in the narrative.

Using for the dogs the word “together,” which Merwin complexly develops in The Folding Cliffs to encapsulate the corporeal proximity desired in the human-human relationship, gives the dogs the capacity to understand a type of relationship that some of the human characters are incapable of understanding. That Merwin repeatedly notes when they bark and when they are silent, makes clear the significance of their movement between barking and silence. The dogs bark when facing a separating force, in contrast remaining silent when togetherness, or withness, is not threatened.

“The Valley” as a whole brings to the surface the impact that leprosy has on a community that values togetherness, in particular as the corporeal devastation the disease causes is exacerbated by psychological, social, and political ramifications.
Forms of Mourning

Through the destabilization of traditional poet and reader roles, the relationships created by line breaks in conjunction with sentences and syntax, the power dynamics centered around language, and an expansion of body as text, Merwin uses language and form to maintain the level of engagement that came to exhaust Mason. In spite of these efforts, and though Mason cites Merwin as demonstrating “a kind of cultural piety,” de Silva still feels alienated by the text. Hand in hand with Ko’olau’s resistance towards the symbolic role of Christianity in the schoolroom, de Silva believes that Merwin strips Pi’ilani of her loyalty to Christianity. The transgression of “playing cut-and-paste with the times, locations, weapons, and emotions” is problematic but “Merwin commits a deeper offense to the truth of Pi’ilani’s account” when he “implies that Pi’ilani is only superficially Christian and that desperation causes her to reveal a more deeply held set of native beliefs. This is nonsense. There is no mention in any of Kaluaikoolau! of Pi’ilani’s faith in anything other than the Christian God.” Changing Pi’ilani’s faith would certainly be a significant liberty taken if Merwin’s aim was perfect accuracy. The problem begins, however, with the fact that such accuracy does not exist. As borderline colonizer already, Merwin must tread carefully with any suggestion of imposed Christianity at the expense of Hawaiian culture or tradition. Countering the generalizations that all natives were good and all outsiders bad, Merwin clarifies that, “Some of the Hawaiians are not so admirable, and some of the haoles are good people. If you read the historical accounts, it’s obvious that there was a huge variation in character among the missionaries” (7). Merwin is able to account for the variation through the character of Reverend Rowell, who exhibits traits on both sides of the spectrum at times. In spite of this, there is no reason for Merwin to take on the added risk of being viewed as missionary himself.

Tied into this concern are the broader risks that Merwin runs in telling Pi’ilani’s narrative. His account of her working with Sheldon sets up two people who both want to get to the “truth”
of the story and, yet, Pi’ilani runs into difficulties in figuring out how to explain to Sheldon what actually happened. Merwin likens the experience of searching for words to the difficulties of describing a dream, even though “the dream is right there. I quarrel with some of the linguists who say we can’t think except in language. I think that the way our minds work, by the time we get something into language, it’s rather late in the process. The language has been prompted by experience of varying lengths of time, sometimes long lengths of time” (White 8). As a consequence, Pi’ilani telling John Sheldon what happened in Kalalau recalls the limitations of Reverend Rowell’s Hawaiian speech, when the children heard “each syllable / of their own language articulated so carefully / that it did not sound like their own language at all” (3.20). The result for Pi’ilani is that, when Sheldon

read back to her what he had written about them
it sounded like a story about somebody else
more than like what she remembered of what happened
but she could not think how to tell him that it had been
not like that and would never have belonged in those words
that came from the church but she could see that he wanted it
to be true and down under all those words it was true
and he thought the words made it true but she kept thinking (7.29)

The words that Sheldon uses do not encapsulate the experience that Pi’ilani remembers prior to putting it into language and, at the same time, they invite the reader to consider Merwin’s position through Sheldon’s. The foremost point in these lines is not Pi’ilani’s relationship with Christianity but, on the one hand, Pi’ilani’s struggle to find the right words and, on the other, the relationship of Christianity with the oppression of colonialism. Though Sheldon wants to be true to Pi’ilani’s narrative, and though Pi’ilani states that “under all those words it was true,” there is the clear sense that “those words / that came from the church” are not the same words that come from her, even if they are telling the same story. This in no way precludes Pi’ilani’s being a faithful Christian. Given the familiar references to the specific books in the bible that she reads with the
Sheldons and the comfortable references to being at church in her conversation with Kealia in the subsequent poem, there is little to suggest that Pi’ilani does not feel true attachment to her Christian faith (7.30). More likely, as a means of countering the words associated with colonial oppression, Merwin folds together Christian faith and Hawaiian culture, history, and relationships with nature, voicing a polyphonic expression of Pi’ilani’s identity. And, more importantly, Merwin calls into question the lens through which he and Sheldon necessarily filter Pi’ilani’s experience when translating it into written language. In an echo of the Judge’s advice to Ko’olau, Pi’ilani sets the example for the reader, as Merwin makes clear that the essential response to post-colonial complexities is the implicit, ‘—Keep thinking—’

A close reading of Pi’ilani’s relationship with religion and mourning in Ko’olau’s burial scene, which de Silva calls “Merwin at his manipulative worst,” offers a view of both Merwin’s limitations and his self-conscious attempts to work around those limitations. Holding nothing back in her assessment, de Silva says that, in this scene, Merwin “robs Pi’ilani of her Christian faith but lacks sufficient knowledge of Hawaiian grief, kanikou (chants expressive of grief) and ‘uwē (the gut wrenching wailing with which grieving chants are expressed) to create a believable non-Christian replacement. Instead he gives us a shell-patting, name-and-nonsense mumbling, darkness-listening husk of the original.” In making this argument, de Silva cites the first view that the reader gets of Ko’olau’s death, in “Climbing” (1.34-1.36). Her argument might hold in a preliminary reading, if one takes the words at face rather than poetic value; but, the argument is harder to maintain after having read the full text because, from a macro-level, this sequence is the first of several important layers that comprise Merwin’s tribute to kanikou and ‘uwē. Merwin admits he knew that structuring the story the way that he did—with the storyline revealed quickly so that the reader could subsequently focus on form rather than plot—could backfire on him if the reader was unable to maintain the level of attention necessary. “I was taking a big risk,” he
concedes. “It would only work if by the end of the first section you were so caught up in the story, of which you already knew the main part, that you could just hold it there while you got the background—which, if it’s working, is building a big context around the whole story, so this is not just an anecdote of two people’s lives, it’s really a hologram of everything that’s happening” (White 7). The hologram, a three-dimensional image created through the interplay of light, encapsulates light’s associations of knowledge and time that are the fundamental preconditions for Merwin’s revisioned epic.

The holographic capacity of The Folding Cliffs comes into focus through a small detail not mentioned in de Silvia’s argument—the sound of the petrels “echoing in the cliffs” (1.34). That sound, ‘uwa’u ‘uwa’u, occurs in four places in the text: an earlier scene in “Climbing” when Kua and Ko’olau are teasing the young Kaleimanu by making the bird sound; this scene; the poem in which Kaleimanu dies; and in the first poem when Pi’ilani returns home from Kalalau. In the first instance, the repeated call has

Kaleimanu
laughing and he said—I know it is you Kua you are not
‘uwa’u but the sound came again and Kaleimanu said
—It is you Kua it is at night the ‘uwa’u calls
and still Kua and Ko’olau kept making that sound
and Kaleimanu laughed but he said—Lahi will eat you—
and he told us he was awake now and kept asking what
bird he was hearing because birds were all around us (1.20)

In this exchange, the call brings laughter and joy amidst the sorrow that has and is to come.

“Kaleimanu” means “The Wreath of Birds,” a name that echoes the chorus of bone flutes and metapoetic “choir of small wheels.” Always bird-like, when Kaleimanu was born he “lay still and looked like a hatched bird” and, even as he grew, “he stayed small as a fledgling” (1.18, 4.14, 4.14). As Pi’ilani, Ko’olau, and Kaleimanu “moved / through the valley like birds as Kaleimanu said once,” the line between metaphoric and material connection begins to break down (6.37). In
tribute to the power of Hawaiian naming, the line between likeness and being becomes fluid after Ko‘olau climbs the cliffs to catch one of the ‘uwa‘u. In spite of the sores on his own feet being torn by the sharp rocks

he carried the bird
   to Pi‘ilani and they made a broth of it
   and gave it to Kaleimanu that night telling him
what it was and he drank it saying ‘uwa‘u
   over and over and then he seemed to be better
   for a few days and then a few more but they could see
   that he was sinking away from them whatever they did (6.38)

The broth made from the body of the bird sustains the body of Kaleimanu for a period and he calls ‘uwa‘u ‘uwa‘u as the body of the baby bird becomes his own body. Ultimately, however, Kaleimanu’s body returns to the earth, incorporating the mourning of the ‘uwa‘u cry. At this point in the text, the cry Kaleimanu chants echoes with the laughter that surrounded them as they first headed to the valley, as well as Pi‘ilani’s grieving under the sound of the petrels after Ko‘olau has died. In this moment of Ko‘olau’s death being recollected past for the reader, but future in the moment of Kaleimanu’s chanting ‘uwa‘u ‘uwa‘u, the cry resonates in every fiber of Pi‘ilani’s body.

When Pi‘ilani and Ko‘olau seek comfort in the water, paralleling the daytime flight of parent petrels seeking food for their single offspring, they are forced by their hiding into a silent expression of grief that seems to radiate from Pi‘ilani’s body as she rocks in the ocean waves.

That the reader feels Pi‘ilani’s emotions but only understands Ko‘olau’s through a level of remove mirrors the growing distance between Ko‘olau and life. Unlike the vivid portrayal of Ko‘olau’s death in “Climbing,” which seemed more to foreshadow its actual moment than to be it, the second poem of “The Shore” allows Ko‘olau’s narrative of how his death will happen and what will follow to fade into its actual happening. It is a moment when narrative and experience catch up to each other so that the pain Pi‘ilani feels no longer needs to be explained but simply understood as the poem closes with her sleeping “alone for the first time in the valley / wanting
to be near some of the people she knew / but not wanting to show herself to them not yet not yet” (7.2). Pi’ilani’s desire to grieve individually stems in part from her uncertainty about how she will be received when she returns, though she expresses no doubt that she will return. The poems between Ko’olau’s death and her arrival at her mother’s home, during which time she must continue to conceal her presence, paint a picture of mourning through kinship with the land that has sustained her. Rather than running counter to a religious ethos, it works in conjunction with a Hawaiian one. When Pi’ilani returns home in the seventh poem of “The Shore,”

There was a fire burning between rocks and her mother and Kinoulu were bending over something they were cooking and she walked toward them slowly until they stood up and saw her and burst out with those cries that were sounds both of love and of grief and they stood with their arms around her wailing and crying and she cried with them and Ida came out of the house so much taller that Pi’ilani was sure she must be someone else and then she knew her and they stood there crying together auwe auwe auwe for all that was lost and the pain and the finding again repeating each others’ names and then Ida was gone and came back bringing Kepola’s parents and went again and came back with Ko’olau’s parents Kukui and Kaleimanu and they all stood embracing and crying by then it was dark and the fire shone on their wet faces showing grief and joy and bewilderment and it was long even before the questions began (7.7)

The scene opens with the quiet that Pi’ilani has been maintaining, the restraint and silence that led de Silva to say that Merwin had robbed Pi’ilani of the vocal mourning practices so intrinsic to Hawaiian grieving. But with each line, Pi’ilani sheds this necessity, relinquishing herself to the comparative safety of her community. With her family, Pi’ilani is free to mourn without fear of the discovery that was always too possible in Kalalau. All of the experiences and expressions of pain that Merwin has layered throughout the text, as in the cries ‘uwa‘u ‘uwa‘u, are released in the communal expression of emotion and pain and gratitude, “auwe, auwe, auwe.” Pi’ilani’s fear of discovery and repercussion haunts her though, as suggested in the silence that holds her in the
final three words of this poem, when she says nothing in response to her cousin telling of the soldiers trying to use her and her husband to force Ko‘olau to surrender. There is the possibility that the government could charge her as an accomplice to murder and, though this feeling weighs on her until she speaks with Sheriff Coney, the safe space of her family allows her the reprieve she needs to properly account for the pain of her experiences.

**Closure**

Pain, in Merwin’s eyes, distinguishes between story and experience. In recognizing Pi’ilani’s pain, and allowing her to maintain connection with this pain in the months and years after her return, Merwin is not denying her closure or healing. Rather, he is allowing her to stay connected to the experiences that she struggles to formulate in words for Sheldon. When Kala, who helped Kukui and Ida escape Kalalau, returns to see Pi’ilani ten years later, she feels a freshness and clarity in her memories and

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 felt how far away Kalalau seemed to have become
 and how her telling about it at the Sheldons’ house
 seemed to have drawn a shadow across it blurring
 and fading it like the pictures ...
 ...............................................................
 ... she wanted
 to keep the pain of it and she felt that it was
 slipping away from her and what she saw in her mind
 was the long sand at Mānā when the tide had gone out (7.34)
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The clarity of the pain that Pi’ilani seeks is the experience that she has prior to Sheldon’s text, or Merwin’s text. Merwin is trying to create for the reader an experience in which the reader feels the pain of Pi’ilani’s story. Though de Silva sees as distorted and disturbing the fictional Pi’ilani’s concern about what others are saying, Pi’ilani’s reaction is Merwin reminding the reader of language’s power to shape the narrative that will ultimately replace experience. Not quite halfway through “Climbing,” in a scene de Silva finds disturbing, Pi’ilani explains to her friend Anne that
There was so much talk and talk. When I came out of the valley back to Kekaha the first time they had been talking ever since we had left and they believed themselves each of them telling something else that meant nothing playing cards with their own stories that they said were us so the bets got big and they asked me one thing or another and I would not know what they had inside their heads that had been growing there while they knew nothing about us when we were in Kalalau talking to nobody except each other those years while day by day there were more things that we did not have to say or that we did not want to say again and what we said lasted— (1.16)

Other people are not the focus of this passage, nor are the stories that those people are telling. Pi’ilani’s concern is the power put into language and the way that power can be misused or can dissipate with overuse. For Pi’ilani and Ko’olau, words have real and sometimes painful meaning. They are not to be squandered simply for the sake of filling the stillness. Anne observes, “How utterly still she sat as she was saying it all” (1.16), so that Pi’ilani, even as she uses language, does so without extravagance and with a focus on the experience contained in the words. Given that Merwin’s text is more than seven times as many pages as Sheldon’s and deviates in significant ways from Sheldon’s account, the potency and sincerity of *The Folding Cliffs* is always in question. Pi’ilani’s role in evaluating language usage continually allows Merwin to circle around the *ars poetica* echoes of what his epic is and should do.

*The Folding Cliffs* makes it clear that Merwin is aware that his own text can be read—as de Silva does—like he too is playing cards, so that he “distorts and recombines incidents in Pi’ilani’s memoir to improve on their symbolic weight” (de Silva). In maintaining the pain of Pi’ilani’s experience, he aims to acknowledge a truth that he can never capture. If closure is denied at the end of the text, as de Silva contends, it is not Pi’ilani’s sense of closure but the reader’s. For Pi’ilani, the open wounds have healed. She has grieved with her family and with Ko’olau so that she no longer needs to visit his grave. She has realized that she must maintain her memories of
how she felt while she was in Kalalau and not let that corporeal experience be replaced by words. She has maintained herself as a female pillar of strength, learning to live in the wake of trauma that would likely have crushed the spirit of less strong figures. And, moreover, she has learned how to navigate the continual threat that words—including Merwin’s—pose to the truth of her experience. Pi’ilani’s final questions to her mother after the inquiring storekeeper Hofgaard has left, the closing lines of Merwin’s text, are not meant to question her own honesty. They question Merwin’s.

Why do you think that man came
to see me Did he think I would tell him something else
after all of the others he has listened to
what does he know now about what I remember
maybe he only wanted to see for himself
whether I was the one in the book he had been reading
where he told me that some of the words were too crooked for him— (7.40)

Merwin, like Hofgaard, has read Sheldon’s account of Pi’ilani’s story. Why, then, does he want to ask Pi’ilani to speak again through his text? Is it because he thinks that a personal exploration of the narrative would be more meaningful for him? Is it because he wants a better understanding of her and others’ experiences in the historical context of leprosy? Is it because he thought that he could find something in the story that had not yet been adequately expressed? Merwin endeavors to create, through Pi’ilani’s story, a revisioned epic poem that models the possibility of ethical relations in the wake of highly unethical colonial violence—violence in which Merwin is consciously ensnared. It is possible to read Merwin as, at best, misguided and, at worst, manipulative and appropriative. However, the metapoetic self-reflectiveness of the text and the poetic care that becomes apparent through the textual layers, suggests that Merwin has created a text that requires as much commitment from the reader as it does from the poet. The danger that readers will seek history where Merwin offers poetry is a very real but necessary risk. Whether readers expect an unerring account of events or an epic of ecological proportions, they
will all reach the same unsettling final line suggesting that the words they have just finished reading were, themselves, too crooked. Merwin’s final act of destabilization is to refuse to allow the text, and the reader’s obligation to the text, to end. Thus, if the reader is denied closure, it is because the narrative in which the reader is implicated is still open. Even after *The Folding Cliffs* stops, the song of the flute continues.
Prophecy

At the end of the year the stars go out
the air stops breathing and the Sibyl sings
first she sings of the darkness she can see
she sings on until she comes to the age
without time and the dark she cannot see

no one hears then as she goes on singing
of all the white days that were brought to us one
by one that turned to colors around us

a light coming from far out in the eye
where it begins before she can see it

bears through the words that no one has believed
(The Pupil, 2001)

* * *

Twenty-first-century scholarship is increasingly interested in the Anthropocene, a term coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 to call attention to permanent human impact on the geologic record and the ecosystems that record reflects. While Crutzen and Stoermer concede that a precise delimiter for the onset of the Anthropocene is open to debate, they “propose the latter part of the 18th century, although we are aware that alternative proposals can be made (some may even want to include the entire Holocene). ... This is the period when data retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several ‘greenhouse gases’ .... Such a starting date also coincides with James Watt’s invention of the steam engine in 1784” (17-18). As Crutzen and Stoermer anticipated, there has been considerable discussion as to what marks the beginning of the Anthropocene. Zalasiewicz et al. have proposed a more recent date for its onset: July 16th, 1945, the time of the
world’s first nuclear bomb explosion (196). This delimiter has particular resonance with Merwin’s poetic trajectory, considering how drastically his thinking and practice changed in response to the atomic era, during which time “additional bombs were detonated at the average rate of one every 9.6 days until 1988 with attendant worldwide fallout easily identifiable in the chemostratigraphic record” (Zalasiewicz et al. 196). The New Yorker backing out of publishing Merwin’s essay “Act of Conscience” in response to the Cuban missile crisis, the University of Buffalo refusing to pay Merwin for a reading because he would not sign a loyalty oath, and Merwin’s choice to donate the money from his first Pulitzer to anti-Vietnam War causes are just a few examples of Merwin’s reaction to the nuclear era and the political situations developing alongside it. Discussion of Merwin’s poetry as it reflects the nature-human relationship in the Anthropocene has, thus far, only been broached with a call for papers from the Merwin Studies journal in 2015 and in the introduction to the 2015 Conversations with W. S. Merwin. But Merwin’s work has long been engaged with the growing crisis of the Anthropocene, even before it was conceived as such. As scholars across the academy consider the role humans play geologically, Merwin’s poetry renders imaginable a vast scale that, previously, seemed inconceivable to the human mind.

Merwin’s poetry offers, in the time of the Anthropocene, a vision of time perceived in three ways: individually, generationally, and geologically. The individual perspective is not limited to the lyric “I,” but takes an individual lifespan as the basic measure for perceiving time. While this perception can be relatively stable, events that heighten a person’s awareness of life as liminal (for example, events of human cruelty and death) can also make that person aware that the individual perception is precisely perception rather than promise. The generational perspective offers a potentially more stable view as a measure of perceived time, as Merwin links it early on to the concept of the saeculum, or the period of time it takes for an entire generation to die out. The generational view might also be considered an ecologic view, given that humans tend to
understand species from a generational, rather than individual perspective. The Greek roots of “generation” link it to “genus,” the taxonomic category one step above species; and the oikos and logos of “ecologic” assign to the ecopoet the task of bringing the experience of dwelling into the realm linguistic reasoning. Dipesh Chakrabarty explains why traditional separation of natural and human histories as discrete records of time is no longer tenable in the age of the Anthropocene:

Simply put, environmental history, where it was not straightforwardly cultural, social, or economic history, looked upon human beings as biological agents. ... In unwittingly destroying the artificial but time-honored distinction between natural and human histories, climate scientists posit that the human being has become something much larger than the simply biological agent that he or she always has been. Humans now wield a geological force. (205, 206, emphasis added)

Both the individual and generational are encompassed in traditional versions human history, so that the separation between human and natural histories makes it harder to connect the individual human perspective with the geologic perspective. While the generational view focuses on the level of species, the geologic combines ἡ and logos to zoom out to the lifespan of the earth itself as temporal perspective. This is the scale of the Anthropocene. For the human mind, this perspective is incredibly difficult to comprehend given the conceptual distance between the measure of the individual and the geologic. In the past, when humans functioned as biological agents, it was easier to overlook the necessity of understanding the geologic timescale because human implication at that scale was not yet clear. However, as humanity becomes a geologic agent, “changing the most basic physical processes of the earth,” human implication becomes impossible to ignore and human recognition of the geologic scale—difficult though it may be to process—becomes imperative (Orestes qtd. in Chakrabarty 206). According to Chakrabarty, “To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at
other times when there has been a mass extinction of species” (207). In line with this, Timothy Morton, in his 2012 essay “Mal-Functioning,” concludes that in the twenty-first-century ecological reality, “Ecological philosophy means accommodating ourselves to a greater and greater range of beings at a greater and greater range of scales” (112). Combining Chakrabarty and Morton’s perspectives, this accommodation means seeking not simply to understand the geologic perspective but, moreover, to understand humanity’s destructive and, potentially redemptive, agency in it.

The urgency of understanding these three perspectives of time become clear through Merwin’s poetic exploration of human cruelty. Typically, cruelty is understood from an individual perspective, as one individual or group of individuals perpetrates some type of cruelty against other individuals or groups of individuals (within and across species). It can also be understood from a generational perspective, as with the Holocaust. Rarely, though, is cruelty considered from a geologic perspective. We lack the conceptual-ethical tools to comprehend its frightening truth. Chakrabarty expresses skepticism about a species-level human identity, laying out examples that illustrate considerable diversity on individual and generational levels. However, from a geologic perspective, the human species has a clear identity. That is, in addressing the failings of universals, Chakrabarty still concludes that

whatever our socioeconomic and technological choices ... we cannot afford to destabilize conditions (such as the temperature zone in which the planet exists) that work like boundary parameters of human existence. These parameters are independent of capitalism or socialism. They have been stable for much longer than the histories of these institutions and have allowed human beings to become the dominant species on earth. Unfortunately, we have now ourselves become a
geological agent disturbing these parametric conditions needed for our own existence. (218)

Ultimately, the focus here is on the conditions in which humanity developed and without which it cannot survive. Human existence on a species level, like each human life on an individual level, comprises a threshold revealed through the geologic perspective. Life is a liminal space between birth and death, and acts of cruelty make visible threats to human existence that otherwise would remain latent in the imagination. In examining cruelty as a major theme in the nature-human relationship, Merwin works carefully from the individual perspective, through the generational, arriving, ultimately, at the geologic—scaling up from the personal to the planetary. Merwin shows how individual failings aggregate into a species level responsibility of geologic proportions. Humans enact cruelty consciously on an individual level but, also, unconsciously on a geologic level, threatening the very conditions on which all forms of life depend.

Aggregate unconscious acts of cruelty result from humanity’s addiction to convenience—and “the urban” (a concept as often reified as “Nature”) is the epicenter of convenience. From a spatial perspective, cities are not inherently violations of coexistence and, in fact, have the potential to be models of a nature-human relationship. While careful urban planning could exemplify the ecoforward thinking that would support geologic longevity, the infrastructure of “the urban” enables the myopia of convenience. Merwin emphasizes that a stark division between ‘Nature’ and ‘the urban’ is a human construction more problematic than helpful in delineating responsibility. In an attempt to undo that perceived dichotomy, Merwin creates a nature-city möbius mediated by light. Whereas in the earlier collections, Merwin associates light with knowledge, in recent collections like The Pupil, The Shadow of Sirius, and The Moon before Morning, he associates light with time. All of these collections emphasize the incorporation of light into the human body through the eye, as well as the role light plays in shaping temporal
scopes, whether individual (through the sun’s light) or geologic (through other starlight). Merwin shows that the material incorporation of light manifests humanity’s hope for understanding perspectives of time and, thereby, the urgency of the Anthropocene. That is, grounding time in the body acknowledges that the body can experience even that which the mind cannot comprehend, and that such corporeal experience can result in more ethical thinking and doing.

Time is an aspect of ecocriticism generally relegated to a less central focus than place. It is a way to make sense of experience and, once time exists (even as a construct), experience is a way to make sense of time. Explaining his own nuanced sense of time, Merwin says in an interview, “I think time is a fiction. It’s a human fiction. There’s a reality, and we don’t know what the reality is. I mean, the watch and the time that we’re going by is a fiction that we’ve agreed to, but we don’t know that it’s true, and what its relation is to time in the universe. And of course time to us—throw away the watches and throw away the chronology of all kinds—but time is really experience” (Academy). Experience, for Merwin, is centered in the body. And since phenomenal experience registers at the sensory level before it registers conceptually, grounding time in the individual experience and body helps the reader conceptualize perspectives of time beyond the individual one, regardless of whether time is perceived as unidirectionally linear, bidirectionally linear, circular, or helical progression. Additionally, by grounding perspectives of time in the body, rather than in the mind, the experience can be understood non-hierarchically between bodies as another facet of coexistence rather than as a conceptualization that only beings with certain cognitive functioning could understand. Consequently, even though the geologic exists on a scale too vast for the human mind to register, such that this scale risks seeming beyond the scope of human experience, being able to relate corporeally with the geologic perspective means that humanity might be able to comprehend what it really means to be a geologic agent capable

\[17\] See Goertzel.
of rendering itself extinct. This knowledge must then circulate through humanity’s species-level
doing thinking as individual ethical commitment to humanity’s geologic coexistence.

Of Snakes and Men

That Merwin pursued the concept of the Anthropocene for the whole of his poetic career
is obvious in any consideration of his mőbial enactment of poetic doing and thinking. While his
earlier work positioned humanity as the proverbial snake in the garden, the more Merwin pursues
a sustainable nature-human coexistence, the more he must look to the core of both humanity’s
culpability and capability. Merwin cited *The Vixen* as the collection that helped him realize the
form in which he could tell the story that became *The Folding Cliffs*. However, this collection
reveals more than the line structure that Merwin used in his revisioned epic; it also reveals
Merwin’s vision for humanity’s current epoch. “Snake,” which appears about halfway through the
collection, begins with the unstable human perspective of time, setting up a sense of cycling
counter to a strictly linear perspective.

> When it seemed to me that whatever was holding
> me there pretending to let me go but then bringing
> me back each time as though I had never been gone
> and knowing me knowing me unseen among those rocks
> when it seemed to me that whatever that might be
> has not changed for all my absence and still was not changing (1-7)

“When” acts as a temporal anchor, indicating a specific point in time; though two words later,
“seemed” works to undermine that stability. Words like “whatever,” “pretending,” and “as though”
amplify the atmosphere of uncertainty as these first lines introduce a tension between the
individual perspective and a larger one. The reference to rocks and stone, as well as the individual
human speaker being “unseen among those rocks,” suggests that the temporal perspectives in
question are the individual and the geologic. The speaker is clearly present and, yet, the individual
perspective does not mar the geologic one, disappearing as the perspective zooms out. The
The remainder of the poem begins with a concrete and very specific moment in time; but then the speaker seems to experience some kind of slippage in temporal experience. Line 8 presents extreme specificity, on the one hand, and destabilizing comparisons, on the other. The speaker is encapsulated in stone, on the edge of which is a literal threshold of stone, which becomes a threshold of time. And on that threshold is the figure of the snake.

once in the middle of the day late in that time
    I stood up from the writings unfinished on the table
in the echoless stone room looking over the valley
    I opened the door and on the stone doorsill
where every so often through the years I had come
    upon a snake lying out in the sunlight I found
the empty skin like smoke on the stone with the day
    still moving in it and when I touched it and lifted
all of it the whole thing seemed lighter than a single
    breath and then I was gone and that time had changed and when
I came again many years had passed and I saw
    one day along the doorsill outside that same room
a green snake lying in the sunlight watching me
    even from the eyes the skin loosens leaving the colors
that have passed through it and the colors shine after it has gone (8-22)

The snake, like the stone, hearkens to a geologic perspective, with snake fossils dating back as far as the Cretaceous Period before the dinosaurs went extinct. The snake also brings a generational perspective into the poem, illustrating through the comparison between “a snake” and “a green snake,” the way that the snake, without clarification, is viewed as a general representative of its species rather than as an individual. Even the green snake is “a” green snake, so that the snake is defined by two of the three indefinite articles in the poem. When the speaker comes to the threshold in line 11, however, it is not the snake but its skin, the body defined through absence—“in the sunlight ... with the day / still moving in it ... lighter than a single / breath”—aligning the snake’s body with light and time. “Day” is inherently a measure of time based on light and it becomes associated with the body that only just left the skin. The coupling of light and air brings together two aspects of nature that Merwin most frequently links with corporeal möbiality. The
skin on the doorsill echoes the unfinished writings on the table, each being shed from the body as material remnant of time. The time, then, so clearly within the snake’s body is also in the speaker’s. In the space of exchange between snake and speaker, time seems to breakdown, so that “then I was gone and that time had changed and when / I came again many years had passed and I saw / one day” is not only the literal passage of time but a slippage in the speaker’s perception of time. At the same time, Merwin uses syntax to pair the snake, time, light, and bodies, as in lines 19-20: one day/a green snake; along/lying in; the doorsill outside/the sunlight; that same room/watching me. In its first mention, the room was a time-specific domestic space that, via syntactic play, becomes a metapoetic space reflective of varying perspectives of time. That is, Merwin is composing a familiar individual space in the interest of defamiliarizing its temporal scope.

That stone and snake can be read as true references to the geologic and generational, bringing in Merwin’s concern with the three perspectives of time, comes from continual layering of these references throughout the collection, rather than from a single poem on which a distorted meaning could be imposed. Poems like “Threshold” and “Late” reinforce not only the presence of the three perspectives but the vision of the individual being able to blend in with the generational and geologic. The “Threshold”—“stone sill smoothed to water / by the feet of inhabitants never known”—becomes a space in which the roles of nature and human body appear reversed precisely because the action taking place occurs over a long period of time, gradually and anonymously (8-9). The individual perspective of the speaker, critical for human existence, exists with the understanding that some day it will no longer exist; that time moves around it, changing the Heraclitian river in which it stands even as it is standing there; and that the individual body is connected with other individual bodies and groups of bodies, the earth’s body, and the corporeal sense of time housed in the phrase “light as breath” (11). Likewise, “Late” situates the speaker
within a vision of nature-human relations in which the individual and even generational can return to the geologic.

The old walls half fallen sink away under brambles and ivy and trail off into the oak woods that have been coming back for them through all the lives whose daylight has vanished into the mosses there was a life once in which I lived here part of a life believing in it partly as though it were the whole story and so not a story at all and partly knowing that I clung to it only in passing as in the words of a story and that partly I was still where I had come from and when I come back now later and find it still here it seems to be a story I know but no longer believe and that is my place in it

The stones of the walls retreating back into the earth, slowly returning to a state that underscores the impermanence of even that which has lasted generations—as well as the impermanence of purported boundaries between nature and human—recurs in a number of poems in *The Vixen* and settles into the background of every mention of walls. In this poem, Merwin again destabilizes time, as in “when I come back now later,” alongside a destabilization of place, as when he defines his place in the story through awareness of his own movement between presence and absence. This destabilization results in the speaker’s realization that the “part of a life” that once seemed as though “it were the whole story” is really a synecdochical representation of human individuals in relation to temporal scales beyond the purview of immediate vision. *The Vixen*’s portrayal of the nature-human relationship is one in which humanity celebrates individual lives and, even, generational passage but leaves no trace from a geologic view. As of *The Vixen*, however, Merwin has not yet articulated explicitly how to implement this kind of vision, particularly in the context of Merwin’s acute awareness of the Anthropocene. *The Folding Cliffs*, through its requisite reader engagement, is the text that makes clear that humanity must mitigate its geologic impact through active engagement or else recognize that the nature-human möbius will be irreparably damaged. Since *The Folding Cliffs*, Merwin has published *The River Sound* (1999), *The Pupil* (2001), *Present
Company (2005), The Shadow of Sirius (2009), and The Moon before Morning (2014), each of which presents a view of human cruelty in individual and generational contexts, connecting them to an aggregate unconscious species-level cruelty that registers on the geologic record.

Reprising Merwin’s revisioning of the Edenic narrative, the snake returns in “The Stranger,” the second poem in The River Sound. In the opening poem, “Ceremony after an Amputation,” the “you” that speaker loses turns out to be both a piece of his finger and a material piece of nature through the finger, leaving a phantom limb of both finger and nature. The result is a prelude to “The Stranger” that centralizes the shared corporeal dangers facing nature and humanity. In “The Stranger,” the title-named stranger saves a snake’s life only to have the snake then threaten to kill him in fulfillment of “the law that whoever does good / receives evil in return” (24-25). At the stranger’s disbelief, the snake agrees to provide three examples to the stranger before expelling the stranger from the garden by crushing him. Throughout the examples, there is significant shift in the use of the pronoun “they,” supporting the poem’s closing ambiguity. Initially, “they start out that way” as the snake and the stranger coming upon a river, who explains that in exchange for preventing “them from dying of thirst / ... all they do is stir up the mud / and fill my water with dead things” (38-40). While the initial “they” includes the snake, the second “they” potentially does not. That is, throughout this poem there is no clear distinction between humans and nature as those who do good or evil. Though more than humans can stir up mud in a river while drinking from it, in the snake’s second example, the palm tree explains, “I give them my fruit and my shade and they cut me / and drink from my body until I die” (47-48), so that it almost certainly must be humans as the current antecedent. With the snake poised to crush the life from the stranger, “they” continue on to the third example, the dog who helped (and subsequently escaped from) the jaguar only then to turn around and violently betray the snake to help the stranger, at which point
the dog said to the stranger Friend
I have saved your life
and the stranger took the dog home with him
and treated him the way the stranger would treat a dog (71-74)

Here, again, is the ambiguity that surfaced earlier in the poem. With the river “the snake said One // the stranger said Let us go on and they did” (41-42) and with the palm “the snake said Two // the stranger said Let us go on and they did” (49-50), so that the reader is waiting for three, perhaps assuming the dog is three. Following through with this assumption, one could read the ending as carrying through the snake’s lesson from the dog’s perspective—the dog helps the stranger and the stranger betrays the dog through “the way” he treats him, in which case, “Three” would be the knowledge of this betrayal and the understanding that, as humans, we do enact “the law that whoever does good / receives evil in return” (24-25). And yet, is this a fair reading of the stranger? The reader knows very little about him apart from his dialog with the snake and his bringing the dog home. The plea of “Let us go on” might suggest a sustained altruistic desire to understand what the snake is saying or simply a selfish desire to delay the inevitable human demise. The snake can easily be seen as devious and selfish, brought down by a love of milk; but the snake could, himself, be the subject of the law, attempting to show the damage done by the stranger’s species and being killed in the process. Nearly every ambiguity in the poem hangs on “the way the stranger would treat a dog,” so that the pressure on the neutral phrase “the way” forces the reader to bring in their own experience in parsing the final meaning. Parsing “the way” becomes even more complicated when one considers the difference in treatment between animals for whom humans see themselves as having a use and others who are outside the scope of individual human necessity or desire. The wild snake and the domesticated dog are generally viewed very differently and, yet, there is a cynical sense here that, even for the loyal dog, “the way” might not be good.

The negative import of “the way” potentially becomes more clear through Merwin’s poems that attribute to humanity acts of immense cruelty against both animals and humans.
Edward J. Brunner tracked cycles of poems up through *The Rain in the Trees* and, even without access to Merwin’s manuscripts, it is clear that the same types of sequences continue in the collections following Brunner’s focus. In *The Pupil*, there is a sequence of poems addressing human cruelty beginning with “Calling Late,” an invocation to the “white lemurs who invented the dance” (1), and ending with a tribute to Matthew Shepard. The second poem of the sequence, “One of the Laws,” explains that, “So it cannot be done to live / without being the cause of death / we know it in our blood running” (1-3). The intersections between this law and the one in “The Stranger” seem clear: humanity has turned a blind eye to its interactions with animals, humans, and nature. More than this willful negligence, however, what the poem presents as disturbing is the human desire for pardon, innocence, and justification of the “cruelty” exhibited (17). The human sense of entitlement

raises
story upon story cities
to indifference denying
existence to most suffering
while living off it kept alive
by it (17-22)

so that there become divisions between humans who call it “by the right name” and those who do not, as well as those whose actions reflect their awareness of the difference between convenience and cruelty, and those who do not act at all except to satisfy their own ends. Raising “story upon story cities” links the cruelty to the urban, overpopulation and overconsumption, as well as the invasion of the human laterally and vertically into resources shared with others. “Star” and “Feast Day” also consider this division between types of people, in the first through the young speaker’s clear discomfort with the treatment of the ape and in the second through the reader’s discomfort with what appears to be a horrific bastardization of “The Dancing Bears.” The young boy seeing, with his father, the ape chained in the middle of the hot field senses the irony in the
explanation that there was “no way of telling how old it would be / but they don’t live too long anyhow” (37-38). The boy looks at the ape as an individual, while his father warns him,

Don’t get too close I saw it was  
staring down at each of our faces  
one after the other as though it might  
catch sight of something in one of them  
that it remembered I stood watching its eyes  
as they turned away from each of us (23-28)

On the surface the warning is about physical distance but this quickly melts into a meeting of individuals in which the ape, too, recognizes the humans one by one, each individually responsible for their actions. But the other humans in the scene deny the ape status as individual—specifying neither age, nor gender, nor quality of life—seeing it only from a generational, species perspective.

The irony is lost to them, just as the irony in “Feast Day” is lost on “the couple sitting there smiling” while the bear, whose teeth and claws have been pulled out, reels as the dogs attack it. Indeed, one absolutely “can tell something about the children to be” from the spectacle: it reveals that, over generations, human action has moved further and further away from the necessities of survival. In these poems, Merwin is leading the reader to the understanding that human lack of respect for coexistence, on both the individual and generational scales, is already damaging human ability to exist on a geologic one.

By situating the reader in a position of knowledge, in this way privileging the reader over the oblivious participants in the poems, the question to the reader is not, ‘Do you have the knowledge?’ but ‘What do you do with that knowledge?’ The cruelty sequence then pushes the reader into uncomfortable ethical territory. While “Star” and “Feast Day” call out relationships with animals, “Good People” and “The Fence” focus on other humans. The title “Good People” immediately tells the reader that there are groups of people, some of whom are ‘good’ and some of whom are, perhaps, ‘bad.’ As it turns out, though, the complication of the poem is not sorting people into the categories of good and bad. Instead, the speaker grapples with the complexity of
nuanced understandings within the category of “good people.” The speaker assumes, based on their parents’ “kindness,” that in the event of some suffering

if only
it could come to the attention
of any person with normal
feelings certainly anyone
literate who might have gone
to college they would comprehend
pain when it went on before them
and would do something about it
whenever they saw it happen
in the time of pain the present
they would try to stop the bleeding
for example with their hands (1, 4-15)

The speaker’s childlike logic seems basic: upon discovery of someone else’s suffering, a person with compassion, knowledge, and awareness would not only react emotionally, but practically. On the one hand, there is the invocation of literacy and knowledge, calling out a particular social and, even, economic class; and, on the other, there is the invocation of body, so that the speaker envisions a corporeal connection denied or repressed by those who do not allow their own bodies to alleviate the suffering of other bodies. The line “in the time of pain the present” seems presciently to speak of the Anthropocene but the speaker tries to reason away the lack of response by explaining that the “good people” might not actually know, or that they understand

there may be reasons for it
the victims under the blankets
the meat counters the maimed children
the animals the animals
staring from the end of the world (17-21)

Through the attempts at justification, this becomes, undoubtedly, a vision of the Anthropocene. In this age, the suffering does not escape the attention of the literate, perhaps college educated, reader, who must then consider the victims named in these final lines, as well as in the following poem, “The Fence,” dedicated to Matthew Shepard. Following the footsteps of the discomfiting
blurring in “Good People,” “The Fence” sets the tone with the uncomfortable opening, “This was what the west was won for / and this was the way it was won” (1-2). The cruelty exhibited historically—individually and generationally, that is, between real people and real animals, real bodies—is deeply woven into the fabric of American culture. It would seem, then, that the snake’s law holds true.

For all the seeming cynicism of the poems in the cruelty sequence—attributing to humanity profound cruelty against enemies, friends, strangers, animals, plants, environment—Present Company’s sequence of poems surrounding 9/11 takes a surprisingly gentle approach. Instead of the sharp, biting undercurrents of the cruelty sequence, the six poems framed with dates from September 10, 2001 to September 23, 2001 search, question, and seek consolation without demand. Instead of criticism, expressions of anger, or calls for action, the poems invoke the ease with which perceptions of time can shift in what seems like no time at all. “To the Unlikely Event,” an undated poem, helps frame the 9/11 sequence. Whether the title-named event is geologic, individual, human, political, social, or otherwise is never made clear. Instead, throughout there is a quiet tension between an unknown event and the distinct sense of a specific event. In light of 9/11, the reader senses that one understanding of this poem comes from the feeling that this event could have already happened and that the naïveté of the speaker is no longer possible given current conditions. Like “To the Unlikely Event,” the 9/11 poems could be read knowing the context or not. The first poem, “To the Light of September,” dated September 10th, feels very much like its speaker is positioned prior to the attacks, leaving the reader in a disturbing place of privilege, reading into the poem the startling difference resulting from such a small amount of time.

When you are already here
you appear to be only
a name that tells of you
whether you are present or not
but they all know
that you have come
the dead heads of the sage
the whispering birds
with nowhere to hide you
to keep you for later

you
who fly with them

you who are neither
before nor after (1-4, 16-25)

If light is associated with time, then the light of September is a time of threshold between seasons and, in the light of 9/11, between perspectives. Reading “you” as time fits into the individual perspective implied through the “I” counterpart of “you,” the generational perspective of the seasons, and the geologic perspective of “neither / before nor after.” In this poem and the next, time and language come face to face. “To the Words,” dated the 17th, begins

When it happens you are not there

O you beyond numbers
beyond recollection
passed on from breath to breath
given again
from day to day from age
to age
charged with knowledge
knowing nothing (1-9)

In the intersection of breath, air, meaning, light, time, and age, the “it” that happens is experience. Experience comes with the passage of time, though the passage from day to day and age to age may not run at the same rate. Robert Pogue Harrison asserts that humans “have a stubborn tendency to reduce age to ‘time’” but that this is a mistake, since, “Only age gives time a measure of reality” (1). Time, in and of itself, is not a measure but only a concept given meaning through experience, a concept subject to change over time. Harrison argues that human generations have
been getting younger over time in a process of “juvenescence,” which may be partially responsible for humanity’s struggle in relating to the geologic scale in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In the case of the 9/11 poems, Merwin destabilizes perspectives of age both individually and generationally, shaking individual and collective confidence in human assumptions about age. That is, in part through the line breaks disturbing the flow of age, Merwin painfully reminds readers that the individual unit upon which humans base their life plan is an uncertain projection.

“To the Grass of Autumn” and “To Ashes,” dated the 18th and 19th, use the context of natural cycles, whether seasonal or generational, to explore the movement between life and death.

You could never believe it would come to this one still morning when before you noticed the birds already were all but gone (1-6)

In the opening stanza of “To the Grass of Autumn,” Merwin deftly uses the reader’s understanding of current events without compromising the aesthetic integrity of the poem. The whole of this stanza could be reference to the reader’s response in the wake of the attacks, an effect made all the more disturbing by the thought of how differently the poem would read only a week before.

Even more disturbing, is the shadow of the möbial nature-human relationship hanging in the background, whispering to the reader that these horrific current events are only a small portion of the contemporary reality that is the Anthropocene. In the final two poems, “To Zbigniew Herbert’s Bicycle” and “To the Coming Winter,” dated the 21st and 23rd, Merwin calls up, first, the political and literary context of Herbert’s life and, second, the feeling shared by many after 9/11 that it remained unclear what there was to be “celebrating now that the fine / days are finished and the old leaves falling” (9-10). Both bicycle and carnival suggest a desire to escape, whether physically or mentally, and each poem presents both a measure of success and a measure of futility. The whole of the 9/11 sequence offers an alternate reaction to human cruelty. The reality
of the situation is no less devastating than in the cruelty sequence and, in the background, the 
realization is that there is no turning back from this devastation. Whether perpetrator or victim—
and there are few humans who can claim solely one status or the other—cruelty is that which 
unites humanity as a species. The only way to survive the Anthropocene is to address this.

Reminiscent of the cruelty poems in The Pupil, “The Chain to Her Leg” from The Moon
before Morning tells the story of Topsy the elephant, who was poisoned, strangled, and
electrocuted to death, allegedly because of her violent behavior but, in all likelihood, as a publicity
and money-making stunt. (People could pay to watch the spectacle take place—perhaps like
“Feast Day” but with an elephant.) This poem is both explicit and harsh in its portrayal of human
responsibility, putting itself in direct conversation with earlier poems on human cruelty, for
example, in its reference to “The Fence” in the line “where the west was won.” Published between
Present Company and The Moon before Morning, The Shadow of Sirius does not deny express
human cruelty but, rather, settles it into the fabric of the collection. In spite of Merwin’s clear
warning about human behavior (in relation to all bodies), the element of cruelty so pivotal in The
Pupil all but disappears in The Shadow of Sirius. This can be seen in “September’s Child,” a quiet
follow-up to the 9/11 sequence. The poem opens with “September light,” creating direct
connection to the poem dated the day before the September 11th attacks. September’s child may
then be like the “single birds” who

come bringing their late hopes as the light warms
recognizing through the remaining leaves a moment they have never seen
as I do waking again here after many lifetimes
to the sight of a morning before I was born (11-14)

A political and social reconsideration of the traditional Mother Goose poem attributing
characteristics based on birth day-of-the-week,¹⁸ the speaker seems torn about what is in store

¹⁸ “Monday’s Child is Fair of Face”
for the child born in September. There is a clear sense of hope—late hopes, perhaps final hopes—but these late hopes emerge from terrible actions, actions that of course are considerably more widespread than simply those people who perpetrated the attacks on September 11th. The sense of aftershock that stems from human-human relations, again, carries over to broader relations, as in “The Silence of the Mine Canaries” and “Remembering the Wings,” two poems in The Shadow of Sirius that provide stark contrast with “The Chain to Her Leg.” Canaries were typically brought down into mines as sentinel animals that would provide early warning—through their own physical ill-being or death—in the event of a gas leak, so that silent canaries carry the implication of a potentially severe health risk. The speaker remembers listening to the canaries, “they were singing of youth / not knowing that they were singing for us” (38-39), bringing in a question of ethics, on the one hand, in sacrificing the canaries’ bodies to save human bodies and, on the other hand, a question of where humanity finds itself in relation to the longevity of the human species.

“Remembering the Wings” follows a similar pattern, beginning and ending with the pigeons on (or missing from) the barn roof after “Édouard said the fox would get them” and “then what became of the children / who had gone to school with him” (13, 17-18). Though the violence in The Shadow of Sirius happens offstage, it is no less present. What these poems establish collectively is that the Anthropocene signals the geologic repercussions of human action. Human cruelty—both individual and aggregate—circulates through the nature-human möbius, returning to humanity that which it has turned.

Human Convenience and Urban Scapegoats

The cruelty poems, especially those in The Pupil, provide a particularly stark view of the nature-human relationship and the way that relationship plays out in a twenty-first-century Edenic narrative of individual and collective human transgression. Knowledge is purportedly the answer,
according to Merwin’s poetic revisioning; and, yet, “Good People” implies that even those educated enough to have the necessary knowledge are not always able to take the necessary actions. It is not enough to read the words; one must understand in the words the significance of the experience. It is tempting to read poems like those in the cruelty sequence as the dominant point of view. However, these poems are a backdrop against which Merwin makes his argument for human ethical obligation—and potential—all the more vivid. “The Wild,” which appears in *The Pupil* a few poems after the cruelty sequence and which may call to mind for the reader “The Wilderness” from *Green with Beasts*, presents the “First sight of water through trees / glimpsed as a child,” a paradisal image, rather than a lasting reality. It is a “tone” that

still crosses the years
through death after death
and the burnings the departures
the absences
carrying its own
song inside it

of bright water (1-2, 16-22)

What fades is the idealized vision read onto the childhood experience, replaced by a growing breadth of experiences that undermine a reified vision of wilderness. Shifting “wild” to the adjective form, with the noun form stirring in the reader’s memory, may have the effect of suggesting more dialog between descriptor and described; that is, rather than reifying a humanless wilderness, the adjective “wild” brings elements associated with wilderness into conversation with the actuality being described, so that neither can exist without affecting and being affected by the other. In this way, even while humanity’s actions are problematized, nature and humanity can never be separated, dismantling the possibility of a reified nature. Instead, as suggested in the closing song’s promise and, more straightforwardly, in “The Summer,” which comes earlier in *The Pupil*, there are ways of recognizing that seemingly separate realms are one and the same, all the while emphasizing the corporeality of the relationship. In “The Summer,” art
is defined as “something we believe is human / whatever that is” before the poem goes on to ponder how this could be when “the same / beam of recognition stops at one penguin” who is courting another penguin by selecting the pebble that will most please her in the hope that she will agree to be his partner (5-6, 7-8).

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and later the dance
of awkwardness holding an egg
on one foot away from the snow
of summer the balancing on
one foot in the flash of summer (11-15)
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Even without anthropomorphizing the story, there is compelling similarity suggesting that penguins share characteristics with humans, or humans with penguins. The role of aesthetics in animals selecting their mates is not unique to penguins, leaving the reader to consider the philosophy of each animal’s aesthetic preferences. The endings of these two poems are each situated within the sphere of nature so that the concern shifts from humanity’s expulsion from a fictional Edenic Nature to humanity’s presence in a real and dynamic nature. Morton points out in “Malfunctioning” that “ecological awareness is not realizing that we have fallen from a state of Nature into some perverse, twisted space. The space was always perverse and twisted, and now we are noticing that” (112). Morton claims that even functioning is a form of malfunctioning and, in his most useful invocation of the möbius, compares Brenda Hillman’s “Styrofoam Cup” with Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” explaining that beauty and disgust cannot be separated, interacting “like the twist in a Möbius strip” (111). By dispelling the notion that “Nature” is some perfectly functioning entity within which humanity malfunctions and disturbs Nature, humanity is better situated to address the fragility of its situation from a geologic perspective and the immediate danger of destabilizing conditions that are in no way guaranteed to continue.

The shift from understanding nature as an ideal beyond the reach of humans, as in “The Wilderness,” to a dynamic body of bodies within which human bodies exist, begs the question of
the relationship between nature and “the urban,” which serves as counterpart to the reified wilderness of Merwin’s earlier visions. The city might be understood as the space in which the time of the Anthropocene plays out: if earlier visions looked to wilderness, any vision of the new proposed epoch must include and account for the urban. Returning to The River Sound, “Echoing Light” with its confession that

When I was beginning to read I imagined
that bridges had something to do with birds
and with what seemed to be cages but I knew
that they were not cages it must have been autumn (1-4)

Initially the poem seems to open up imagination through reading, pairing bridges and birds as though the bridges might have had something to do with soaring heights or flying, until the turn to cages, though the speaker knows at this point that the bridges are not cages trapping the birds within them. As the speaker moves through the urban scene mixed with visions of empty fields and Merleau-Pontian sounding “ghost flowers,” the autumn dying while waking in the city suggests that the cage bridge might be the figurative understanding of the urban’s effect on nature (11). But the speaker, between waking and sleeping, again hears “the call notes of the plover,” so that in this urban landscape the voice of nature literally cannot be escaped (17). The speaker closes the poem by slipping away from his own body to tell the reader that “here far down river / flocking together echoing close to the shore / the longest bridges have opened their wings” (18-20). Whether the birds are bridges or the bridges are birds, the two come to share a body so that urban and natural have no dichotomous divide. The Shadow of Sirius returns, in “What the Bridges Hear,” to the image of two bridges hearing

the sound
of the water rushing under them
and passing between them unvarying
and inaudible it is still there (13-16)
just as in “No Shadow,” “the river still seems not to move / as though it were the same river” (15-16). Earlier, in “Long Afternoon Light,” there is a strong undercurrent referencing the eternally changing nature of both human and river, which can be understood simply as the eternally changing nature of bodies. The two bridges are bodies in relation to the bodies around them and are likewise continually changing both individually and in relation to the other changing bodies around them. That the river seems never to change nods to the difficulty of understanding the geologic perspective from the individual human one. A bridge, too, has an individual lifespan, the length of which might easily correlate with generations of human ones. Merwin’s use of bridges not only helps span the conceptual distance between varying human perspectives of time but also works away at the rigidity of the division between the city and nature, recognizing that, just as “Nature” as a term can become reified and limited in its usefulness, so too can “the urban.”

Looking forward to The Pupil, “Planh for the Death of Ted Hughes” and “Mid-Air Mirror” both echo The River Sound’s approach in acknowledging the ginger relationship between the actualities—rather than reified conceptions—of nature and of “the urban.” In “Planh for the Death of Ted Hughes,” the urban initially appears stable and lasting, with more than enough streets, words, and time for the “we” of the poem, who seem to take for granted the presence of words and the experiences and time encapsulated therein, “as we turned up the collars that had been through the wars / autumn in the park spring on the hill / winter on the bridges” (10-12). The autumn in “Echoing Light” returns here linked to war, as in “Echoing Light” it was linked to dust, and “winter on the bridges” links “Planh for the Death of Ted Hughes” to both “Echoing Light” and “Mid-Air Mirror,” which takes place “through the late winter afternoon” (4). Both poems in The Pupil allow nature to infiltrate the urban rather than insisting that, by establishing an urban space, nature is kept at bay beyond the perimeter of the city. The speaker in “Planh for the Death of Ted Hughes” admits “there was so much dew even in Boston / even in the bright fall so many planets
poised / on the sills of transparent houses it was coming to pass” (13-15) and the speaker in “Mid-Air Mirror” that “time / was only the light reflected / on all the buildings facing west” (6-8). Both poems question unshakable views of urban space as ‘human’ and distinct from ‘nature,’ accepting as ‘natural’ the interplay between nature and city while simultaneously emphasizing the adverse impact the urban can have on humanity’s relationship with nature, particularly as individual acts compound at the species-level. Just as the snake skin on the threshold carried light and day within its corporeal remnant, humanity too seems poised to become corporeal remnant as the planh for Hughes functions also as a lament for the human species on a bigger scale.

In a nod to their purported correlation, Merwin allocates equally little space to the urban in The Shadow of Sirius as he did to cruelty by comparison with the surrounding collections. There are perhaps five poems that address questions of the urban, including “What the Bridges Hear,” just as there were few poems that addressed questions of cruelty. What is striking about these poems, when compared with the ones in The Moon before Morning, is both the lack of direct criticism concerning the urban and the way that the urban functions hand in hand with the natural cycles around it. “Empty Lot” is perhaps the closest one gets to criticism, as the poem portrays a vacant lot left vacant only so that the coal company that owns it can use it to run emergency mine shafts in the event that something goes wrong in the mines beneath the surface, presenting a literal image of humanity’s simultaneously horizontal and vertical reach. The closed mines here, with their earth-dampened explosions rattling the house windows, provide a contrast to the brief mention of the speaker in “Child Light,” the poem before “Empty Lot,” seeing their “first strip mine” (15). Even with the mine politely covered, without talk of sacrificing canaries, the lineation of “miners / in trouble below there nobody could say / how far down” puts significant emphasis on “in trouble below there nobody could say,” hinting at veiled threat (21-23). “By the Avenue” and “The Song of the Trolleys” in partnership with these two poems, each bringing the urban into
unison with nature. In the latter, trolleys function in conjunction with the natural cycles of the seasons, so that the coming and going of summer is linked with the trolleys. The speaker knew that even when all the leaves were falling through it as it passed and when the frost crusted the tracks as soon as they had stopped ringing summer stayed on in that song ........................................
then humming to itself while it waited until it could start again ........................................
the voices of morning stars and the notes that once rose out of the throats of women from cold mountain villages at the fringe of the forest calling over the melting snow the spirits asleep in the green heart of the woods Wake now it is time again (2-7, 12-14, 29-37)

As the seasons progress, so too does the journey of the trolley. The trees lose their leaves in the fall and rest dormant for the winter; because, like the trees, the trolleys cannot flourish in the winter, they too are inactive until the warmer weather returns. The “spirits asleep / in the heart of the woods” speaks of all that is waiting and ready to return in the spring.

In “By the Avenue,” the cityscape and the landscape exchange qualities as a foundation for the speaker relating a shifted biblical parable. The new version of the parable provides a lesson that the judgment of others should remain secondary to concern with one’s own fulfillment of obligations to nature and, moreover, that “the urban” cannot be made a scapegoat to avoid having to take personal responsibility oneself.

Through the trees and across the river with its surface the color of steel on a rainy morning late in spring the splintered skyline of the city glitters in a silence we all know (“By the Avenue” 1-5)
The speaker sets the scene for the reader having to look through the trees in order to see the city skyline splintered by the trees, while the river that flows in front of the city is itself the color of the material with which the buildings are made. In this way, the city and the river and forest are perceptually affected by each other. Meditating on this scene, the speaker claims to be the only one who remembers

another light through the tall windows
a sunbeam sloping like a staircase
and from beyond it my father’s voice
telling about a mote in an eye
that was like a mote in a sunbeam (10-14)

The closing lines of “By the Avenue” resonate with the warning in Matthew 7.1-5:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. (King James Version “Bible Gateway”)

In “By the Avenue,” the speaker is the (only) one with the beam in their eye while the mote is in the beam of sunlight. Connected to this are the lines from “Child Light” in which the speaker observes retrospectively, “I see that it was only the dust in one sunbeam / but I was a child at the time” (5). In contrast with the biblical version, each speaker desires the sunbeam and, yet, the message of the original story still resonates in reminder that the reader must consider their own actions before judging others. That is, before criticizing the actions of others as detrimental to the nature-human relationship, or blaming the negative aspects of the world on “the urban” and its
detrimental effects on “Nature,” the reader must first ask whether they have fulfilled their own ethical obligations. Merwin’s personal example of this responsibility comes through his poetry—which is highly self-reflective in its forms of metapoetic inquiry—as well as through his labor intensive cultivation of endangered palm species on the land around the sustainably built house that Merwin designed and constructed himself. Matthew 7.7 also encourages individual engagement, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (*King James Version* “Bible Gateway”). Action is requisite. Frequently, as in the case of “Good People,” it is easier to point to terrible conscious acts perpetrated by others rather than to look at oneself and recognize the unconscious acts that are equally damaging to humanity’s coexistence. The importance of these connections cannot be overstated: aligning functions of the city with natural cycles refuses the reader the option to make “the urban” a scapegoat for humanity’s aggregate acts of unconscious cruelty. Instead, the reader must be accountable for their own daily contribution to humanity’s cruelty, even if this violence does not resemble the reader’s assumptions about forms of violence against nature and humanity.

Settling violence and critique of humanity into the background of *The Shadow of Sirius* allows Merwin an alternative to the biting critiques that speak more directly of humanity’s self-inflicted annihilation. By using *The Shadow of Sirius* and *The Moon before Morning* as counterparts to the earlier cruelty poems, in particular through his exploration of shared natural and urban landscapes, Merwin is able to explore more deeply a livable version of his nature-human vision—the möbius turn between culpability and capability. That is, he looks at the way that the urban landscape enables unthinking acts of individual violence that compound to create a species-level threat. The poems in *The Moon before Morning* indicate that the only way to address this violence is to become aware of how unconscious individual acts can be toxic to a healthy möbius of thinking and doing. “The Latest Thing,” takes up the question of presence and absence, defining the city as
that which is present as a result of absence, made “of what disappeared so they could be there” (4). The vision in “Neither Here Nor There” works in tandem with “The Latest Thing” laying out the space of the airport as a human-made purgatory in which everything essential to the body is second-rate.

you sit there in the smell
of what passes for food
breathing what is called air
while the time pieces measure
their agreement (“Neither” 11-15)

Sitting emphasizes the body’s inaction, while the food and air taken into the body are merely masquerading as food and air. Even time here requires mechanical collusion, in contrast with poems that use light as an indicator of time’s passage. Humanity accepts the state of existence in spite of its drawbacks because it seems temporary, like a means to an end. The risk, though, is that what is temporary becomes permanent. In “The Latest Thing,” one by one the bodies and voices that were present before the city are slowly superseded by the city,

until one could say
that in the continuous sound of the city
one white note plays on to prevent memory
even of the city itself as it was
yesterday in that very place or just
before the light changed at the street corner
it may be that the sound of a city
is the current music of vanishing
naturally forgetting its own song (9-17)

The light that might have provided a contrast with the means of timekeeping in “Neither Here Nor There” is replaced by the light of the city. Whether the light that changed at the street corner is a traffic light or light from the sun being filtered through the presence of the city, there is the undeniable sentiment that this new version is not as good as the old one. That the “music of vanishing” is the city “naturally forgetting its own song” underscores the unnaturalness of the city’s irony. The resulting desire, however, is not to remove the city, its innovations, or the humans
responsible. Instead, the criticism is aimed at the mindset represented in the poem: the ease of forgetting and the way that the city enables forgetting.

“Convenience” helps explain why and how forgetting happens in the city, in a blunt and biting assessment of humanity’s concern for convenience over consequences. The riddle poem, reminiscent of Merwin’s early bestiary poems, makes it clear that convenience is, by definition, not a matter of necessity. Convenience becomes excuse and dependency, both poisoning the nature-human möbius. The consequences are severe and will always circulate back to humanity. Even the act of listening to music, as in “Antique Sound,” displays the consequences of preferring the easy. Merwin’s choice to use analogue rather than digital technology as his example is a reminder to those readers who think of record players with nostalgia that antiquated technology is not exempt from responsibility and that even this space of pleasant remembrance is also one of forgetting, as the human-nature power struggle recedes into constructed memories.

There was an age when you played records
with ordinary steel needles which grew blunt
and damaged the grooves or with more expensive
stylus tips said to be tungsten or diamond
which wore down the records and the music receded (1-5)

The steel that is the strength of the city proves inadequate, not strong enough to withstand ongoing use. Simply using a stronger material to overpower previous inadequacies ignores the fragility of the record and ultimately damages it beyond repair, causing the music to recede. The poems in The Moon before Morning are not without hope, albeit it limited hope potentially beyond the humanity’s reach or comprehension. “Antique Sound” is very much an extension of solution and simultaneous denial of its likelihood. The speaker and friend who knew what thorn to use and where to find them exemplify a sense of harmony with the give and take of nature-human relations. The thorns came from a place

that once had been forest and had grown back
into a scrubby wilderness alive with
an earthly choir ... 
all long gone since to improvement but while 
that fine dissonance was in tune we rode out 
on bicycles to break off dry thorn branches 
picking the thorns and we look back the harvest 
and listened to Beethoven’s Rassoumoffsky 
 quartets echoed from the end of a thorn (10-12, 16-21)

While others in the poem prefer the convenience of the metal and diamond needles, the speaker and his friend understand that there is an energy that they need to invest into the collection of the thorn needles. The place of harvest was once a forest that grew back (presumably after humans cut it down) into a scruffy wilderness. The significance of this poem’s redefinition of wilderness cannot be overstated in thinking about how the concept has developed since the early poem “The Wilderness.” Rather than an unachievable fantasy, “Antique Sound” presents wilderness redefined from a place devoid of humanity to a place of dissonance. Dissonance does not mean out of tune but, rather, in tension. Not passive but engaged. This scruffy wilderness is a moment of pivot and potential, a moment lost to its human audience perhaps as the beauty of Beethoven’s Rassoumoffsky was lost on its initial audiences. Eventually audiences came to love the Rassoumoffsky quartets, suggesting that humanity might also come to appreciate the dissonance of humanity and wilderness, actively reseeding the music rather than sitting passive while it recedes.

Convenience signals the desire for immediate gratification, as well as a lack of conscientiousness about perspectives of time other than the immediate present. Convenience both leads to and justifies cruelty, perpetuating a passive cycle of violence that becomes reified into constructed ‘fundamental’ differences between ‘Nature’ and humanity in the form of ‘the urban.’ Convenience is the addiction of the Anthropocene. Humanity has become physically and mentally dependent on engaging as little effort and energy as possible, if only because efficiency signals progress. Merwin’s focus on cruelty and the urban in his collections following The Folding
Cliffs is not meant to absolve humanity’s responsibility through the recognition of obstacles too substantial to be overcome. What these poems do is recognize not only the obstacles but the risks involved in facing the obstacles. Knowledge is not the crux of Merwin’s recovery model; it is only a pivotal piece. Active engagement and participation is the crux. Individuals must take responsibility for their obligations to the human species and the other species with which humanity coexists. While the individual perspective of time can help humans relate with other individual bodies, the individual must actively work against selfish convenience. And it cannot use the urban as a scapegoat for its own actions. The urban is not inherently a sign of convenience but its infrastructure can enable the negative associations of convenience. To counter this tendency, humanity must work hard not to overstep its necessities, while recognizing the ways that its impact on nature, which inherently coexists with the urban, ultimately circulates back through the nature-human möbius to impact humanity.

Nature-Human Reconciliation in Time

While the urban is not permanent in and of itself, human action can have permanent consequences. Merwin has hope, though, that even in the age of human impact, humans might be able to change their course. This sense of dark hope is epitomized in “A Message to Po Chu-I,” the third-to-last poem in The Moon before Morning. Merwin begins by recounting the story that Po Chu-I tells in his poem “Setting a Migrant Goose Free.”\textsuperscript{19} Time is a key element in both Merwin’s and Po Chu-I’s accounts, with the first line of each grounding the poems in a specific moment: Po Chu-I begins with “Snows heavy in Hsün-yang this tenth-year winter,” and Merwin looks back to Po Chu-I, “In that tenth winter of your exile”\textsuperscript{20} (1, 1). Merwin and Po Chu-I’s shared story is of a

\textsuperscript{19} Translated by David Hinton in The Selected Poems of Po Chu-I.

\textsuperscript{20} “Setting a Migrant Goose Free” was likely written in the first year of Po Chu-I’s exile, according Po Chu-I’s poem “The Song of the Guitar,” translated by Witter Bynner in 300 Tang Poems.
starving migrant goose captured by a river boy and brought to market to be sold alive, certain to be killed and eaten by the soldiers before they strip the bird’s feathers to use for their arrows. The goose, symbolically aligned with Po Chu-I, exiled for his political poetry, is not only a victim of violence, but an unwilling perpetrator of violence as well. His body is centered in the conflict of human action: on the one hand, the goose’s body sustains life but, on the other hand, those who are sustained then use the goose’s body to destroy other lives and bodies. Po Chu-I rescues the goose, nourishing him and then setting him free; but he worries that his own actions are not enough in a world in which so many other humans are bent on self-destruction. Twelve hundred years before Merwin, Po Chu-I echoes the fear that Merwin experiences generations later; and Merwin’s message to Po Chu-I might also be a future message back to Merwin.

I have been wanting to let you know
the goose is well he is here with me
you would recognize the old migrant
he has been with me for a long time
and is in no hurry to leave here
the wars are bigger now than ever
greed has reached numbers that you would not believe and I will not tell you what
is done to geese before they kill them
now we are melting the very poles
of the earth but I have never known
where he would go after he leaves me (24-35)

The destruction that Po Chu-I feared has not come to pass and, yet, the fear and potential of human self-destruction is as central to Merwin’s poetry as it was to Po Chu-I’s. The twelve hundred years between Po Chu-I and Merwin do not indicate that their fears are unfounded. On the contrary, they are evidence supporting the necessity of Merwin’s concern with perceptions of time. Po Chu-I and Merwin each tell the story of an individual but the individuals are linked generationally. Po Chu-I and Merwin are linked, and the individual geese that each fears to set free are linked. Whereas Po Chu-I’s “Snows heavy … riverwater spawns ice,” the ice of Merwin’s moment is melting, spawning river water and rising sea levels (“Setting” 1-2). Each poem is in tune
with the geologic perspective; however, Merwin’s poem needs to face the unsettling reality that the violence of Po Chu-I’s moment has amplified the violence of his own. When Merwin reassures Po Chu-I that the goose has not disappeared into extinction, he does so with the dark admission that he has “never known / where he would go after he leaves me,” speaking of himself not only from the individual perspective but from the generational one as well. Even if, in what might be viewed as the early years of the Anthropocene, humanity does not obliterate itself, its actions will cycle through the möbius of generational and geologic time.

In the wake of the uncertainty and potential cynicism of the third to last poem’s closing lines, it may seem hard to argue that Merwin thinks it at all possible for humanity to change or that his contemporary work would be doing anything different from the poems in The Lice, for example, which seem to lament the inevitability of humanity’s self-destruction. The final two poems do a great deal to contextualize Merwin’s position, however. “Variation on a Theme,” the penultimate poem of Merwin’s current published poetic corpus, delivers exactly what the title promises—and the theme is the corporeal interplay of bodies and time. The poem is, on the surface, an individual’s reflection and gratitude, recognizing, for example, “those mistakes that were only mine,” and it seems that the theme is the anaphora “thank you” that begins more than one-third of the poems twenty lines (10). Gratitude is a point of entry, however.

Thank you for my lifelong afternoon
late in this season of no age
thank you for my windows above the rivers
thank you for the true love you brought me to
when it was time at last and for words
that come out of silence and take me by surprise
and have carried me through the clear day
without once turning to look at me (1-8)

In the first two lines, the words lifelong, afternoon, late, season, and age all bring into question the role of time and its significance. “My” initially indicates a focus on the individual perspective but, its secondary function is to situate that perspective in a larger one. If it were “the lifelong
afternoon” instead, that would suggest a singular recognition of time, in direct contrast with “my,” which explicitly acknowledges a subset of a larger view. The layering of temporal moments that each bring in their own cycle compound into a complex view of perceived time that carries through the poem, resurfacing in other moments of temporal complexity, like “when it was time at last” and “through the clear day / without once.” Calling on both time and age also emphasizes the importance of perspectives, and this poem brings together consciousness of time with individual experience as key to understanding the abstract (and concrete) interrelation of möbiuses that comprise the nature-human relationship. That is, if every formerly dichotomous relationship is understood as a möbius and all of those relationships are in relation to each other within time, then the individual perspective is the mind’s opportunity to filter through the body the incomprehensible model of coexistence that results.

This incomprehensible model, filtered by the mind through the individual perspective, requires the experiences of the body in order to undergo any kind of affective engagement with other perspectives. The mind might, in theory, be able to reason through some portion of these interrelations; but, without the experiences of the body, translating that reasoning into praxis will fail. Thus, in “Variation on a Theme,” the individual expression of gratitude signifies considerably more: it is a manifestation of mind and body working in möbial unison to situate the individual in an existence of coexistence too vast for the mind alone to realize.

    thank you for friends and long echoes of them
    and for those mistakes that were only mine
    for the homesickness that guides the young plovers
    from somewhere they loved before
    they woke into it to another place
    they loved before they ever saw it
    thank you whole body and hand and eye (9-15)

The act of thanking is an act of recognition. Merwin’s speaker recognizes other bodies—human bodies and their lasting effects, as well as the plovers’ bodies—before recognizing “whole body
and hand and eye” as the instruments for “sights and moments known.” While the friends’ bodies do not last beyond their own lives, the “long echoes of them” are inherently corporeal, requiring the body to be able to remember them. The “homesickness” and “love” that the plovers feel are corporeal manifestations that center their migration instincts in the body. The speaker’s body, then, becomes the space of encounter, through perception, for all of the bodies the speaker meets:

thank you for sights and moments known only to me who will not see them again except in my mind’s eye where they have not changed thank you for showing me the morning stars and for the dogs who are guiding me (16-20)

Merwin has long proclaimed language’s distortion of memories and here is no different. That the “sights and moments” remain unchanged is only because they are known solely by the speaker, in a prelinguistic experience through the mind’s eye. The speaker cannot share these in words but can recognize their existence and their contribution to coexistence. Through all of this, the anaphoric “thank you” functions as sonic effect, recurring recognition, and, moreover, marker of the poem’s passage such that it disturbs the regularity of time’s constructed progress through its own irregular recurrence. Experience is always the heart of Merwin’s poems and, in this poem, each “thank you” is a recognition of experience. Perceptions of time are contingent on the nature of the experience taking place within that duration. In the final “thank you,” Merwin recognizes the importance of the geologic and generational perspectives to the individual one. He acknowledges “the dogs” in literal and figurative senses through The Shadow of Sirius’ poems dedicated to his own dogs, as well as the importance of the dogs in The Folding Cliffs. Merwin makes a point of referring to the dogs using “who” rather than “that,” a sign of respect between bodies rather than of status over non-humans. The reference, also, to the constellations Canis Major and Canis Minor alludes to the mythology so key to the final poem of The Moon before
Morning, reminding the reader that—though Merwin has revisioned the epic form and Edenic narrative, shifting the focus to the nature-human möbius and the importance of knowledge and engagement—mythology has always been a lens through which Merwin seeks to break down perceived barriers of time between generations of humans.

The final poem of Merwin’s current published corpus of poetry, “The Prow of the Ark,” nods back to the centrality of mythology key to Merwin’s earliest collections. In these collections, mythology served as a primary way to help the reader make sense of human experience but, as it became clear that the stories of the past were no longer sufficient for the experiences of the present, Merwin began to shift his narrative approach, incorporating a more historical perspective. He never eliminates the use of mythology; rather, he incorporates the historical perspective with the mythological in order to entwine historical specificity with mythological reach. Mythology represents a generational view of the human species and, while history does as well, history also accounts for the individual perspective. History, however, allies itself with fact; while mythology, with narrative imagination that begins with fact and elevates it beyond the actual. The Folding Cliffs is a perfect example of this combination, which started as Merwin shifted his style towards the end of The First Four Books of Poems leading into The Second Four Books of Poems. In The Folding Cliffs, Merwin begins with an individual historical perspective and then blends it with elements of legend, other individual historical voices, and generational history. The Folding Cliffs is the epitome of Merwin’s poetic endeavor towards a reconciliation between nature and humanity, contingent on humanity’s ability to recognize and fulfill its ethical obligations to nature and, consequently, itself. In The Folding Cliffs, Merwin built from his revisioned Edenic narrative by reshaping epic form to fit the historical context of the Anthropocene, using the generational, historical, and mythological perspectives to facilitate conceptual connections between the individual and geologic perspectives.
As in “Variation on a Theme,” “The Prow of the Ark” centralizes the metapoetic observation that the prelinguistic experiences of the mind’s eye can never be replicated properly in language. To fully grasp the individual perspective of time, the reader must be willing to engage the experiences of their own mind’s eye in relation to the generational and geologic perspectives that encompass the individual perspective. “The Prow of the Ark” reminds the reader how poetry, ethics, history, and myth flow into each other. It uses the resonance of the poem’s closing position to suspend in the reader’s mind the elements of thought necessary for reconciling the three perspectives of time. In doing this, it urges the reader toward a form of remembrance that does not need linguistic expression.

What I remember I cannot tell  
though it is there in all that I say  
the scrape of the prow on the mountain  
after forty dark days of rain  
and the boundless flood of forgetting (1-5)

From the opening lines, this poem converges poetry, history, and mythology so that the story of the Ark becomes the story of the poem itself. “I” appears only in the first line of the poem but the first-person speaker remains significant throughout as the self-reflective voice of the ars poetica, occupying a space both individual and generational. The tension between remembering and forgetting is that neither can be told, though the poet speaker stands witness to both. Merwin rewards the attentive reader who understands that the line break at the end of the second line is not a full stop but, rather, only a disruption in the poet’s admission “that I say / the scrape of the prow.” Setting up the poet’s voice as the scrape and the prow as the poem, opens mythological past to recurring generational present. After narrating the flood and the pairing of the animals, the speaker explains that

the shipwright and his family  
took their words and their tools and their first steps  
on the earth and were all forgotten  
it was soon impossible to say
whether the name for him was his real name
or whether he had ever existed
though we have heard the scrape of the prow (23-29)

Mythology’s generational perspective does not distance itself from the reader. It forces the reader into the experience of the poem through the “we” in the final line. If it were not clear before, the implicated reader has a second chance to realize that “the scrape of the prow” is not simply mythical Ark but poem and, “all that I say,” the sound in the reader’s ear. It is neither history nor mythology that have the final word. It is the poem, the work of the poet resounding corporeally in the reader. It is the reader experiencing the fading echoes and dwelling on the change those echoes stir. It is the riddle form that resurfaces in the first two lines of the poem, whose answer is experience and whose meaning, in the context of the closing poem to an immense body of poetry, is the significance of maintaining ethical coexistence. The reader should know by now that reading the poems does nothing unless they result in your actually doing something.

Conclusion

Considering Merwin’s poetry through the geologic perspective of the Anthropocene drives home his importance as an ecopoet. The Anthropocene is the geologic reality of the Edenic narrative. Merwin’s consideration of human cruelty, in part through the figure of the snake, signals his intentional blending of myth and history as engagement of the reader’s individual experience through generational narrative. The cruelty of the Anthropocene has been symbolized by ‘the urban,’ just as the ideal from which humanity was expelled has been signified by ‘Nature,’ and Merwin works to show the limitations of each of these reifications. Time, though in all likelihood a human-created fiction, inserts an element of dynamism into the equation that helps prevent reification, as with Heraclitus’ river, ever-changing in time. In the same way, even the poems themselves must necessarily change with each reading. “The New Song,” the last poem in part I
of *The Moon before Morning*, explicitly illustrates the significance of time’s fiction to human ethical obligation.

For some time I thought there was time
and that there would always be time
for what I had a mind to do
and what I could imagine
going back to and finding it
as I had found it the first time
but by this time I do not know
what I thought when I thought back then

there is no time yet it grows less
there is the sound of rain at night
arriving unknown in the leaves
once without before or after
then I hear the thrush waking
at daybreak singing the new song (1-14)

Leading up to the declaration that “there is no time,” the whole first stanza destabilizes perceptions of time. Time is both a construct and a commodity to be doubted or used. The speaker looks back with an ambiguous observation suggesting either that they cannot believe that they could have thought what they thought back then, or that they simply cannot remember it. In claiming that “there is no time and yet it grows less,” there is a simultaneous assertion of time’s fiction and of humanity’s perception of the constructed measure. That it grows less means either that it is not growing as much, or that it is actually decreasing in quantity, as when age affects one’s perception of remaining time within the individual perspective. That “there is no time” but “there is the sound,” again, centers the question of perceived time in the body, with drops of water being another measure of time’s passage (here as well as in other poems, like “Forgotten Fountain” in *The Moon before Morning*). Both “there is” constructions are general formulations, resolving into the specificity of the seemingly timeless “once” that is “without before or after,” as well as the individuality of “I” and “the thrush,” whose corporeal expression of time is one of threshold and circulation. That the song is “the new song,” in this individual moment and in the
repeating one implied by the general “there is” setup, stems from the newness that time, or the perception of time, grants.

Whether time exists or is merely a construction, it has the power to increase human ethical behavior if it is used to create a sense of urgency. Humans perceive time in relation to their own finite lifespans. The geologic perspective of the Anthropocene is, comparatively, so much larger that the individual human lifespan can seem hardly significant enough to make a difference on a geologic scale—or, as “The New Song” suggests, to go back and do whatever needs to be done. The generational perspective proves key to connecting the individual and geologic perspectives, as seen in the cruelty poems, in which individuals are the ones perpetrating the violence but with individual and generational ramifications. The generational in comparison with the geologic then becomes akin to the individual in comparison with the generational. Merwin also works at times to bring the geologic in direct conversation with the individual, as in his use of light as a measure of time that becomes incorporated in individual bodies. “Prophecy,” the first poem in The Pupil, provides—in its subtle crossings between individual and geologic—not merely a prediction for the future but the practical action that humans need to take in the Anthropocene. The poem opens with what appears to be a straightforward chronological progression of events:

At the end of the year the stars go out
the air stops breathing and the Sibyl sings
first she sings of the darkness she can see
she sings on until she comes to the age
without time and the dark she cannot see (1-5)

The stanza is full of seeming paradoxes though. How can there be an age without time when age is a measure of time? How can the Sibyl, without time, sing prophecy when the Greek pro that precedes phētēs requires time in order to occur “before,” which would no longer exist if there is no time? With time proving so important, the first step is to realize where time is absent: in the word “and.” The combination of the conjunction in the second line and the line break that lulls
the passive reader into a false full stop at the end of that line makes it easier to misread chronology
than read the first line and a half as a description of the end, when there is no time, no light, and
no vision to be seen. The Pupil is a collection centered around vision and in which light is time.
Humans, to see, require light; while the Sibyl, to see, requires time in order to be able to ‘speak’
‘before’ as prophet. The “year” of the first line does not need to be understood strictly as 365 days
but, rather, as a unit of time whose purpose, or end, is to mark time’s passage. When the light
goes out and time is over, there is no further need for the year. Likewise, as the stars have died,
the air—which materially connects bodies—stops them from breathing. Thus, this stanza gives,
first, the end and, then, the explanation of chronology.

The remaining three stanzas explain the connection between the Sybil’s vision and
humanity’s. Again, syntactic ambiguity plays a huge role in guiding—or leading astray—the reader.
In particular, “then” opens the second stanza with the impact of Merwin’s omission of
punctuation.

no one hears then as she goes on singing
of all the white days that were brought to us one
by one that turned to colors around us

a light coming from far out in the eye
where it begins before she can see it

burns through the words that no one has believed (6-11)

Most likely, the first reading will be punctuated in the reader’s mind as “no one hears, then, as she
goes on singing.” However, it is imperative that the reader also consider the alternative, “No one
hears. Then, as she goes on singing.” The insertion of “then” is not merely emphasis. It indicates
chronology. The significance of this change is dramatic. In the first version, the Sibyl’s singing is
secondary to the the lack of hearing and the phrase seems to full stop at “around us” before
beginning anew in the final three lines. The second reading, however, builds the action of the
Sybil’s song as the passage of time itself, unfolding in the translation of darkness to light (color, of
course, being the result of light refracted) so that there must only be a comma-like pause after “around us,” before the third and fourth stanzas shift the focus to “a light” that “burns through the words that no one has believed.” That no one has believed does not preclude the possibility that someone could. Therein, is the purpose of opening The Pupil with this poem, in which the geologic and the individual are so closely allied. In Merwin’s final published poem, “The Prow of the Ark,” the echoes of “The Prophecy” should ring in the exchange between the raven—a bird associated with Apollo and prophecy—and the dove, who returns with the olive branch. With prophecy so prominent, the olive branch might also recall the golden bough, which allowed Aeneas to enter the underworld with the Sibyl, and which he obtained with the help of two doves.

In this way, Merwin links the “words that no one has believed” with the active engagement that “The Prow of the Ark” necessitates in its reminder that experience cannot be conveyed fully in words, but only through experience itself.

The reader should realize, then, that “the words that no one has believed” are those “we have heard [in] the scrape of the prow.” Merwin’s poems are both prophecy and prescription, mourning and model, thinking and doing. They are a möbius of ethics and aesthetics. Because the crisis of the Anthropocene takes place in a geologic context, humanity easily loses sight of that urgency, using instead the individual perspective as its guide. Merwin’s exploration of human cruelty, the urban, corporeal exchange, ethics, and coexistence all require a strong understanding of the interplay between the individual, generational, and geologic perspectives. Merwin works to reconcile these perspectives by guiding the reader through this interplay between them. Centering the experience in the body and continuing to employ tools like form and syntax to coerce reader engagement, Merwin models what ecopoetry should be and do. The difference between a poet and an ecopoet is that the former’s obligation is to a poetic aesthetic, while the latter must answer to an ethical imperative. Merwin addresses his role as poet in The Moon before
Morning, bringing together some of the most important aspects of his ecopoetic thinking and practice. In “Rule of Thumb”

When my thumb touches my little finger
a door opens that I forgot was there
a door of air forgotten in air

the thumb knows that door through which I came
but what the thumb knows is before knowledge

it does not listen with its map of hearing
it hears the harmony the fingers play

I cannot go back through that door again
and the thumb will not guide me anywhere
pointing the way home for the thumb is there

The rule is that, in the time of the Anthropocene, humans must be more aware than ever of their own bodies, as well as of other bodies. Merwin’s möbial approach to the nature-human relationship is not limited to the realm of the literary but, rather, to the daily, yearly, generational, geologic reality of twenty-first-century life. To help humanity move towards the reconciliation and coexistence enacted in his poetry, Merwin, as ecopoet, must not only touch thumb to little finger but, by the end, leave the reader doing the same.
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