

In a Boat on the River Nowhere Writing Home: The Spiritual Poetic of Tim Lilburn

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Article abstract

Tim Lilburn's ninth book, the 2003 Governor General's award-winning *Kill-site*, is grounded not only in the harsh, rural Saskatchewan landscape that he calls home, but also in a philosophical and theological poetics that draws on multiple ancient eastern and western sources. Lilburn's essays of the 1990s, collected in *Living in the World* as if it were Home in 1999, provide insight into this poetics, including his perspectives on nature, the contemplation of God, and the idea of knowledge as the darkening of the mind. An understanding of these themes is essential to a critical appreciation of his poetry. The central spiritual conflict or dialectic in Lilburn's poetry is between the presence and absence of the divine in the world. Despite this constant tension, the negative or absence takes precedence, and his poetic emerges in *Kill-site* as concrete and anti-transcendental.

In a Boat on the River Nowhere Writing Home: The Spiritual Poetic of Tim Lilburn

GREGORY MAILLET

VETERAN READERS OF CANADIAN POETRY could not have been surprised by Tim Lilburn's *Kill-site* winning the 2003 Governor-General's award for poetry, for this is Lilburn's ninth book, and second nomination, in a long and productive career as a very public poet, essayist, and professor of both literature and philosophy. Yet for those whom the prestigious award motivated to read Lilburn for the first time, these poems must have been a daunting experience. *Kill-site* is a text grounded not only in the harsh, rural Saskatchewan landscape that Lilburn calls home, but moreover in a long contemplated philosophical and theological poetic that draws on multiple ancient sources, both western and eastern. Yet the text as a whole retains a characteristically eccentric, individual character that also challenges Lilburn's already developed approach to these sources. Appreciating *Kill-site*, then, requires a basic knowledge of some key steps in Lilburn's own spiritual journey and a serious attempt to explicate how the key concepts of his mature poetic seamlessly create complex, highly individual poems.

Born in 1950, Lilburn's journey began in Regina, where his father was a mailman and his mother worked in a dress store, and his youth was largely spent on common Canadian, male, working-class pursuits such as, in his own words, "hockey, fighting, and general thuggery" (Lemay 179). Yet he also remembers having "always liked the way words could hang together, floating, could find an incantatory stride and say something you knew was true but had never said" (Lemay 179). Despite this inclination, or perhaps because of it, Lilburn describes his late teens, like many of his generation, as being "borderline hellish ... drinking, drugs, psychiatric problems" (Lemay 182). He did manage to attend university, and in 1973 attained a B.A. in English, with distinction, from Champion College, a

Jesuit college that is federated (administratively independent but academically integrated) with the University of Regina. The education that most profoundly affected Lilburn, however, began at twenty-one when he read the medieval Catholic work of mystical theology called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Lilburn was raised in the United Church but had stopped attending in his early teens, and reading this text, along with John of the Cross, Walter Hilton, Thomas à Kempis and Merton, combined with the discovery that he “loved the liturgy,” led him to join the Roman Catholic Church (Lemay 182). Then, in 1978, after teaching in Nigeria and doing construction work, Lilburn joined the Jesuit religious order. Today Lilburn still describes himself as “very glad” of this decision (Lemay 182), but after nine years as a Jesuit, spent mainly in formation at the Upper Canada Jesuit province near Guelph, Ontario, Lilburn left the order in 1987. He had become romantically involved with a visual arts professor, Susan Shantz, and in 1990 moved with her back to his home province when she took a faculty position at the University of Saskatchewan, living just outside of Saskatoon. Though this relationship later dissolved, Lilburn remained in Saskatchewan and joined the faculty at St. Peter’s College, a small Catholic liberal arts college in Muenster, Saskatchewan, where he remained until 2003. In the fall of 2004, Lilburn joined the Department of Writing at the University of Victoria.

So far “as [religious] practice goes,” Lilburn currently describes himself as “undetermined,” but his reading remains “solidly in the Christian contemplative tradition,” with strong interests also in “Plato, the Pythagoreans,” “Weil ... Lao Tzu and Chaung Tzu and Buddhist thought from the Tang period and much else” (Lemay 182). This spiritual journey, with its initial entrance into religious orthodoxy and subsequent retreat from it, does provide important contexts for his first three poetic texts. Space here does not allow explication of these complex texts, which are far from novice work, but suffice to say that *Names of God* (1986) includes long, intellectually challenging theological poems strongly marked by his time with the Jesuits, while *Tourist to Ecstasy* (1989) primarily concerns Lilburn’s movement away from this religious community. Between these two texts, in 1988, Lilburn also published a reinterpretation of ancient Sumerian mythology, for which Shantz provided the illustrations, called *From the Great Above She Opened Her Ear to the Great Below*. While obviously a shift away from Christianity and towards ancient myth, the more important point for Lilburn’s career, is

the analogy that the text provides for a pre-Christian form of the 'via negativa,' the negative or 'dark' way to God that becomes central in Lilburn's mature poetic. Certainly Lilburn's return, with Shantz, to Saskatchewan's rural landscape was a crucial turning point in his poetic career, and this process and subsequent poetic is both chronicled and explained, very usefully, through essays eventually collected as *Living in the World as if it were Home*.

Though not published as a collection until 1999, these short but profound prose essays began to be published in literary journals in the early 1990s, and they are certainly the best available commentaries on Lilburn's work throughout the decade; his subsequent two poetry collections, 1994's *Moosewood Sandhills* and 1999's *To The River*, both include poems that have the same titles as essays in this collection. Though *Living in the World as if it were Home* is not an easy read, due both to its intellectual depth and the fairly frequent use of technical terms from Greek philosophy or Christian monasticism (for which a glossary is provided), reading it closely is highly rewarding, offering an unusually clear, fully conscious account of the role of disciplined spiritual contemplation in literary art. The book's preface succinctly states Lilburn's central poetic motif:

I am not interested in theology but in desire. Traditionally, however, the sort of erotic experience that draws me has been cast either in Christian theological language or in the dialectical language of Plato. The eros for the world, I believe, unfolds in the same way as dialectic and the eros for God have been understood to unfold. (xv)

It remains for the other essays to clarify just what the mature Lilburn means by "desire," but understanding how "eros for the world" is comparable to Platonic dialectic and Christian mysticism is certainly crucial to any critical understanding of his work. Yet "How to be Here," the first essay in the collection and also Lilburn's contribution to a 1995 volume he edited called *Poetry and Knowing*, begins not with philosophical definition or reflection but rather a concrete description of a silent, shared stare with a deer. Immediately the reader is in the Moosewood Sandhills, a name which Lilburn, in a long prose epigraph for the poetry collection of the same name, tells us usually appears only on old maps, "a large rise of hummocky aspen land" along the South Saskatchewan River, a "cactus land" of "dry scrub," "deer and coyote country." Lilburn went there, he says, "and *looked*" "with care and desire," a counter-Western cultural act that at first "seemed a politi-

cal act” but, in “How to be Here,” later causes his prose to reflect on the nature of poetic knowledge. Here Lilburn sounds at first like a romantic nature poet, as his “consciousness walks across the land bridge of the deer’s stare into the world of things,” and he affirms that “this is knowing” (3). Quickly, however, he realizes that in forsaking “objective removal” from the world he reaches not “subjective union” with it, but rather “an intensely felt differentiation,” what the Franciscan John Duns Scotus calls “*haecceitas*” (5), defined by Lilburn as “the individuality of a thing, its singularity — a property such that exactly one individual could have it” (100). Drawing, then, on Hopkins’s notion of “inscape” as a response to “*haecceitas*,” Lilburn sees poetry as a form of “good desire,” “an eros for union with the world building from awe,” but which it “can achieve only by misrepresenting the world” (8). Poetry and contemplation thus engage in a dialectic fueled by desire, and frustrated by reality. Like the “contemplation of God in negative theology,” it “is a knowing which is an unknowing ... hurtling one forward into the unknowability of unique things” (13). Yet the end of poetic contemplation is not angst; through it, “one loves the world and wants to be in the world without skewing it” (13), for the poet finds “a frail home in the garden of otherness” (17).

Poetic returns home are always frail, and so, for Lilburn, poets live in the world *as if* it *were* home, but it is not. While the third essay in the collection grounded in Moosewood Sandhills is called “Return to the Garden,” and though it begins by rejecting the ‘spiritual’ strain in Western religious thought that gives a firmly negative answer to the basic question at stake — “What is the worth of the world?” — Lilburn also rejects the most influential Christian alternative to this view, St. Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*. For Augustine, Lilburn explains, “nature is a book in which God bespeaks himself,” so that the world is valued as a “divine writing” which tells us about the nature of God (44-45). For Lilburn, however, contemplatives in the Augustinian tradition “appear to pull away from” their “gaze” of nature “with troubling quickness” (47); more fundamentally, Lilburn differs from them because whereas nature refers these writers to the name of God, the Holy Trinity, for Lilburn, “If you look hard enough at the world ... you enter a vast unusualness that defeats you. You do not arrive at a name or a home” (47).

Yet neither does Lilburn’s gaze remain mute. As contemplative poet, the technical term perhaps most important to Lilburn’s own writing is

“apophasis,” which he defines as “address, in negative theology, appropriate to what is beyond what the tongue can manage, an asserting of names, a removing of names” (99). Lilburn explores this concept in “Contemplation and Cosmology,” the first published of the *Living in the World* essays, claiming that “the apophatic knowledge of the contemplative is the essence of the *via negativa* . . . the core of the “dark” mystical path to a relationship with the heart of the universe” (29-30). “Knowing,” in this tradition, “is an attentive name-cancelling darkness of mind” whose language “typically describes the soul’s approach to God,” but it can also “plot the return of consciousness to the world, unnameable in its athletic variety” (30). So apophatic contemplation

tells us that the truth of limitless particularity lies beneath language, but is accessible to language when language asserts then cancels itself, asserts, cancels. For in the restlessness of these reversals is the eros of the language-user to return home to his place among stones, river, maples. (37)

This return is exactly what Lilburn seeks in the poems of *Moosewood Sandhills*. It too begins with meeting a deer, but presented here in the form of short, lyrical, yet also dramatic forms that illustrate the initial stages of contemplation. In the opening poem, “In the Hills, Watching,” the poet lies down on the “nerved grass” (1), “down in the nearness of the deer” (7), and begins the *via negativa*: “All knowing darkens as it builds” (8). The second poem, “Acedia,” refers to another technical Greek term, “*ascesis*,” which Lilburn takes to be a form of spiritual exercise, “the gathering and speeding of the self reformed by contemplation” (*Living* 100); yet here, the former Jesuit novice follows not the Ignatian spiritual exercises, but would rather “like to be the novice of a deer,” and would “do whatever it told you” (8-9). As in the spiritual life, however, the poet is “terrified of having nothing” (14), and this leads to the sorrow of the third poem, “Contemplation is Mourning.” Again the poet begins by lying “down in the deer’s bed,” but then realizes its *haecceitas*, its unknowable singularity:

The deer cannot be known. She is the Atlantic, she is Egypt, she is
 The night where her names go missing, to walk into her oddness is
 to feel severed, sick, darkened, ashamed.
 Her body is a border crossing, a wall and a perfume and past this she
 is infinite. And it is terrible to enter this. (14-18)

Closing this initial group of four with the ironically titled "Stability," the poet humbly concludes, "You have been stared at by deer and / must grow smaller" (22-23).

Thus humbled, the poet can begin to ask seriously, in a poem of "Rest," another question with a long history in Christian spirituality: "What does it mean to become nothing?" (4). In "a cave in the earth, / room of knowing, room of tears," comes, in italics, at least one temporary answer: "*It means to place yourself beneath irrational things/ and know they are without blame*" (5-8). "From an Anchorage" explicitly takes the poet "to the desert," as a monk, where with the "white grass above snow, coyotes, the heavy stars," there is a place to "hunker down," and say simply, "I am looking, I am obedient" (1-3). Yet the very next line foretells that "A big weeping's coming" (4), and a number of the next few poems deal with the dark sense of estrangement produced by authentic contemplation. In "Things Recede, Everything Recedes, Everything is Far Away," the poet experiences "the distance of things / a lit and horrible separateness" (14-15). Then the poet is given "The Gift of Tears," and the consolation of knowing, from his study of the *via negativa*, the way probably referred to in the title of the next poem, "No One Remembers How to Do This," which counsels that "the way to anywhere leads through humiliation" (15). Finally the poet is given "Contemplatio," which begins with a clear vision: "Deer among the chokecherries, in the blue wood, deer" (10). Then, after waiting in the certainty that "something's going to be whispered," the contemplation ends with a beautiful sound: "the river, the river strums deep in the bone of the land" (16, 18).

This carefully patterned yet natural, authentic series of poems, concluding with a brief moment of contemplation, briefly returns Lilburn to a poem of "Piety" in which the animals of nature are compared to monks, "whispering in the name of us all for mercy" (22). But then the poet begins to feel inauthentic, so that in "To the Left of Everything" he mocks his own attempts to "study for this," to "crack the books" and become a contemplative through the intellect (11). "Solo on Orthodoxy" thus returns to self-deprecating humility: "But me, what do I know; just a Baden-Powell Platonist, jack-Catholic, slo-pitch cognoscente" (7-8). Then again, he thinks, the river too "is divine and dumb, doesn't know a thing," and maybe "the coyote's shady glide, bluff-lambada, is evangelical" (12, 14). Perhaps Tertullian, mentioned at the start of the poem, was right; perhaps a coyote, Lilburn comically imagines, will arrive at a "Holy

Martyrs Fowl Supper, “and say: “Everything ... will be saved ... Everything” (23). With this faith, however unorthodox, the poet can again begin “Learning a Deeper Courtesy of the Eye,” to simply accept that “Eros has nowhere to go but to become sorrow,” that “it hurts to look at deer” (5, 16). He can also plant some wheat, in “Early June, Sandhills,” and simply “let it have a good time” (5). Yet the poet must also continue the “Discipline of Secrecy,” and remember that the very “marrow of wheat is patience” (13).

Thereafter, even the most hopeful poems of *Moosewood Sandhills* also remind us that nature is large and humans are small. “Paradise of the Cells,” now closer to the centre of everything, concludes: “Everything is odoured with infinity; / snow moves through high grass; everything is infinite” (10-11). “In Paradiso,” similarly, again answers the crucial question “How to be here?” with a decidedly post-lapsarian conclusion: “Things sprout a called-back collar of gold / the decay of something brighter” (33-34). The collection does recap the entire contemplative process in its final two poems, the first of which again asks, “How to Be Here?” Stressing the persistence of the topic, it begins, “Desire never leaves,” and reaffirms that, rather than giving subjective union with nature, “Looking undermines us” (6). Though a capital ‘F,’ apparently Platonic “Form quivers in the deer,” and though this “Form is the doe’s ease within herself,” “Tears will take you part of the way back” to knowing its wonder, “but no further” (15, 19, 25). “Knowing,” this poem further explains, “is a bowing, a covering of your face before the world” (55), and in this monasticism Lilburn’s “name in religion is the anonymity of grass” (60). Yet it is “eros” that “repeats the lesson” (62), and the poem concludes not with despair but rather an apophatic statement that has, for one on the *via negativa*, “the rhythm of praise”; Lilburn’s “tongue protrudes,” and he “asserts then cancels”:

Outside the window one chokecherry in the bush,
 in a thicket of gooseberries,
 adds a weight and compression of darkness under the sun
 that is perfect. (64-67)

This seems the perfect place to conclude *Moosewood Sandhills*, but desire reasserts itself in one last poem, “Restoration,” the never leaving desire “to be the knowledge that is one sleep in the sunward shoulder muscle / of the two-year-old doe coming out of hills and down to Moon Lake” (1-

2). "Sometimes it happens," this concluding poem optimistically asserts: "you lose everything / and wake in the strange room of what you want" (18-19). Even more joyfully, the poet's long quest to see the deer ends in blissful mystical union:

I crane into the deer.
I am in the bright-dark cloud of knowing her
and could walk for days.
She is at the top of the hill and starting down
in early evening. (28-32)

Lilburn's next major collection of poetry, *To The River*, in some ways a sequel or companion to *Moosewood Sandhills*, is best understood through the final three essays of *Living in the World as if it Were Home*. The first two of these essays, in particular, temper the knowledge claims made by anyone, but especially a poet, who aim to walk the path of the *via negativa*. "Sorrow; the River," the first of these three essays, is perhaps the darkest, most pessimistic piece in Lilburn's entire writing corpus, its opening sentences setting the scene clearly at night: "Dark ice rolls and drifts on the river, form without intention; sandbars blur through the motion. Dark river, burly aimlessness, gathering and losing itself, darkening in mid-November" (55). The trip to this river offers, even for a poet, not knowledge but a skepticism almost postmodern rather than Platonic or monastic, for the river "is a dark thing and it is infinite" (56). From this conclusion, he proceeds to claim that, far from what some might expect, the heretical assertions of the Arians, in the early Christian church, were "premised on a confidence that the clarity of names, arrived at by effort of logic, revealed essence" (57). Descartes, too, resembles these heretics "in the hegemony he offers reason" (58), against which Lilburn affirms the theology of Gregory of Nazianzen, bishop of Constantinople in 379, who rejects any attempt to make "our great mystery" a "thing of little moment" (58). Lilburn further affirms the epistemology of John Scotus Eriugena, who argues that "no substance or essence of any creation, whether visible or invisible, can be comprehended by the intellect or by reason as to what it is" (61). Based on these Christian thinkers, Lilburn similarly argues that "in their largeness, complexity, dissimilarity, things are properly addressed by awe, by gratitude for the generosity of their proximity" (61).

The second of the three essays, "There is No Presence," also becomes the title of a poem in *To the River*, and also sounds strongly influenced

by postmodernism. Again, however, Lilburn's sources are primarily Christian, or Platonic, and he affirms his title only as the negative, second half "cancelling" of the also-held affirmation that nature is filled with the presence of God. The first, affirmative half of the claim is supported through men like the Egyptian Desert Fathers, and the twentieth-century Catholic mystic, Simone Weil. Most influential, though, is again John Scotus Eriugena, the West's first translator of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. For Eriugena, "all things ... are theophanies," revelations of God, the, in his words, "Divine Goodness and Essence and Life and Wisdom" (75-76). Yet the presence of God within things does not make them knowable; rather, just the opposite, for if "things are both eternal and made," then of "their eternal nature, you can say only that they are but not what they are," for "the 'more secretly' each thing is understood, 'the closer it is seen to approach the divine brilliance'" (76). Generally affirming Eriugena's thought, Lilburn, as poetic theorist, concludes that a divine thing — that is, all things — "merits a multitude of praise," and is "approached best by praise, a form of naming which has given up the project of identification in a sort of drunkenness" (77). This is "the stutter of apophasis, the naming which is always undoing itself while remaining erotically momentumed to what woos the names," the "speech of wonder" (78). Experience with this kind of apophatic speech affirms that "there is presence," but

a higher expression of this is to say there is no presence, a denial that holds, as something residual, the smell of the affirmation, yet unbendingly resists all images and anticipations — of conversation, community, of forgiveness from the world — that the affirmation of presence engendered. (78)

However paradoxical, then, the title of this essay "is not skepticism but a stride toward what cannot be spoken" (82). Apophatic speech, for Lilburn, is the poetic expression of desire, in which "eros moves its blind hand on the unknowable thing, not to discern shape but to ... accomplish a touch" (82). Though metaphor can never be simple truth, never simple affirmation of presence, desire in this sense, Lilburn concludes, "is an animal brushing against other animals as they move down to the water" (82).

Surprisingly then, "There is no Presence" acts as a pivot moving Lilburn's poetic away from a purely dark path. The third and shortest essay, the concluding piece in *Living in the World as if it were Home*, is

called “Epektasis; Under the Instruction of Things,” and it is also the most hopeful, offering the promise of poetry continuing to learn, to grow. It begins in much warmer seasons: “Summer river, jewelled variety; fat, flirtatious, yet oblique, bank grasses, a green vegetable mist over the evening river” (87). “Epektasis” seems to be a name for the unfailing character of apophatic desire, even after it experiences loss and failure. Lilburn defines it in his glossary as the “unbroken reaching arising from eros’ emptiness and ingenuity,” adding that the “stumbling of the erotic individual is part of the poverty out of which courtesy issues” (100). Within the essay, Lilburn describes “epektasis,” in even more positive, poetic terms, as a return from sorrow:

Humiliation, grief, regret can alter into beauty and kinship: poverty in us is like the forgottenness in grass which is the further tip of its beauty; it may place us in the family of grass. Lose and the wheat is closer. (87)

Gregory of Nyssa, Lilburn’s primary source for the concept of “epektasis,” argues that a virtuous life is distinguished by “unfixability,” a “perpetual erotic craning”; by contrast, “coming to a stop in the race,” ceasing to be epektatic, is the very essence of sin (88-89). For Gregory, in the virtuous life “the participant’s desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless” (90). In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory describes the soul as searching for God, “her Beloved,” but this process is endless, for “every fulfillment of her desire continually generates further desire for the Transcendent” (91). It is in the context of this spiritual tradition that Lilburn, the nature-monk, would “like to go to confession with the river” (93), and via its truth he can affirm the central paradox at the core of his collection of essays, and his contemplative poetic: “Having no home, while bending into the world where one would live as if it were home, is the human home” (95). This “erotic homelessness,” for Lilburn, is the human way to be in the world, “as the grass is the grass and the river is itself” (95).

Read in relation to these three essays, *To the River* is an exceptionally rich poetic voyage. Like them, it begins in the cold, black sorrow of “Pitch,” as “dark shifts of cranes in the valley” give the poet a simple imperative: “Be quiet” (8-9). Like the opening of *Moosewood Sandhills*, this is a poem of approach, waiting as “A bigger dark comes in from a farther place” (17). “Slow World” plants us even more firmly in the cold world of winter, as after “two weeks of thirty-five below,” “the fat sway

of the river / is jammed four feet down" (1-2) and "there are no deer tracks" (5); instead, "there is the colour of horror over the snow" (24). Fearlessly, the poet goes "under the / earth and the river" (25-26), Lilburn's version of Yeats's famous "foul rag and bone shop," which here gives him "a rag, a leg bone to hold" (27). This is the place of sorrow from which poetry and, indeed, life itself must begin, though initially the poet perceives only "a dark in things," "an almost buried light in cold trees" (31,46). A place of sorrow, "the river is widowed," and its willows, Lilburn tells us, "are the same thing" as Eriugena's *Periphyseon* or pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names* (59-61). All such divine realities make one "poor," and give "a red that drops its eyes / when you look at it" (63-66). Yet also by the river is a woman, perhaps an allegorical feminine representative of the soul, perhaps a physical lover, and her gaze tips him into "the far corner / of her eye"; caught by desire, the poet will "build a fire where I am and wait" (78-79).

The next poem, erotically titled "On the Bed of Attention," is a brief but ecstatic consummation with nature, an apophatic poem of praise that contains only the briefest hints of human alienation; having passed through sorrow, the poet is welcomed into the landscape, the anonymity of grass:

Quiet in the buck of things;
 down in the grass
 the lift and the end of light,
 down in the snow-pressed grass. (8-11)

Yet one also recalls that apophatic assertion of presence, for Lilburn, is always followed by a higher negation, which *To the River* gives us in its very next poem, "There is no Presence." It opens with hints of divine presence, but they are fading: "there are geese over the water," but "flickering in bad light" (1); here desire gives "a garden that would appear, if the word were found" (5). Though "the geese participate in the boiling dark," and are an apophatic "speech of it" (14-15), the lack, the absence of the divine is also felt in everything, for

Everything is fallen, everything a soul,
 dry stick fire, green water shouldering up among absent-minded,
 heavy poplar. I've seen the river; the river is one sleep;
 the forehead, tin-coloured, flexes with guessing. Everything
 is lonely. (47-51)

These lines visually represent the negation of presence, the waiting in desire to know the river, here able to assert only absence, loneliness. The “river is a hiddenness” (63) because we live in a fallen world; or, to put it more precisely, “the world became the world when the light of adoration fell in it” (71). Personal virtue cannot amend this fall, as the poet self-mockingly explains in telling himself, “You are good but no blond disc for you in the grass, no bone / of light” (74-75). In the fully sorrowful stage of apophasis, one feels only that “you are alone in the world,” and in its infinite density “the flab of the river / is anarchic,” obscuring human identity itself by acting as “a dangerous mirror that makes your face darkness throwing its hair” (79-81). The poem does not end, however, in an extreme assertion that there is no presence; however untrue they may be, Lilburn closes with metaphors of praise: “the river’s breath is a bright elm,” the river is a “head of grass in the chest,” and though there is in the water “the lack of light so strong you cannot look at it,” this “flicking” light brings, finally, “half sickness, part relief” (82-88).

This opening sequence of poems in *To the River* presents, in microcosm, the broad pattern of the book, which moves in a non-linear, recursive fashion from sorrow to apophasis to, briefly, moments of epektasis where there is, if not joy, at least growth. Though a dialectic of presence and absence is maintained, and one poem’s title reminds us that “Everything is Proportion,” proportionately there is more of the “higher negation” of presence. “River” reminds us that “the river doesn’t know you” (25), and the birds on its “sick ice” offer only “a thick-tongued black / sway in the air with no message coming up the valley” (73-74). In “Dark Song,” the plain shows a “barely given-off light / the intelligence of a block of salt” (4). Even more sparsely, “Poverty” tells us that on the trip to the river, “You go there and are walled into nothing / and lie down. / A darkness worms forward and up in you” (7-9). Yet these dark poems also contain hints of the presence which Lilburn’s prose had told us must also be maintained. In “Nothing There,” the dialectic of presence / absence / presence is clearly evident. In silence, the poet sees “the kingdom of heaven in the grass / pulling a / forgottenness toward itself with a full-hands’ / erotic gravity” (8-11), but this leaves the poet in darkness, for the swollen grass “breathes the light of your face all into it” (23). Still, after sleep, and the feeling that “nothing will come near, / not grass, nothing” (27-28), the poem closes with the hope of a continuing dialectic: “Something will happen, / it will be both expansion and breaking down” (42-

43). Even more hopefully, in “Music in the Cloud,” addressed to a Chinese woman named “Huaizhao” who appears periodically in a few of these poems, the poet hears “the deep singing in this thinking about darkness” (14); cosmically, the poem’s conclusion asserts that “the shape of heaven is the shape of earth” and, more personally, that “I am what the darkness likes” (27-30). Perhaps the most relaxed, hopeful poem of all is “You Sleep Your Way There,” in which the poet senses, though not through the senses, “Everywhere the faces of things pouring the gold of what / they are into an unseeable place” (13-14). Though always humble, simply stating that “I don’t amount to much” (62), Lilburn does feel the presence of divinity in his work, as the very next line affirms: “This is a song, you sing it, then become it, the work of God” (63). While the poem’s conclusion again negates presence, as the light is “turning away” and “nothing will ever be enough” (105-06), it has established some identity between nature and humanity, some sense that the world is our shared home: “The water smells like a hole filled with old leaves / where you once might have lived. / The water smells of you” (112-14).

Having achieved this small gain, the second major section of the book, though only about a quarter of its length, turns somewhat surprisingly to two of the major ways humans have historically attempted to form homes in the world: “Marriage and Agriculture.” Its opening lines sound very much like a bachelor surprised at having to admit to being married. “You are embarrassed by this” (1), says the semi-personal second person narrative voice, this “great eros turning itself / in a way that makes it want to be sick” (6-7), the “turn toward marriage and agriculture” (15). Not that the *via negativa* is forsaken; rather, it is more immediate: “You can walk right into darkness now, / right into blood and children” (18-19). This, the poet affirms, is another form of apophatic dialectic, “This is love and sorrow,” “a killing and a coming / out alive through the killing” (24, 42-43). Following this introduction, the both willing and reluctant husband and farmer follows his desire, his eros for the world, along a dialectical path. Sometimes, in response to the fundamental existential question, “What do we do, what do we do all day?,” the poet can only answer: “We imagine nothing” (70-71). Other times, however, within the poet “glitters unaccountably a careful knowledge / of how and where to plant the new corn” (93-94). Then this assertion is cancelled, for though the poet “would like to seed something in this / plain of aroused sediment, river light, soft middle of your tongue ... there is no home” (137-40).

Finally the dialectic concludes, in the spiritually sweet section sixteen, with perhaps Lilburn's most succinct yet complete example of contemplative, apophatic praise, his fullest poetic statement of the restless, continual nature of erotic desire, and the power of desire to form some kind of home in an essentially alien world. Desire, as understood by Lilburn, is the implied subject, the true antecedent, of the series of phrases beginning with "it" that open the first several lines in this concluding section; it is apophatic, erotic desire that "carves genius," that "carves light-love;" that "wants a shape inside clean enough to lie down / with sorrow," that "tastes the winds coming from what is" (299-304). When "it" is finally named, it is this relentless dialectical force, returning again and again to the attempt to know reality, that becomes a simple but powerful metaphor: "Desire rows out again and again" (307).

Then, in the last twelve lines, there is one final glimpse of an almost Edenic moment, a brief consummation of desire in which humans are at home in nature. As "the river feathers deeper into exhaustion," there is almost "no memory in it at all," just the moment of beauty, which is also shown as sexual union with the husband's wife: "the woman is folded into me, between ribs, fists, and lower arms" (308-12). This re-union of Adam and Eve, man and woman, enlightens, simply enjoying the fruitfulness of "black / thickness of bees," "a big fish lying among stones," of "long shafts of dark in June" (312-15). Yet as the season's difference brings no pain in Eden, this Saskatchewan scene ends with the river, "sullen drunk," absent, "not here," but rather a source of nourishment to man and animal: "on a horse northwest of here" (316-17). Heading north, the horse and rider move toward winter, "snow coming out of a purple cloud," but now there is no danger, no darkness, no terror, but simply the cold, real source that will renew the river and keep it flowing: "snow," "first snow" of the next winter (319-20), first gift of God to renew creation. It can snow in June in Saskatchewan, and if it does most people complain about it, but in Lilburn's poetry the sorrow of summer snow has become a song of serene peace.

It is in relation, then, to the rich, complex contexts of Lilburn's long contemplated, hard-won spiritual poetic that *Kill-site* must be read. Yet its themes, as implied by how starkly its title contrasts with his earlier volumes of poetry, also contain an intensity that is at once more disturbing, even dangerous, and yet, ever paradoxically, more reassuring. Its epigraphs, for example, cite Osip Mandelstam to remind us that the pain

to be described by the poet is “not a migraine” but rather “the cold of genderless space,” an image of negation; in the second epigraph, Odysseus speaks of digging “a pit” and filling it with “offerings for the dead,” but these all suggest the possibility of new life: “honey mixed with milk,” “sweet wine,” “water,” and “white barley.” *Kill-site* then begins with Lilburn returning to a place of ‘Quiet, Quiet,’ and to apophatic contemplation, a place of “night and deeper night / pulled down from waiting,” which finally perceives that “the animal was the world; it was the world” (18-22). The second poem, “Its Seeing-Perfumed Fist,” reaffirms that “First philosophy is mystical theology” (7), while the third, “What He Said,” returns to Christian spiritual writers like Nicholas of Cusa and St. Benedict, concluding that the poet must “Hear it / and say it again, say it again” (36-37). Then comes the title poem, however, which places the poet inside nature, making concrete all of the dark, dangerous uncertainty that Lilburn’s spiritual poetic implies.

In the title poem, “Kill-site,” it is no longer the poet whose desire searches for the animal, but rather, Lilburn begins, “the animal dreamed of me” (1). Reflecting on Henry Kelsey, an early Hudson Bay Explorer whom, legend has it, “continued walking under the ground” after his death, Lilburn’s Kelsey sings this mantra: “Let the will sleep here 400 years” (8,12). This ‘kill-site,’ then, is an image, a place, an environment, in which nature requires human nature to enter, and long remain, in a *via negativa*, a dark path in which one’s own desires, one’s own will, are replaced by a gradual awareness of the “animal that came ... big with wounds, songful / with wounds’ clatter,” and “wore a dark sound” (68-70). Human and animal nature, and being, here seem fused; both Kelsey and the animal, the poem concludes, continue “walking, wanting and fearing / the freezing of rivers” (160-61).

Yet compared with *Moosewood Sandhills* or *To the River*, *Kill-site* is situated within not just nature, but also the human culture, often even the popular culture, of Lilburn’s Saskatchewan home. “Sleeping Four Nights in a Tree,” for example, begins at “the Sunset Motel in Senlac, Saskatchewan,” where it is yet “possible to think of *The Spiritual Canticle*,” by St. John of the Cross, “with the ear of Garcia Lorca / inside it like a silver imaginary bird” (1-3). Partly this is caused by the closeness to nature — to “Mule deer, bluebirds, the moon, instead of [the satellite] dish” (33) attached to the motel — but the seedy, “fucked, hillbilly” (44) character of the old motel also makes it “possible to think of the bones of things, / shark

bone of arguments" (61-62). The *haecceitas*, or individual uniqueness of things that Lilburn has listened for so carefully in nature is also found in "The one neighbour you saw leaving the office," whom "you never / see again, black ball cap, his full, see-through bag of white bread" (70-71). In "A Book of Flashes," however, the poet's desire to "leave ontology behind," to "leave goodness behind" (14-15), becomes darker and concludes with the image of poet "Anne Szumigalski dead" (40), in the sea, "moon-faced," which leaves the poet turning east: 'buddha, sunfaced buddha" (48-49). "Boom Boom Boom" concludes *Kill-site's* first section even more darkly, the poet admitting, "I can't begin to tell you how abject I am," in "a darkened church . . . in a dark, the dark," yet even here the poet also finds "the goldmouthed / wall, going on" (21-24).

The second section of the book further explores the East, Saskatchewan, and Lilburn's own poetic world. "This" points to the minute *haecceitas* favoured by the "Tang robes" (27) of classical Chinese poetry, who notice "givenness," "the night's smell of horses," "the vita of duckweed," "a slowly unparalyzing beetle / just before the new wasp eats it in the birth-hole" (15, 18, 23-27). "Great Ignorance" further proclaims the "maxima doctrina" (84) of Socrates and Nicholas of Cusa, who know only that they don't know, for this allows the poet to be "quiet," and know that his "scholarship was gold *and* shit" (21; emphasis mine). With this perspective, Lilburn now sees that "the animal came with the world" ("There" 14), and "The Book that Changes Everything" next gives the example of a fox who "reads its one book cover to cover, then again," as a model of mystical contemplation who deserves this title: "Lord Hermes, Lord Porphyry" (40-41).

"Waiting" returns to another of Lilburn's main themes, "desire" (8) again evoked by the presence of an animal, a "three years old, shoulder cut, mule deer, pushing / north" (4-5), and there is another poem set in China. There then follows one of the clearest maps of Lilburn's spiritual poetic, "A Gloss on *To the River*." It begins by stressing that "The *only* way in is impoverishment," but paradoxically adds: "Don't repeat this to anyone" (1). "Things," or reality, "are the speech of an untonguable darkness in themselves" (22). "Geese on the river, walking the half-iced river, are our breathing," and so for Lilburn, "Where else / could you live but in a simple hole, listening?" (30-33). And yet, the poem concludes, when you truly "look into a distant thing as into a mirror, you / will see something that will terrify you" (102-03); rather than a sense of peace, contemplation "feels like

a lowgrade fever,” “as if we’ve just been missed by a car” (112-13). This breathless awareness is not modern, though, and section two concludes with “Could be Feb. 14, 1244, Could be North Japan,” another statement of the affinity between the creeks and rivers of Saskatchewan and medieval Japan, as Lilburn becomes a poet of Zen paradox, “under the ground, moving / my arms to the stars” (9-10).

The third and final section of *Kill-site* begins in civilization, in “The House,” but it soon becomes “a bear / smelling winter, moving further back into the mountains” (15-16), and in the next poem, “Night,” the poet leaves, moving into nature, “anomalous, in love with homelessness, desire” (18), hoping that the “antelope’s start” can “set up a small / home-stead of thinking in you” (23-24). Next, Lilburn finds “The Dark Fields of the Tongue” in Saskatchewan’s “Quill Lakes,” writing “speech which is like an unbearable nudity,” an ineffable reality that forces the conclusion: “Don’t say this ... Don’t say this” (37-40). Affirmation follows negation, however, and “Hearing” gives a simple, concrete description of both nature and people in Saskatchewan. “Swallowed Rituals” is also dedicated to a Saskatchewan dance company, “New Dance Horizons,” who inspire Lilburn to begin in “the stone,” a “fox’s foot” (1-2), at “Last Mountain Lake” (11) where one hears “the animals below the ground” (14), “hears the darkness, moving, / the muscle-sliding dark” (16-17). This is Lilburn’s natural habitat, “Socrates curled in the coyote hole,” but the familiar setting soon shifts back to that of “Kill-site,” to Henry Kelsey, walking under the rivers and forest, a model both for poets — “a voice” (39) who “built many irresistible lean-tos / for his ear” (44-45) — and also for dancers, whose “naked brown legs” yield “delight” (50-51).

The collection’s remaining poems frequently find Lilburn in the earth, part of “the familia in the stone” (“Quietly, Quickly” 2), for Plato, John Scotus Eriugena, a young woman made drowsy by “a class in advanced poetry,” and Julian of Norwich are all “under the ground,” their “imagination” entirely “burnt down around their ears” (“Even the Light of Words” 1-2, 17). “Underground streams” become “a kind of speech” that the poet can “listen / to by inhalation and exhalation” (“Rock Creek Valley” 32-33), noticing that “Tracks, deer slots, are gathering in [his] ears” (“This Thing” 31-32). Everything in this poetic seems concrete, natural, anti-transcendental, yet the next poem, “So,” begins by affirming “Everything takes a religious pose” (1), and in the “ground somewhere around here” (13), even though local “farms here are fucked” (27), there yet comes

“mule-deer, white tail / billowing with weirdness and specificity, with our jumping, charge-heavy / voices, rocking, rocking;” (23-25).

This, for Lilburn, is mystical ecstasy, the “first philosophy” promised by the book’s opening (“Its Seeing-Perfumed Fist” 7). Despite the book’s darkness, then, and concrete awareness of the reality of death, the final poem of *Kill-site*, “Now, Lifted, Now,” does seem, within the context of Lilburn’s spiritual poetic, almost ecstatic, joyful. The poet begins by affirming another teacher of monastic, mystical theology, saying, “I am in the boat of John Cassian’s mouth,” for this is the river Lilburn has travelled throughout *Kill-site*: “night-coloured, mind steered, poplar-scented, aspen-lit / ship, old limestone boat, dead ferns pressed into its side” (1-2). In this place is “the stomach of the thing,” “low in the breath,” and the “eyes in the willow, this willow,” are “open” (17-20). This place is not anti-intellectual, but rather offers concrete images of mind, body, and nature united; one “must / read, read — work the shovel: go through / the tears, pry under them, the garden under the stone” (30-32). Having done so much contemplative work, Lilburn concludes *Kill-site* by recalling earlier encounters with the reality of nature, “when the gold animal appeared to me,” and “bent and took my smell” (34, 37). This initially appeared to be a moment of great danger, for the animal, Lilburn writes, began “crumpling my tarp, its head hammering toward my shoulder and chest” (40). But it was also real, and in that sense good, and so Lilburn finally states that “I was sick then, remembering badly” (41). An honest admission of the difficulty of authentic contemplation, this final line might also be read as Lilburn suggesting that the very process of writing *Kill-site* has allowed him to advance, however imperceptibly, towards a deeper understanding of both animal and human nature.

Perhaps the best summary of Lilburn’s poetic journey, however, came a year before the publication of *Kill-site*, in 2002, when he returned to Campion College at the University of Regina to deliver (with another distinguished alumnus, visual artist Erica Grimm-Vance) the annual Nash Memorial Lecture. Lilburn’s address, “The Poem Walks Toward You: Listening, Negative Theology, Place,” covers many of his central themes, in memorable language. The “poem comes toward you,” he insists, for it “is not written, but heard” (5); this “large-earedness in poetry” can produce work that is “leaping, discontinuous, resonant, associative: not unlike the deeper urgings in prayer which are themselves a-gestalt,

counter-intuitive, shocking” (5). This is the kind of poetry Lilburn wants to write — and has written — but not to shock; rather,

The object of poetry, finally, isn't to write poems; it's to come home, to return to the community of things. We let the ear grow large, and what is in the world comes near; we're less apart, then, less rogue, dangerous; the old union wobbles back. Poetry — the plain gesture itself, the helpless, intent listening — is hybridically political: this makes it both laughable and immeasurably dear. (10)

Though few others, if any, have ever described Lilburn's poetry as political, his saying so should not surprise, or make one laugh; in the quiet, contemplative home that his erotic desire has carved out of the Saskatchewan shrub and river land, Tim Lilburn hears things that can gradually effect political change through personal transformation, and which have allowed him to write a body of poetry that will continue to hold a unique, dear place in Canadian literature.

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