



Reading Wordsworth
in the Tar Sands

*It takes a specific organization of space
to try to annihilate space.*

—DAVID HARVEY

An evening walk
An afternoon tripping
A landscape with

No *there* left there
And who knows how
To negate a negation

Turn our cups upside down
And pour sand into this
Sea of sand

Up north where woods
Are wet and moosey
Except not here not

A single green thing
In sight the site like
An abandoned beehive

Broken open its grey
Papery layers scattered
Around on the ground

The small spaces where
The bees' dark bodies
Should have been

Occupied by the things
We have already forgotten
About the pastoral tradition

We were walkers
In a dangerous time
Of storm and thaw

Took damage in our
Stride – the vacant
Air the wildered mind
Ensnarers – beat down
And scraped clean
Of the burden
Of overwhelming being

Wordsworth – I feel you too!
Though there is no mechanism
To nuance this conversation
Across the years – so I brought
Your ruined cottages your
Evening walks and Grasmere
Homing here to the Tar Sands
To stroll across northern deserts
Not knowing how well you fit –
The method of our walking
From seeing to contemplating
To remembering – is yours
Though no solitary haunts
Are here – no birds that scud
The flood – here we tread
Together the shadowy ground
Bright in the sun round
The sharp place absence occupies

The place from which I looked
The plane descending on Fort
Mac or the road we walked

Around the bounds of one dry lake
And if I thought I thought of dying
Of stone and tombs and pits

No profit but one thought
The lot of others could be mined
Yet – aerial – we might business

Halt – tempting notions – wind
Over dead water – I thought of
Clouds where none lay

Grey billows of moneyed dust
Nickel and naught caught up
In tracks of trucks – shadows

Brittle butterflies and the liquid
Crystal depths of dry grass –
Benzene and naphthenic acid sands

Without restraints or bounds
Blowing out and over this
Huge sand-ensnared world

Upper limit elegy
Lower limit pastoral
Fader glide between

Walking – we were seeing
Silvered shunts of sand lakes
Like salt flats wondering what
Winkles out in yonder mercury
Sheen? No ponds pretend to
Lighten belief – air cannon and
Scarecrow miners surround
These tailings are desolation's
Dream of crumbling decor
Whoever it was saw boreal
Swept it clean in cold accounts
Before land wastes were
Fenced former forests of sand
Thick dark thoughts leaching
Heavy metal music machines

Or death metal bands screaming
Unfathomable ruination
Inside a sealed steel cube in space

Dear Imagination – lighten up!
Your part is human protest
But there are no visionary scenes
Of lofty beauties uplifting to see
No picturesque prospects
Even if Burtynsky might
Shoot them from the air chromatic as
Abstract patterns of chemical dirt
No matter! – When in service
Of monetary gain and increasing
Industries of land liquidation
This world is anvil entertainment
Bashed First Peoples' flat land home
Still springing up thrust midst the
Fossilized dead on whose ancestral
Heat we strange grammar feed
As strange accumulations folk
Pummel pores and veins of
Saturated soils coiled up in the
Barrage we make making roads
And the slow bombardment
Of never-ending development

Tell me I'm preaching to the choir
I'll tell you I cannot live
Without the choir's solidarity

Tell me I'm flogging a dead horse
I'll tell you I feel every lash
Landing on this galloping land

Perhaps I digress – the occasion
Was a public walk on a
Public road – but the aesthetics
Of the place are pure negation –
Open maw is no landscape
Ripped wound no terrain
There is no viewpoint despite
The signs and picnic tables of
Doom's treeless playground
No play of light at sunset on
Tumescent swath of an earth
Heaving its golden breast towards
A slate sky where gawkers careen
In tin cans winged while in utter
Foundries of digital light
Pounding out templates of data
We break to browse disaster porn
Look death in its vertiginous eye
One house-sized truck after another
Blanket ourselves in perspectival
Air of vanished relations – no
This is just the vast insides
Of machine whose impetus
Money tells – no point from which
To see it whole or unveil its grasp
On brow of yonder nonexistent hill –
Just a moving power that moves itself
And us tempest-tossed within it
Sloughing boreal off its bitumen back
The calculus which compels
Its animate limbs for alien power
Assembled from our loathing
And slouching now towards Fort
McMurray and Fort McKay to
Deliver a world of dead birds
And unquenchable thirsts

Walking – we were old
Technology
Biotic and slow-moving

Dropped into circuit
Pilgrims circling on a
Healing walk walking

All day beating the bounds
Of a single vast and dry
Tailings pond

Edge of the largest mine in the
World past Syncrude and Suncor
Refineries and the vast desert

Tar Sands pastoral
Between upper limit howl
Lower limit lament

Like we needed a new thing
Could sing ourselves to
Disappear in where

Our appearance was a trapeze
Over leisure a pratfall for
Liquid asset junk pile and

Property gave out maps
Territory an escape hatch
For animals and others outside

This is where we walked and swam
Voice again humming
Drum and song Indigenous
To keep us timed timeless
Moving beneath bullets of
Economic praise spraying
Billboards and the birdless
Lakes on our left not
Lakes but pools of poison
Doing *what* beneath their beds
We can only guess leaching
Towards the Athabasca River
Flowing wide nearby on
To Fort Chip and the toxins
Captured in animal flesh there
Last human tenant imagined
Ruined shack-planet home
Barren of all future good
Water-scarred skin and wooden
Buffalo of Wood Buffalo
Cigar-shop life and mines
And ponds where ancestors lie
Don't let the new houses fool you
Told us in no uncertain

It is surrounded by fencing
And air cannons and clearly
Owns the police

Its money is heaped
In deep black banks
It has broken every treaty with life

Its ceremony is poison
It seems to have strangled the ducks
Or at least their feathered inner lives

Where ghost flight soared
Radar pond to pond
Its magnetic sojourn is lacking

Its clime is coming fast
And is difficult to resist
As merchants ship it so

This is where we walked and swam
Wrapped animal bone in
Sweet dry grass offering
And now stand in dry grass
Beside the road offering
Prayer on this first stop
First of four directions west
Second stop north drumming
Singing between two tailings
Ponds not ponds edged by sands
Remembrance that came and went
Like a bird to its grave in the water
Not water – third stop east
Past the refinery smoke and tanks
Fourth stop south and fourth
Direction – still drumming and
Still singing the elders praying
Should earth be wrenched
Throughout or fire wither all
Her pleasant habitations and
Dry up ocean left singed
And bare or the waters
Of the deep gather upon us
Fleet waters of the drowning
World – know that kindlings
Like the morning still
Foretell – though slow –
A returning day lodged
In the frail shrine of us aglow
Old technology of people together
Holding the line against changing weather

Wordsworth there are things
That are fucked up
That we live among

That we are
New life we wanted
All the clear particulars perceived

In active water and airshafts
Struck by slanting light
Energy of forests

Leapt out of animal form
And run into the quiet
Of our empty developments

Caught there electric on CCTV
Buffering then lighting up the net
And darkness under the earth

We didn't put there though
We dug its inherent
Capacity to burn and

There are banks and there are
Signs posted up high
That say "we are banks"

Dear common – lowest
Denominator – highest right
Lift light of future foliage
Here where bright burnt
Sands hinge chemical ponds
Over loosest leaves of boreal
Burnt brooks and forests for
Fatter fuel in bitumen beds
Beneath everything we see
Remove everything we can see
To reveal it – paucity of
Ideas for making homes
Making lives led as ghosts
Already haunting doomed
Earth we split and devour

Its elders bring us back
Living-idea elders drumming
Singing and walking Indigenous
To all the overburden which
Is no burden but carries
Itself echolocaic through
Leaves of this living and
Wakes while walking still
Breathing in dreamt shade

I could almost gather
Intuitive hopes for spring
Heap method of gleaning

Against Google Chrome of
Most expensive trucks
Or cheap flights to Vegas

Or the women who – treated bare
Commodities – are brought here
Or the single battered yellow bus

Bringing migrants to clean
The factories of empty futures
Grinding horizon I'm drawn to

Having stood wondering at
Far end of pipeline then
Salmonlike travelled

To its source in boreal we
Cannot erase the
Colonial continent's bitumen heart

But we can know what arteries
Liquefying histories we
Walk along coasts to mountain view

Stopped here near the
Blasted vale or just after
Lift off on gas wing south
Over seeming endless forest
I find I still need a little
Language of the Tar Sands
The knowing by walking
That tells how boreal grew
And gathered animal cohort
And plant polity over bitumen
Deposit and didn't once think
Noxious profit gas even when
Bubbling surface bogs leached
And aspen trembled – even when
Drinking its life from waters
Just thin surfaces veiling the
Pitch coppered tight beneath

What strange adapters we are!
That things will grow again
Is no consolation – the difference
Between *this* situation and
The situation of the old growth
On top of bitumen base is the
Difference between a happen
And the ecological capacity
To bear this happening and
A making and the ecological
Capacity to bear this human
Act and choice – what strange
Adapters we are – moving
Swifter than old accumulations
To chemical our hues where we
Are still that vitality that springs
A weed beside the poison road
Banks of the poison pond
Beneath arch of poison sky

Will we – delimit – ourselves
Or – ova storm of digital increase
Uncap our climate and trade
Mere earth to reach residual heights
Of the value form and receive –
A new dispensation of finitude
Forced from the very ground we have removed
And the sky we have spilt our angers on?

Let me walk a little longer at
Bodily scale – beings have always
Been here – contemplating this
Landscape and letting the flood
Of memories of the future in
Recollecting that time to come
When none of us will be disposable waste
That time somewhere near
Where the road turns at the guarded
Edge of the refinery that we were
Circumambulating a common to come
Curling towards stillness at all scales
Having walked one amongst many
Through a dangerous time and place
The withering land turning towards
Each animal's unrecountable face

– *Fort McMurray and Vancouver*
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