

## Between the Sky and the Stove

### John Thompson's Animal Encounters and the Extra-Linguistic Experience

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[See table of contents](#)

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# Between the Sky and the Stove: John Thompson's Animal Encounters and the Extra-Linguistic Experience

TAMMY ARMSTRONG

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* (7)

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer  
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

— Agha Shahid Ali, "Tonight" (374-75)

**B**EFORE HIS UNTIMELY DEATH from a mixture of alcohol and anti-depressants in 1976, John Thompson spent nearly a decade rendering into poetry New Brunswick's Tantramar salt marshes, near Nova Scotia's border. New Brunswick's importance as "a paysage moralisé" — "a co-ordinating, poetic landscape," as Peter Sanger observes ("John Thompson"), reflects Thompson's tumultuous emotions throughout his work. But none of Thompson's critics has readily equated his regionalism with New Brunswick's animal inhabitants, though the province's "landscape so imbues Thompson's poems," critic Cary Fagan remarks, "that it's hard to believe he wasn't born to that flat, grey land" (6). What becomes even more apparent, however, is that in both of Thompson's collections, *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* (1973) and *Stilt Jack* (1978), the animal populations, in Lawrence Buell's terms, "remythify the natural environment" (*Environmental* 31).<sup>1</sup> Thompson's poetry conveys a spectral presence that haunts the poet through a language system that he believes can no longer capture the lived reality of the animal world and his encounters with it. He therefore strives to move beyond language, looking to animals because he shares with them an extra-linguistic experience. As he states, language is foreign to him: "The word works me like a spike harrow" (*Stilt Jack* 115).

An inadequate domestic space, defined in many ways by his unhappy marriage, also overwhelms Thompson with untruths and tamed lan-

guage (*Stilt Jack* 115).<sup>2</sup> Thus, he moves from indoors to outdoors, seeking something both physically and metaphorically beyond the confines of human responsibility and control. He feels compelled to follow animals into the woods because they do not belong to deeply rooted systems that domesticate, such as femininity, submissive language systems, marriage, and the use of tools. His navigation from the home and marriage into the outside of the animal world unearths a profound confusion in him at first. He realizes the anthropocentric nature of homelessness and his potential melding with the world through this homelessness. At one point, he asks, “whose children are we? We have / mistaken home” (*At the Edge* 91).

Because leaving home is not a clean transition, Thompson uses various tools from the house and farm as intermediary instruments for engaging the untamed outdoors. Animals, in these first encounters, are often wounded by fish-hooks and guns as he struggles to maintain some control over the world. When he finally submits to the world, embodying the animals that he sought to control, he becomes the fish on the hook or the bear in the snow. He finally enters the animal world with a new identity, not as intruder but as ontological shape-shifter. With this final transformation, Thompson becomes a being-out-of-doors, one who accepts the unspoken language of the world, in both its truths and its silences.

It therefore becomes important to read his zoopoetics, even as Thompson creates them, through a desire to move beyond the *domus* of human language and its relationship to truth. The word *zoopoetics*, as used throughout this essay, considers the animal directly as the point of crisis that occurs when Thompson realizes how unsustainable his language is during the animal encounter. Such zoopoetics demarcates the internal struggle and anxiety that the poet grapples with to communicate his lived experiences. His real-world experiences intensify as he realizes that human language systems will always be inadequate to identify animal difference, yet he quickly learns that he cannot escape language even through his own silences. One way to see this clearly is by using the critical context of Friedrich Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” in conjunction with the work of later thinkers who build on these ideas. Nietzsche can be read in the context of Thompson’s investigations of the failures of language. Later thinkers, such as Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, also prove to be useful as contexts for

Thompson's developing poetics, as they highlight his dissatisfaction with the domesticated language of social exchange and his yearning for new articulations of truth and, ultimately, his turn toward silence.

Nietzsche distinguishes humans from animals by suggesting that humans can shift images into concepts. Through their inability to make such shifts, animals expose a more fundamental kind of truth since they can never elaborate through metaphor. Humans, conversely, cannot act truthfully since they must rely on a sign system that has to be tacitly accepted universally in order to make sense. Nietzsche finds reciprocity between what he terms intuitive or "first metaphor" and animals. The intuitive is generated when the "stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image" (144). As prelinguistic, it is not simply an anthropocentric rendering of experience. Conversely, a conceptual or "second metaphor" is generated when an "image is then imitated by a sound" and so enters language (144). Nietzsche's second metaphor is rooted in an anthropocentric experience. We create metaphors from human projections as they are placed onto the world. These conceptualizations cannot lead, in Nietzsche's words, to "the thing in-itself," "pure truth," or the "essence of things," since they impose their own order on the world (144, 145).

Searching for this essential kind of truth on New Brunswick's salt marshes, Thompson wishes in "The Brim of the Well" to "lie with the crow on the dump" and "pass through the wall of his eye" and to see "what brightness of flesh he probes, / what shadows" (*At the Edge* 91). In language like Emerson's "transparent eyeball" (6), Thompson wishes to immerse himself in the world and assume the animal's sense of reality. To overcome the determinism found in language, even in poetic expression, one must discard many of the rules and return to an intuitive thinking of first metaphor.

Thompson's "new" language exists at the cusp of old domestic enclosures and the wilder, open spaces of New Brunswick's woods and marshes. Thompson relies on fractured thought processes and a sparse poetic to foreground such truths in poems such as "Crow's Wing" in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*. A crow's wing nailed to the side of a barn — the physical structure of home — mirrors his inescapable human condition that always frustrates his search for freedom. This particular voice, housed in desperation, creates an eerie sense of danger at the edge of the dark woods:

a crow's wing nailed  
to the barn side dreams  
dark flights,

but the hand keeps, silky,  
to the air,  
sure  
of its blood-filled quarrels. (66)

The lines are brief, almost truncated, in an effort to achieve an immediacy of form that might reflect the moment's dark observation. Although the crow's wing retains some of its *crowness*, despite the iconography of it being nailed to the barn, the parallel sense of the free human hand, which nailed the wing, cannot escape its symbolism of certain violence. Contemplating this violence reminds the reader of Don McKay's dramatic essay "Baler Twine," which begins with his finding a shot raven strung up on a fencepost with baler twine. McKay's conflict stems from his inability to understand the raven in such a state or to understand the motivation behind such a cruel act. The presence of the bird in death, for McKay, points primarily to the human need to proclaim "that the appropriation is total" (16). For Thompson, the crow's wing points to how humans must inherently return to a reliance on language as a medium of conflict that denies them the crow's non-verbal "dark flights." Robert Gibbs sees that Thompson's poetry often works on such a non-verbal level "to activate in the brain sense responses so immediate to consciousness as to be painful" (134), and for Thompson this becomes the core of his search: "I believe in unspoken words, unseen gods" (*Stilt Jack* 122).

Although both of Thompson's poetry collections seek a kind of truth through the animal, his poetics develops a keener sense of the encounter with animals from collection to collection. His work speaks to a progressive understanding of fictions beyond human creations that empty our memories and preconscious selves of any previous understanding of the world. *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* begins with his failed "quest for domesticity" (Sanger, "John Thompson"). The search leads Thompson into the animals' woods but then finally returns him, albeit changed, to the house. It is a clear trajectory that many of the poems in the collection follow. His escape from the domesticity of home and language is unsuccessful in the collection because he is still drawn to the reassurances of the domestic scene (marriage and family)

and its language. The following collection, *Stilt Jack*, does not return Thompson safely to the house but opens up the question of inhabitation of place in much larger terms.

In *Stilt Jack*, experiments with the ghazal employ a form outside dominant Canadian poetic traditions in the 1970s. A large part of the difficulty in reading *Stilt Jack* stems from Thompson's particular innovations with the ghazal's structure. Although Thompson was drawn to the form by literary luminaries and friends who studied with Canadian critic A.J.M. Smith at Michigan State in the late 1960s — such as Adrienne Rich and Jim Harrison — the ghazal has a much longer history beginning in a twelfth-century Urdu/Persian poetic form that expresses love, loneliness, and separation. Etymologically, the word *ghazal* derives from the death cry of the gazelle. Perhaps Thompson heard that cry as his own. It is the essence of what he cannot translate into any language other than poetry, and even there it often fails. The form's subtleties, as Ken Norris has argued, are based on "tone [and] nuance, so that the lyrical unity we've grown accustomed to in the English tradition is rendered irrelevant" (qtd. in Winger 29). Thompson's interpretation of the form further distances it from cohesion, since Thompson does not follow the traditional rhyming couplet and refrain pattern but writes his ghazals in free verse. Ghazals depend "not [on] the leaping surrealism in which the couplets are strung together to provide strange imagistic juxtapositioning," Norris suggests, but on their "bringing together of disparate materials subject to a common tone or emotionality [that] leads to the creation of feelings that threaten to break open the perceivable, objective world" (qtd. in Winger 29). The ghazal's more radical structure seems to serve both Thompson's sense of displacement and his search for extra-linguistic expression in a human-centred world.

The failure of lyrical unity and the possibility of exposing an indifferent world attract Thompson, who seeks something beyond the traditional poem's all-too-human language and its common "imagistic juxtapositionings." His feelings "threaten to break open" the world and equate to his desire to destroy that subjective world by entering into it through the animal gesture. The ghazal is a primary step, a means by which Thompson attempts to further his initial experimentation in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*. In the original foreword to *Stilt Jack*, he speaks to his attraction to the form:

The ghazal allows the imagination to move by its own nature: discovering an alien design, illogical and without sense — a chart of the disorderly, against false reason and the tacking together of poor narratives. It is the poem of contrasts, dreams, and astonishing leaps. The ghazal has been called “drunken and amatory” and I think it is. (*Stilt Jack* 106)

The definition seems to echo Nietzsche’s understanding of the intuitive metaphor as created a priori to linguistic conceptualizations. Thompson’s definition must be read not as *disorderly* but as a deeper *order against false reason*.

An inability to dissociate himself fully from the human world is still part of the poetic exploration in *Stilt Jack*, but the second collection is compounded by the urgent realization that Thompson was running out of time. *Stilt Jack* was written at the height of his anxiety as an intensely intertextual collection, full of allusions to the Bible and to poets such as William Butler Yeats and Theodore Roethke. In recognizing himself as vulnerable and fallible, Thompson tries to move in the collection beyond cultural boundaries by rendering the world around him through non-linguistic expressions. “I don’t hear your words,” he writes, “I hear the wind, / my dreams, disasters, my own strange name” (129). Although he appears to become a stranger to himself at times, he finds that he cannot escape the human condition or that sense of self that draws him back to human communication.

What Thompson discovered over the course of these two collections was perhaps something of the essential nature of *différance*, as Derrida has coined the term, as the play of differences in language and its relation to the world. Even earlier Ferdinand de Saussure, in *Course in General Linguistics*, asserted that “in language there are only differences *without positive terms*,” expressing a sense of the inability of language to bridge that gap between word and meaning (121). Both thinkers reflected Nietzsche’s idea that language is suspect, that it transforms the world’s lived reality into something that it is not.

## The House of Language

In his essay “Deer Slayer with a Degree,” John Tallmadge suggests that men sustain identity through domestic connections: “Marriage and household are key metaphors in the vision of a sustainable, personal

ecology" (26). Thompson's understanding of marriage, home, and language as claustrophobic perhaps better defines his unsustainable personal ecology, his unstable psychology, and his turn toward animals as an alternative to domestic failure. The house defines and isolates him: "the house / rises: we fight; this is love" (*Stilt Jack* 108). His first collection sets the stage for the later escape back to an uncultivated locus. It is no accident that many of these poems occur during the short days and long nights of winter. A wintry landscape, with its strange refractions and fragmented shadows, confuses clear lines of sight and compounds the poet's sense of claustrophobia indoors.

"Wife," an early poem in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, alludes to this fractured domesticity as the poet cannot separate his wife from her baking bread. Bread in this poem and others is analogous to the moon, suggesting menstrual cycles and feminine power. Here the bread, like a moon, "gleams and fattens," while his wife is a "shadow / huge on the wall" (51). Her ominous and formless presence overwhelms the house. Later baking bread becomes cacophonous and interrupts his thoughts, reminding the poet that the house is not a propitious place for him: "this morning the bread hot from the oven / sounds with voices: terrible blows" (97). In a later poem in the same collection, the domestic kitchen represents the failed *domus*; there is no food, and he exclaims, "god damn this winter when the air / and women get thin / and cold" (72). While "sluffing through the cold rows, pulling young onions," the poet equates the action with his futile struggles at home. The onions might be "a cure for disaster," he states, in the "white morning / in this kitchen of dead moons" (74). The onions communicate to him, whereas the "dead moons" of the bread cannot.

Animals initially do not expose a new sense of truth to Thompson so much as reinforce the wildly disordered nature of the world. He does not engage the animal world at first but glimpses its profundity at the edges of his failing domesticity. The animals' presence suggests a more fundamental level of communication but also a different kind of language. As zoosemiotician Dario Martinelli observes, animals already communicate by signs: "Language added a series of communicative and cognitive elements on top of the existing ones, not in place of them" (64). Such a sentiment echoes Thompson's struggle to strip away the façade of language while acknowledging that there is no alternative to replace it. Because this impasse haunts Thompson, he anxiously works



harder to decode and expose language's failed authority through various animal encounters. As he admits in *Stilt Jack*, "I feel you rocking in the dark, dreaming also / of branches, birds, fire, and green wood" (111). He dreams about this other world because birds and fire illuminate a new way of thinking, even while a conceptual "Heaven goes on without us" (111).

Thompson's understanding shows similarities to philosopher Giorgio Agamben's observations in *The Open: Man and Animal* on how domestic spaces trap the human mind, which can then free itself only through the creative act. Agamben suggests that humans are creative, or world building, because they can become bored, presumably with their self-imposed order on the world. He writes that our self-awareness of existence makes us unique: "Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened *from* its own captivation *to* its own captivation. The awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human" (70). In awakening *to* his captivation, Thompson strives to replace his unsustainable personal ecology with ghostly animal imagery at the edge of the woods, where "deer break from a mesh of dreams / and two bears burn with the dawn" (*At the Edge* 97). These animals incite within him the urge to seek a provisional language for his new relationship with nature. "I feel as words I do not know," he writes, "of immense weight, / that I would carry with me, burdens" (97). Words formed in the immediacy of the intuitive metaphor hold great weight and truth, while "the gods of this place, / this household," are "words so light, so still," that they cannot capture what lies beyond the threshold of the house (97). Increasingly, it is as though the animal must carry some of the "immense weight" for him (97).

*Stilt Jack* goes further and is much more critical and less lyrical than *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*. In Ghazal I, the poet's erratic thoughts shift from literature to trout to domesticity and finally to the erasure of everything. Thompson writes in the first couplet, "Now you have burned your books: you'll go / with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart" (107). Destroying his books releases him from cultural idioms and language-based reason. The second stanza introduces the first of Thompson's many references to fishing as metaphor: "On the hook, big trout lie like stone: / terror, and they fiercely whip their

heads, unmoved" (107). His zoopoetics realizes a trout that echoes his own state of captivity in the house. His new sensibility manifests as a pressure on words and their authority. It is a fierce creation of the imagination, not unlike Derrida's "unheard-of grammar" that is "neither human, nor divine, nor animal" (64). As the fish eclipses his own identity, Thompson is partially subsumed and therefore freed to stretch the metaphor. It allows for a metaphorical "interspecies convergence" between himself and the trout (Moe 37).

The first ghazal's trajectory undergoes a complete breakdown by the fourth couplet, however, when his language fragments into a blur of unfinished, breathless thoughts: "Think of your house: as you speak, it falls / fond, foolish man. And your wife" (*Stilt Jack* 107). Still dependent on the conventions of language, Thompson cannot escape from this recurrent imagery of his deteriorating marriage: "Kitchens, women and fire: can you / do without these, your blood in your mouth?" (107). Here the bloody mouth echoes the hooked fish of the earlier stanza. The couplet's ending with a question mark also typographically underscores the inverted hook — the human hooked on land, in language. Near the end of the poem, a "great northern snowy owl" appears as a possible curative. The owl is "the thing of things, essence / of essences," and eliminates the tension in the earlier couplets with its "whiteness," a blank presence that reflects the absence of humans (107).

Thompson's struggle to locate truth between the conceptual world in the house and the intuitive world of the animal becomes more critical in *Stilt Jack*. His conceptual metaphors break down as domestic irrelevance begins to shade into a new animal reality. "The barn roof bangs a tin wing in the wind," Thompson writes. "I'm quite mad: never see the sun" (122). His suggestion of insanity points to his anxiety in reading the world outside the human. When the barn roof is metaphorically transformed into a wing, a reminder of the earlier crow's wing, the dislocation pushes him into thoughts of insanity.

Thompson's final attempts to salvage something beautiful from his earlier conceptual thinking, despite his fears of insanity, inform Ghazal XIII. It draws into question Yeats's poetic "rook-delighting heaven," since Thompson has only "seen one crow" (*Stilt Jack* 119). His sentiment suggests that poetically heightened language, in what Nietzsche calls a "regulatory and imperative" world (146), does not dovetail but splinters.

He rejects the Romantics' idea of nature, which turned to imagination and images of the sublime, because his world is rife with anxiety.

Thompson's real crows also have a counterpoint in Georges Bataille's arguments that animals point to the gap between lived experience and language. "The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me," Bataille writes. "In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own. It is also that which is furthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me*. But this too is poetry" (22). The "unfathomable" becomes evident in the fourth couplet, in which a steer has been shot and the farmer has "dragged him home behind the tractor: / fat beef; the dark wound in the loam" (*Stilt Jack* 119); the steer becomes a stain on the earth and a metaphor for language that too easily shifts the animal into object. Later in the same ghazal, Thompson removes himself from the home, reinforcing his need to escape: "I think we should step out the door: / they're calling: men, women and dead voles" (119). If "men, women and dead voles" are calling and being called, his inclusion of the voles as a significant other establishes animals as guides to an unfathomable, darker reality: "I'm in touch with the gods I've invented," he admits. "Lord, save me from them" (119).

To supplant these greater assertions, the woods and animals must claim Thompson and unite him with the rest of nature. Allan Cooper suggests the difficulty of doing so: "One reason these poems are deceptive has to do with the careful melding of the outer world and the inner, private world of the poet; it is sometimes difficult to distinguish where one leaves off and the other begins" (38). Although the migration outside is an extensive process, teased out over several poems, one poem that demonstrates the trajectory best is "Moving Out, Moving In." It teeters between human language and interstitial space, as the title implies. The house is finally given over, and the poet enters the animals' world. In the first stanza, Thompson praises the silence: "The beauty of dumb animals / long silence" seems to grow "on the walls of our house," while "our water surrounds us with cold voices / of fish and mud" and "the woods and / flies, coons, rats draw / our heat into their dark" (*At the Edge* 82). He juxtaposes this celebrated animal environment with his own sense of how words falter as he leaves his thoughts unfinished: "the world is full of . . ." (82). Now only silence and animals return to him:

We throw words at the dark  
 and the dark comes  
 back to us; a bird  
 is still for a moment  
 in our garden. (82)

The words return, reflecting a deeper sense of darkness. The bird's silence is not dialogic but a kinship with the world that foregrounds its presence. Thompson slips further still from voiced language when he confesses that he and an unnamed companion "don't care for voices" and that "the poet names, almost / without speech" (82). Breaking the line at "almost" leaves the thought ambiguous and unfinished. His reluctance to complete the sentence suggests that there might be something viable in the silence, in the ineffable, and in his refusal to name.

Derrida's suggestion concerning our refusal to name the animal reinforces what we can see as Thompson's own sense of the unnamed in animal relations. "It would not be a matter of 'giving speech back' to animals," Derrida writes, "but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation" (48). Does Thompson, then, *almost* name the world, or does he name through an alternative language system? How we answer that question points to how broad or narrow the gap appears between animals and Thompson himself. By the end of "Moving Out, Moving In," the house is finally given over to the outside world in order to reconcile conflicting environments. His relationship with the house is no longer hierarchical but a lateral or intertwining encounter. The poem succeeds by evicting Thompson from his insular space. "You have opened the windows, the doors," he writes, "let in our animals, our sea, our woods" (*At the Edge* 82).

His turn toward the woods is nearly complete in Ghazal XXVI. "Surrounded by dirty glasses," Thompson is "caught by bad music, strange meat, / the smell of old tin" (*Stilt Jack* 132). The detailed shabbiness incites his search beyond the house for a tenable truth in the intuitive metaphor:

there are ways, and signs: the woods  
 point one way.

the words: there is a word:  
 there are words, lie about us. (132)

The words, which “lie about us,” point to his recognition of the prescribed character of conceptual thought, while the woods and signs function as intuitive metaphors. Abandoning words in favour of “dogs and the night and children / poured out in looseness” reinforces his new focus on language as a limited, yet kinetic, element to carry his thoughts (132).

In the final moments of this early transitional stage, Thompson moves beyond the “lamp-glow” and “coppery spire” of the house and deeper into the woods, where, unfortunately, his anxiety escalates (*At the Edge* 60). Buell suggests that moving into unknown territory, as Thompson now does, increases one’s anxiety. “Place consciousness and bonding,” Buell writes, “might be imaged as concentric circles of diminishingly strong emotional identification (and increasing anxiety and fear of the unknown) fanning out from the home base or home range close to which most of one’s life is led” (*Future* 72). Thompson seems to realize that to journey outward, as Buell suggests, is to risk one’s sanity as well: “Why should not young men be mad?” he asks (*Stilt Jack* 126).

### Tools in a Transitional Space: Inside to Out

The transition from house to nature is not accomplished all at once or even in a studied fashion. Rather, Thompson struggles at times to both sustain and reject his need for human contact. A key element that identifies this later transitional state is his reference to tools. Tools become a way of pressing the earlier sense of violence onto nature while retaining a physical connection to cultural and domestic spaces.

It soon becomes apparent that his transition cannot occur without a certain amount of violence, for Thompson wants “to join blood” (*Stilt Jack* 126). He chooses handheld tools — avatars for domesticity and violence — to escape his “wife’s sledgehammer” (137) and to control the animal, as we have already seen in the image of the crow’s wing nailed to the side of the barn. Living, he says, is like “a tried blade,” as he insists, on “my wounds, my death: clean axe / in new wood” (*At the Edge* 91, 93). The transition seems to be one of dying and being reborn. If, as Agamben suggests, language is the “most ancient of apparatuses” used “to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (*What?* 13), then poetry for Thompson is the abyss that words cannot express.

Perhaps not by accident, Agamben's adjectives for language also focus on functionality and the "tool-like" nature of the word. Poetry frees language even as it threatens to silence itself by testing the limits of referentiality.

When Thompson realizes that he has nothing to replace language with in order to articulate his lived experiences, existence becomes tenuous. "The human mind is nervous without its writing," Vicky Hearne argues. "[W]hen we imagine the inner or outer life of a creature without that bustle, we imagine what we would be like without it — that is, we imagine ourselves emptied of understanding" (171). Physical tools such as fish-hooks at first have to work harder as epistemological instruments in order to control or even suppress the wordless wildness. Riddled with fish-hooks, themselves shaped like question marks, with shotgun shells, knives, pole axes, and axe blades, both collections reveal how Thompson's language falters, ultimately leading the poet to question his relationship with the tools and the metaphors that he had relied on earlier.

As the poet strays farther into the animals' world, their stink, along with his own strange fear, becomes a more visceral element in the poetry. The premise behind "The Change," in *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, is that Thompson loses his axe blade "in the chopping" (89). The lost blade ruptures the balance of his domestic world; at the same time, it returns the reader to the title of the collection, suggesting that where the chopping ends intuitive metaphors begin. The first lines state that "It's in the darkness we approach / our energies" (89). Thompson's search for the blade later that night becomes his point of exit from the human world:

a cow moose blind, stinking  
with heat, moaning, and

hooving the black peat with  
such blood, such fury,  
the woods broke open, the earth

recovered her children,  
her silences, her poems. (89)

The heightened sexuality of the cow moose, as it violently tears open the earth in its rage, conveys Thompson's own release from a senseless world

that constrains the poet. The sexual power of the cow moose is also an element of her maternity. She is real and not a romanticized nature. The zoopoetics of the moose is a more primal language: she stinks of estrus and nature, the beginnings of a new truth, an unrepressed sexuality and fertility, yet an uncontrollable violence for Thompson as well. In "Ewe's Skull on the Aboideau at Carter's Brook," he moves even closer to the truth of animals harmed by human tools as he discovers a decomposing ewe on the *aboideau*, a part of the Acadian dike system. He observes that the ewe "seems to rock, gently, in / a satisfying, crushed sleep, nourishing / the iron blow across the nose" (*At the Edge* 90). Using "rock," "gently," "satisfying," "sleep," and "nourishing," the poet ironically juxtaposes the brutality suffered by the ewe with the natural health of the environment. Thompson goes on to ask the unseen slaughterer, "I wonder why you aren't pure: your pole-axe each time / in marriage with the bone" (90). Connecting violence to marriage again, he consciously distances himself from his wife and the home. This moment also reflects McKay's "second order" appropriation by suggesting that the animal is not simply killed but also left abject and therefore a cypher for "the colonialization of its death" (20).

Where the ewe's body decomposes "between these two waters: the salt scummed / with ice, thick with sea-mud, the fresh, / clear with the iron of the woods," ambivalence becomes manifest as Thompson tries to separate the animal's vulnerability from his own (*At the Edge* 90). As Bataille writes, "The animal has lost its status as man's fellow creature, and man, perceiving the animality in himself, regards it as a defect. There is undoubtedly a measure of falsity in the fact of regarding the animal as a thing. An animal exists for itself and in order to be a thing it must be dead or domesticated" (39). Whereas Thompson associates fresh water with clarity, and with tools in his repetition of "iron," the opaque salt water represents his own muddled position outside domesticated language and tools. The ewe straddles both waters because Thompson is still transitioning toward a perception of the animal other freed somehow from his own control.

### Outside and the Gestures of Silence

What the poet finally discovers at the heart of his conflict with language and animal nature is a new power in silence. Later poems move toward a greater acceptance of animal gesture, of the unspoken language

of the other world, and of a fundamental relationship that he desires to re-enter somehow. Consequently, Thompson often identifies where language becomes a hindrance to communication or, as Martinelli makes clear (84), where it simply adds to a pre-existing language of nature. Nietzsche suggests that, by “demolishing and deriding the old conceptual barriers, he [the human] may do creative justice to the impression made on him by the mighty, present intuition” (152). Thompson recognizes that he does not have an epistemological advantage through language, and this exposes language as a grand illusion.

As his earlier sense of language proves to be inadequate, he is released from its demands. “Black Smith Shop” is a good example of the transition. While Thompson watches a blacksmith shoe a horse in his dark shop, he discovers a series of sign exchanges between man and horse. These exchanges help to release Thompson from his dependence on an earlier language. The blacksmith “has no words but his laughter,” which “breaks against the sun” and can “break / chunks out of the light” (*At the Edge* 61). Thompson’s words “break” in the blacksmith’s world because they are part of an older, brittle, and fragile system:

The sun lights blue fires in the black stubble  
on his face —  
a shapeless rock  
my words break. (61)

The blacksmith’s “language” is only for the horse. His sounds are “marrowy” and use a “rhythm of grunts” that emerges from “the intense / anthracite light” (61). As the blacksmith “sinks into his labour,” which calms the horse, his “moaning speech” achieves a kind of prelinguistic communication (61). The ritual compels Thompson to seek his own domesticated language outside:

Outside again, I break open and shout,  
shout,  
and my sound comes back to me,

furry, alien, shining,  
from the horn of the new moon,  
out of this new dark. (61)

His “alien” shout, like Whitman’s “barbaric *yawp*,” helps him to break



free from the conceptual constraints that he felt earlier. Now, in the stifling darkness of the blacksmith's shop, and in his own realm of linguistic fluidity, Thompson distances himself from that earlier space of the house and its language. The "new moon" rises into a new darkness through a revelatory prelinguistic connection.

Near the end of *Stilt Jack*, in Ghazal XXXIII, Thompson must admit a certain failure in his search for an adequate silence. By seeking an interspecies convergence with animals, he reveals his own human limitations. The tone becomes more frantic, which the punctuation partially reflects. Short, incomplete sentences underscore his frame of mind: "The want. The hunting harrier / bound to earth. The fox denned" (139). Beginning the couplet with "The want," as a sentence fragment, attends to questions of desire. Desire then highlights language's restrictiveness and the ungraspable longing for the poem, like the harrier, no longer able to fly. These lines suggest that his project's wildness, in both language and animal associations, is nearly exhausted. The second couplet reinforces this as the fox is denned and silenced in the snow and earth. Thompson complicates his own position, however, by including himself with the fox and harrier in the next stanza. "I go clothed like a bear," he writes, as he moves toward "the snow sleep" (139). It is important here that the poet is still human, hidden in bear form because he cannot fully fuse with the world. His desire to escape the human condition is reinforced in his search for "snow sleep" because snow has been an analogy throughout both collections for erasure, silence, and emptiness in life and on the page.

The truth that Thompson hopes to find in silence is neither the soundless world nor a simple emptiness but a heightened awareness of the contrast between speech and silence, the contrast that characterizes the human and animal exchange. "Silence comprehends the Abyss as incomprehensible," Agamben argues in *The Open* (63). But for Thompson, it is language that maintains the abyss and prevents him from attaining new ways of expressing lived experience. His desire for a provisional language closer to animals and adequate to his perception must go unfulfilled, despite breaking down rules and grammatical constructs. In the end, there is no provisional language, for language always maintains its distance from experience. In the Nietzschean sense of silence, Thompson evokes a reverence for the absence of words throughout *At the Edge of Chopping There Are No Secrets*: "words so

light, so still" (97), "still cold" (81), "voices fading / on the narrow road" (81), "knots / of light and silence" (99), "a white stillness" (100), and "silences, / asking everything" (79). The quiet affords him a chance to pursue his own ontological inquiries while he struggles to find truth in the animal and contentment in himself.

When Thompson returns to his home and family at the end of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, his language is rich with stagnation:

[I] stand before the window  
 my eyes rimy  
 with frost, glittering  
 with owl's flights, my mouth  
 full of dead ferns. (94)

Returning from "an immense journey," the poet can no longer use the domestic language of bread, moons, and "those terrible iron tongues," with which he struggled earlier in the poem. Now, his mouth is "full of dead ferns." His time outside has left him physically changed, filled with a sense of the "owl's flight." The poet's acceptance of the unknowable and the animal other echoes the argument of animal critic Peter Steeves that, by admitting to the mystery embedded in the animal, we "return to the thing," which "is a return to the world, and thus a return *to the animal himself* — and the accompanying insecurity of not-knowing" (12).

By the end of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, Thompson does not appear to be ready to embrace fully the mystery that he has discovered, since he returns to his wife and "that deep / speech of your hands which always / defeats me" (100). His first efforts to find a provisional language have failed. Perhaps, too, he realizes that silence works only in contrast to the world of speech and poetry. Despite his failure to capture the animal world, he still gains insight into the nature of language itself.

*Stilt Jack*, on the other hand, makes a much more concerted effort in the end to extract Thompson from language itself. In Ghazal XXIII, as a last attempt to maintain control, he turns away from his reliance on the poem and consumes it: "I'm a great fish, swallowing everything: / drunk on my own seas" (129). But by Ghazal XXXV, his power weakens: "love look at my wounds, the shame I've drunk" (141). Finally, in

Ghazal XXXVI, the poet has returned from “[t]he scorch of letters written / from the poem’s isolate place,” and he has found truth at the edge of Agamben’s dark abyss. “I feel all the weight,” Thompson confesses; “have I dared the dark centre?” (142). And he returns to his initial frustration in Ghazal VIII: “I forget: why are there broken birds / behind me; words, goddammit, words” (114).

As Heidegger’s observation on Nietzsche makes clear in “The Nature of Language,” “when the poet listens to the world silence can occur, which can reveal the poet’s attainment of ‘the most intimate kinship’ with the world” (78). In a final resolve, *Stilt Jack* leaves Thompson silenced between “the sky / and the stove” (144). His project inevitably fails because the search for a metalanguage or transcendental language to crack open the phenomenological experience with animals fails. He leaves off with “these words for you,” passing the torch to the next generation of poets to seek a path for themselves (144).

Although *Stilt Jack* confronts language’s limitations, Sanger concedes that in the end “Thompson’s rage for a pure language, *poesie pure*, has changed into resignation, or defeat” (*Sea Run* 16). Yet, as we have seen, that defeat might be on the threshold of victory, where Thompson would share a sense of profundity with others, such as the trout:

Where are all our books and stories?  
I look into dark water:  
We have been there: our eyes  
join deep below the surface. (*Stilt Jack* 131)

This sort of defeat reaches beyond his own isolation momentarily to enter the animal world. Yet such moments are not sustained, and he perpetually returns to a middle ground: “I swing a silver cross and a bear’s tooth” (144). Here, wedged between the symbolic “word” of God and the symbol of the bear, his final thoughts become linked, but Thompson is unable in the end to reconcile the separation. Granting space to multiple worlds through his cross and tooth, he finds himself in a dichotomous relationship with conceptual and instinctive modes of thinking.

Thompson’s quest for language does not end in silence but fulfills itself in recognition of the distance between humans and animals. His explorations of animal metaphors eventually lead Thompson far from domesticity and into silence. Julia Kristeva observes that one who wan-

ders, as Thompson does in both of these collections, must continue to do so in order to attain a sense of closure. Seeking leaves one displaced as ideas on autonomy and dependency have lost their relevance: “A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*,” Kristeva writes. “He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. . . . [T]he more he strays, the more he is saved” (8). Thompson’s evolving roaming through zoopoetics discovers the tenuous spaces between language and the animal, and this continuous rupture might be read as his final emergence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although there is much debate over the separation of “animal” and “human” as a binary construction, I use these concepts throughout this investigation because many of my sources have written in this manner. To continue using these terms eliminates confusion and awkward transition.

<sup>2</sup> I have taken a rather different approach than Jan Zwicky on the importance of domesticity as a spatial and psychological concept. Domesticity is most often associated with interiority and a safe place to land after one cannot fuse with the world. Zwicky suggests that it is “an awareness of the desire for fusion, conditioned in its turn . . . by the inevitability of our separateness” (135). The 1960s and 1970s comprised an era of shifting masculinity, including, but not limited to, second-wave feminism, which affected young men’s ideals of masculinity, heterosexuality, male dominance, male breadwinning, and head-of-household status. Thompson’s domesticity is the place of cold comfort and regulated mundaneness.

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