

# THE VILLAGE

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# PART I

## TO AND TOWARDS

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it.

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1893, p. 489)

# VILLANELLE, COALSEAM PARK

*For Frank Cook*

When I want to whisper to those long gone,  
I go to the fields of everlastings  
And hold still watching the slow yellow dawn.

A friend who has drowned, my father withdrawn,  
Both becalmed like tallships at half-masting,  
When I want to consort with those long gone.

All the ones who have been too early drawn  
By cancerous rot or the sea's clasping,  
I hold still watching the new yellow dawn.

Frank, here you are with your tall sapphire brawn!  
Wide as the flowered hills and unlapsing,  
When I want to hold court with those long gone.

Under the wattle scrub, shimmering lawn,  
With the lissome Irwin River grasping,  
I hold still watching the swift yellow dawn.

The arid lands east, the *kwongan* heath on  
To the Indian Ocean's calm lapping;  
When I want to commune with those long gone,  
I hold still watching the spring yellow dawn.

## TWO OLD TREES EMBRACE

A conjoined duo tethered at sternum,  
filmy fern-fur, fused feet, and femora  
in clique of cryptogams, etcetera;  
We concede not having nerve to stir them;  
We agree 'twould be a risk to spurn them,  
those fellow late Cretaceous genera,  
crisping our muscles like thick tempura.  
Towards one another we, therefore, turn in,  
halfdressed, chest-to-chest, stomach-to-stomach,  
locked in eons of terse conversation,  
fantasising of some younger hummock,  
free from the drear of glaciation—  
perhaps filled with the tune of a dunnock,  
anything other than this speciation.

# GONDWANAN BEECH WALK

The rawness of the air  
is rare in the prehistoric  
beech forest at Pt Lookout  
as panoramic vertebrae  
across the Bellinger Valley  
unroll fully to the Pacific &  
mosses of the mostly  
vivid verdure bandage  
buttress roots & fleece  
knurled, time-tatty trunks  
composed of convolutions  
inscribed by indentations  
& woody vines spiral  
into bearded lariats  
as dull orange fungi  
punctuate hirsute surfaces  
like solar flares flashing  
seconds before fading  
& basalt cliff faces of  
Weeping Rock seep  
iridescently with springs  
sheltering sphagnum things  
scrambling up slippery steps  
beside knotted-gnarled-rooted masses.

## METANOIA: FROM CAPE NATURALISTE

I.

Despite the lighthouse  
studding the Cape's old rostrum,  
I toe southward from  
behind lax chain link into  
my oblivion  
of sand billows and limestone  
sabres fraying shore;  
over-shoulder, for the nonce,  
the muted optics  
of the Fresnel lens, late noon.

II.

On the second night,  
I quaffed tepid Quininup  
fluids and all but  
heaved up swamp registers of  
sludge ferment and then  
the opalescent moon splayed  
open opal dunes—  
red sand blowouts where birth wails  
first entrained to sea,  
precipitated bird forms.

III.

In Biljedup vale,  
the fitful gurgle was mine,  
not the brook's, I climbed  
Rube Goldberg stairs above cliffs;

by abseiling paths,  
stopped in the shade of faces  
made stone long ago—  
Whaleback, The Womb, Joey's Nose,  
objects of prospects  
crystallised on maps, in minds.

IV.

Snug in chrysalis  
of an eider feather bag,  
I lipped tank water  
from the Moses Rock Camp stash;  
an echidna shrieked,  
became half woman, half snake;  
each and every shape,  
throbbed some way on the last day—  
me included with  
the breathing myths that live there.

V.

A surfer-brickie  
careers his ute—you'd better  
*step it up mate, I only  
go one way, out of Gracetown!*

# LETTER FROM ARMIDALE ABOUT DRIVING

There are only 2

traffic lights and very **FEW** stop signs.

Junctions are Give Ways. The street layout reflects

some brilliant new theory of town-planning focused

on enhancing *vehicular flow*. The right-hand ~~always~~

has right-of-way.

Nearly half the motorists seem to be <sup>provisional</sup>.

This morning I saw a middle-aged driver sporting a greyish

beard and a ~~P-PLATE~~ sign brandished ~~like a Scarlet~~

~~Letter~~ on the radiator grille of his **BMW SUV**. Drivers become

petulant when they must

defer to bicyclists, pedestrians, canines or *birds*.

Registering a vehicle is a *slippery* matter: the green *slip* is

for compulsory insurance and the pink *slip* for the safety

inspection required for cars over **5-years old** such as

the 1997 Toyota Starlet

I purchased from one of those bright-eyed provisionals.

It handles the potholed final 1.5 and some kilometres to my

house in Kellys Plains surprisingly well for a cheap runabout.

No, I haven't noticed any **ALFA ROMEOS**. Nor other Italian brands.



The closest city, Tamworth,

is more than one hour south on the *New England Highway*.

Now that I have new struts, I want to take a ~~relaxing~~ drive

down there one of the(o)se Sundays. After all, it is the First City of Lights (1888) **AND** the Country Music Capital of the whole of Australia.

I would rather cycle

*everywhere*, but the weather is frosty this time of year and the nights so **dark** sometimes I can barely **see** my front **tyre** and the climbs unforgiving enough to render the trip impracticable and I often work late anyhow and how would I carry **groceries** on a pushbike.

On Saturday I saw

a pink-breasted bird *sputtering* in the oncoming lane.

It is nearly spring. The longer days are *arousing* in us all the desire for <sup>flight</sup>.

After passing the bird, I had this nagging **FEELING** that I should have **STOPPED** the car. Rescued it. This letter has nothing to do with driving.

# THERE ARE AT LEAST FIVE WAYS TO GO FROM HERE

"Well sir, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here."

-Irish joke about giving tourists directions to Dublin

I.

From Newcastle, turn inland

through the Hunter Valley

coal hamlets of Muswellbrook and Scone. At Tamworth

climb the Moonbi (which Banjo Paterson wrote about).

Then continue north to Bendemeer onto the plateau &

pass through Uralla. You'll notice

the airport on your left.

II.

Or don't turn inland at all

& proceed straight up the A1

towards Myall Lakes. At Port Macquarie make a left (west)

on the B56 through Wauchope, Pipeclay & Mount Seaview.

Take care with hairpin turns, blowdowns & wandering cattle.

go past the Walcha Tennis Club

to Bendemeer (then as above).

III.

If you're not pressed for time

continue up the Pacific Highway.  
cross the Hastings & Wilson rivers. At Kempsey follow Valley Way  
through a small residential area to Armidale Road, mostly  
paralleling the Macleay River. (This will become  
Kempsey Road). At Waterfall Way turn left & pass  
Wollomombi. Caravan park is before town.

IV.

Coming from Brisbane

or Gold Coast you'll be slowed down by  
major construction on the A1. Watch out for camera traps.  
Speed limits switch abruptly from 80 to 50 to 100 kph. I got pulled  
over outside of Maclean in June this year. (Let off with a warning).  
At Grafton drop south-west through Nymboida, Clouds  
Creek & Dundurrabin.

V,

Another option is by way

of Lismore. The route is longer but cuts  
out the highway construction fiasco. Head through Mallanganee  
to Tenterfield. Left past Bolivia Hill through Moora Moora &  
to Glen Innes. Call into the Standing Stones or, 12 kilometres south,  
Balancing Rock. (Distinctive granite monoliths).  
There are (at least) 5 ways to go from here.





Coalseam Park, Western Australia. Photo Credit: JCR





Antarctic Beech Trees. Photo Credit: Peter Woodard (Wikimedia Commons)





Walking Track through Antarctic Beech Forest. Photo Credit: Alan Wigginton (Wikimedia Commons)





Downtown Armidale, New South Wales, Australia. Photo Credit: P. Lu (Wikimedia Commons)





Cape to Cape Track, Western Australia. Photo Credit: JCR.





Northern Tableland Gorges, New South Wales, Australia. Photo Credit: JCR

# PART II

## HERE AND THERE

My heart fell and flew  
The lotus bloomed in the pond  
The flower bloomed over those grounds  
The golden paddy field, the white flowers  
I will use those in my meal tonight

-from 'The Tree of Life', Rewat Phanphiphat, *Mae Nam Ram Luek*  
[*Remembrance of the River*] (2003, p. 29)

# ODE TO LUANG'S RICE PADDY

I.

After dark, if someone has died

or married, the cantillations of  
monks will drift from gold-spined

Wat Pabong across spikelets

of young rice in the paddy, admix

with frog chatter and duck jabber  
enthused by rainspew, tempered  
by tempest of Songkran

nights that are humid, but not

deliriously so—yet—fresh enough  
for bodies to drowse off, to release  
the pickling heat, which will creep

back feverishly up the spine at dawn,

malarial wind, somersaulting yellow  
confetti of ratchapruek, ruffling  
nectarine drupes of palms,

rattling teak frames thinned by

seething termites in the ever-selfless  
rice paddy where three seasons pass  
each day from Luang's terrace.

II.

At dawn, if Hmong villagers in hills

distant have been scorching slopes  
to prepare the earth for corn, potatoes, taro  
or opium, there will be smoke

hazing the paddy, stinging eyes

nose, lips and lungs but, when  
it lifts, you will see a spindly papaya tree  
with green gourd-like fruits

obscured behind a satellite dish

as a grey-haired duck-keeper with  
bare chest pours gruel for his bunch, sets  
them quacking at once,

before 8 am when *Phleng Chat Thai*

blasts from the village intercom,  
motorbikes sputter to life then buzz away  
but Luang will stay, pacing

paddy edges, collecting ferny *cha-om*

sprigs to chew fresh or cook in curry,  
his crop, taller and more golden, rising  
with wire-tailed swallow song.

III.

By noon, if no rain has fallen, then,

fish will not belly flop from shallow  
pools and ducks, too, will be subdued,  
for once, while summer

furnaces the paddy and exudes through

rough-hewn floorboards of a wooden  
house where Luang lies in a hammock  
awaiting cooler hours

muttering, from time to time, *mai pen lai*,

not a problem, nevermind, *sabai*  
*sabai*, just take your time, his hens  
with downy broods

foraging the yard, mid-road dogs

comatose outside, then long-  
legged wading birds will glide  
in from Phuket islands

to savour northern delicacies, geckos

skinks and plump winged-things  
in Luang's paddy, giving of itself  
each season, ever-selflessly.



# Ratchaphruek



*I am the golden rain tree*  
I am stalling here to see you



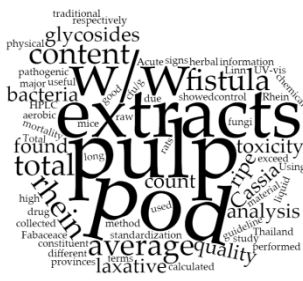
*These are my heady dok koon*  
I smell them showering the soi



*My pungent fruits bring fortune*  
I won't leave here empty-handed



*You felt that I was coming*  
Through the many-petalled tunnel?



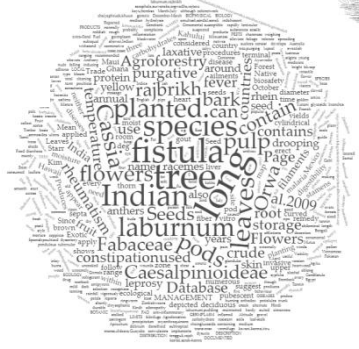
*I purge away the putrid*  
Hope this week you are on duty



*The season rages in my belly*  
You pulp the pangs of Songkran



*You are overfull with racemes*  
I am peduncled with burden



*When will cool of rain come?*  
When the seeds will be split open



*I overlean these temple walls*  
You rain petals on the naga



*Near fishmongers in their stalls*  
I stall with you just a moment



*Should I?*  
You must.

*And you?*  
I must too.



# MANG MON

after drenching rain, winged insects emerge from deep, dank burrows  
knocking themselves

senseless on incandescent lamps

all night around Pabong village,

a chaotic conglomerate hungrily mobbing 7-11s, descending on vendors  
laughing girls netting them,

men crouching with candles waiting

for luscious ones to pop up from nests,

termites enticed from grottos with the dim light and sharp hope that guide  
their short lives, by morning

dead bodies are scattered like samara

in sinks, in toilets, on ceramic floor tiles,

gaping vacantly from insides of fridges or crisply from steel trays at markets  
wondering what to do next

nearly as vexed as me about

the intensity of their genitive urges.

## KAD BANTHA

There is a wild market on the highway from Chiang Mai to Lamphun  
with wriggling coconut palm grubs for sale  
*aroi mae krub*

There are fried water bugs sweeter than scallops and shiny as roaches  
with their legs stuck together with rubber bands  
*malaeng da na*

There is a well-dressed woman peddling bitter bark from the forests  
for old men to boil up and drink as a tonic  
*yin dee tee dai roo jak*

There are piles of brown pockmarked mushrooms round as plates  
with particles of earth still on them  
*hnung roi baht ka*

There are hedtob truffles spilling like black marbles over rims of tin cups  
from the tailgates of pickup trucks  
*hnung roi ha sip baht ka*

There are bull frogs stuffed with galangal, kefir lime leaves and coconut  
then roasted on skewers over wood fires  
*khao pat kob krub*

There are strange bird carcasses plucked and sealed in clear plastic bags  
beside tubs of eels there at the wild market  
*jee gan mai krao-naa*



# JAI YEN, OR COOL HEART

Tell me of your troubles,  
But I'll not tell you mine  
Twelve hours over this fryer with no fan to ease me  
And the unfaithful villagers  
Will eat elsewhere again

My hands are sandpaper  
From cutting and grinding  
My back and feet throbbing from lifting and standing  
I cannot wash away  
The rancid grease from my hair

My husband with millions  
Borrowed in my name  
Wasted on gambling, motorcycles and mistresses  
But I should sop it up,  
An old rag, and remain stoic

Have *jai yen*, a cool heart,  
As a woman must, so come dusk,  
I pedal my rusty bike past the teak temple and yowling  
Cats in search of the dusty  
Lanes of my youth when water

Buffalo with great curved horns  
Hauled carts and ploughs unhurriedly  
And father sold rice packed in palm leaves not plastic  
As a girl dreamt of worlds beyond  
And who would take her there.

# FUNERAL FOR TULUANG YUT

It is said that Tuluang Yut rescued  
so many starving dogs  
that wads of fur clogged his lungs.

Now, after a year of waiting, gold  
leaf coats his cheeks,  
and he is ready to greet the afterlife.

Dancers come first with flamboyant  
pha nung dresses and  
sbai wraps slung over thin shoulders.

Soldiers in military garb rap mallets  
on ranat ek xylophones,  
seeing him off with baritone flourishes.

A dragon boat with elephant tusks  
and a trunk will escort  
the monk to chiwit phayhlang mrna.

At his casket, under funerary steeple,  
dignitaries lay flowers,  
then cherubs in flowing green gowns,

bearing sparkler sticks, swing down  
to the pyre, triggering  
fireworks and clouds of blue smoke.

The burning masterpiece rages until all  
that remains are bamboo  
poles overarching the crematorial stage.

The audience rises en masse and rushes  
to exit, leaving Tuluang's  
dogs to scavenge the scene for scraps.



Rice Paddy, Pabong Village, Saraphi, Thailand. Photo Credit: JCR





Rice Paddy Bird, Pabong Village, Saraphi, Thailand. Photo Credit: JCR





Golden Rain Tree, Ratchaphruek, Saraphi, Thailand. Photo Credit: JCR





Fried Insects for Sale, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Photo Credit: JCR



Hedtob Truffles, Kad Bantha Market, Lamphun, Thailand. Photo Credit: JCR





Funeral Pyre for Tuluang Yut, Saraphi, Thailand. Photo Credit: JCR

# PART III

## ELSEWHERE AND BACK

No longer truth, though shown in verse, disdain,  
But own the village life a life of pain;  
I too must yield, that oft amid these woes  
Are gleams of transient mirth and hours of sweet repose.

-George Crabbe, from *The Village* (1783, Book II, p. 25, ll. 1–4)

## CROSSING THE FJORD

Crossing the fjord of Bonne Bay  
    buoyed above metalimnion  
towards ochre tablelands,  
    towards distant desert mesas  
towards extruded toxic iron masses—  
    I am buoyed on a plastic peasecod  
slashing salted ocean slices.

I have found that this is mental,  
    as the lemur wraps prehensile  
phalanges round a limb, so I  
    steer the rudder with hitherto  
unknown articulations of toes  
    (proving something of co-evolution).

The pod nutates with each slash  
    wind hissing saline *saline!* with  
each slash, my blood, its—our blood  
    less in gradient, while under me  
a fin whale scuffs the tickle  
    with its innards, and in the fathoms  
sound the clinks of chitin creatures  
    scuttling the shallows—plumb bob!

into underwater chasm. Where  
    I came from is disappearing and  
the foreign side is nearing,  
    nearing, then at midway comes  
the sudden sway of pendulum from

indecision to elation, the giving  
over that is, at once, being born

and dying, over, that is rolling,  
roiling with the water.

## SOUTH FROM ROSEBERG, OREGON

Riding in the cab from Roseberg, Oregon,  
principles of Buddhism, kava and dawn  
blooming jasmine incense mix. I float a bit,  
entrained to the incoming highway, or am I  
moving steadily into its motionless body?

Nevermind. Nevertheless, I estimate Doug Firs,  
And take note of the passes that slow  
the bellowing machine to a creep.  
Through the karst, a glint rises, then vanishes.  
Thunderstorms pockmark the desert flats

leaving scorched prints of rainspray.  
This is what I imagine might come next:  
Bird-loosed achenes. Intertangling of  
roots. Suck of water into membranes.  
Engine torque. Seed dehiscence. All movement

speaks of the movement of water.  
Eyes that once eddied are now  
paused on the soporific curves  
of the interstate in Southwest  
burn. Creaking seat springs.  
Clay red manzanita. Jake

brake snarling over  
steel bridges and  
then the sun—I  
must place

and be

pla

ce

d

.

# DAY OF THE DOGS, OR MY KENTUCKY COUNTRY ROADS

Curled in the street and asleep on an  
empty mountain morning, where the  
bitumen meets gravel.

They don't see  
me until the last second then erupt in  
paroxysms of barking, flashing fangs  
and slobbering.

Not statues after all  
but brutus, cujo and company.

Some chained  
and pacing for an opportunity, others  
in rangy packs that circle, the alpha  
pooch scowling, as his mates look on  
gobsmacked.

I swing sticks and spit,  
shout profanities and match threats, but they  
keep pouring out from places, down  
mowed front yards, from doorways and  
fields, from beneath cars and junk-  
cramped caravans.

Some resemble  
hyenas or wild boars, with drapes of flesh  
and drool glistening at the snout.

Petite foxes  
beside big-pawed bears, a motley menagerie  
of dog-not-dogs, lurching for calves,  
Achilles or hamstrings—wagging tails

and yelping puppyly between convulsive fits,  
teasing me, sizing up their future prey.

From a porch

or shuttered window, locals yell *he won't  
bite* or waving *them sticks only makes  
him angrier* but my bare burnt legs are not  
your beast's banquet bell

and what lies beyond

these forlorn Appalachian roads, these  
subdued sideways looks, these terse spit-  
first greetings, is suddenly

extremely urgent.



# QUABBIN RESERVOIR, NEARING SPRING

I.

Spring spurs the yellow spotted salamander  
from their burrows and overland to spawn  
in vernal pools where they form a squirming  
mass, the raccoons drawn to feast as well.

We gather torches muted with red cellophane  
so as to not disturb them and plastic buckets into  
which to flop their rubbery bodies and carry  
them unscathed to safety, admonishing drivers

lest they squash the sidling creatures, yellow  
dots on top of glistening ebony undercoats,  
our breath fuming in the nearly-midnight brew  
of moon. We are voyeurs to an ancient cavalcade

that hastens en lascivious masse with warming  
hesitant rain turning bitumen to throbbing.

II.

The farmers who collect maple water  
no longer use metal buckets and spiles  
but a lattice-work of yellow, red and blue  
plastic tubes netting trees to fifty-five gallon

barrels. In the bright barren late-winter sun  
the saccharin *drip-drops* like fairy puckers  
and, through the nights, the flowing forth from  
phloem, fermentation, then the sealing off

of maple, sweet maple, simmering in sugar shacks—  
a single drop, juice of primordial seducing.

III.

Feeling old and idle, I walk a battered track  
to a curve at a delta of frost-singed grass  
and backfill, the church bell *dlungg-dlungging*  
across the valley. In these northern towns

I often think balmy days will never come,  
that I live in a forgotten frame frozen by corn-  
snow as porcupines gnaw at bark in pallor of  
truncated days, that I will always dwell in drafty

rooms with sodden firewood in hearths  
of stone, chasing my tattered shadows.

# WEDGE ACRES

In the claggy days  
of summer, my father

cleared oaks and pines  
from the triangle of sand

that on a shellacked sign  
under the front lamppost

he decreed *Wedge Acres*.  
Sweat and dust caked

blue jeans as he wrestled  
into Archimedean alignments

a series of pulleys and winches.  
I sat on the splintering

rim of a newly cut stump,  
its concentric twirls burnished

by the hot steel blade,  
time-rings gnashed

into a sawdust pile—  
cerise with chain grease.

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Dad once gave me a robot  
except he called it a *row-butt*.  
I wondered, *how does somebody*  
*row a butt?*

That was his Northern New Jersey accent—  
the *ahh* becoming *uhh*, the *uhh* becoming *arghh*,  
the ague of too many miles commuting to the Exxon oil plant,  
each day truly becoming a soothsaid curse.

It wasn't Christmas, wasn't my birthday,  
but he gave it to me anyway  
though mother warned that spontaneous gifts  
could turn a mannered son into a spoiled brat:  
a Jersey Boy, a Jersey Bot, a Jersey  
Butthead.

I placed the bot on the vacuum tube television,  
atop the pea-green rug,  
atop the concrete slab,  
atop the sandy strata,  
atop the aquifer watering the well:  
the miniature R2-D2,  
blue bands over silver dome  
arms that went up or down. Only.

But the Shelty snatched it, chewed it up,  
tore off its head: the R2-D2 eyes went blank  
as a starling's after flying blithely into a window.



He savoured it like a grisled shoulder bone,  
left ragged incisor prints daubed in slobber.

I grasped the bot from the dog's hot wet mouth,  
set it in the corner of my room, up higher this time,  
where it stared back eerily for years, head  
hanging.



Newfoundland Fjord. Photo Credit: JCR





Alvord Desert, Oregon, USA. Photo Credit: Sosobra (Wikimedia Commons)





River, Kentucky, USA. Photo Credit: JCR





Quabbin Reservoir, Massachusetts, USA. Photo Credit: David Pinter (Wikimedia Commons)





Tree Stump. Photo Credit: Tim Green (Wikimedia Commons)





Howell Township, New Jersey, USA. Photo Credit: Mr. Matté (Wikimedia Commons)

# GLOSSARY

<b>Bonne Bay</b>	bay in Newfoundland, Canada, within Gros Morne National Park
<b>Cape Naturaliste</b>	headland on the Indian Ocean in Southwest Australia and the northern terminus of the Cape to Cape Track
<b>cha-om</b>	species of legume, <i>Senegalia pennata</i> , native to Southeast Asia and eaten widely
<b>chiwit phayhlang mrna</b>	Thai term for the afterlife
<b>Coalseam Park</b>	conservation area in Western Australia known for its variety of everlasting flowers
<b>dok koon</b>	blossoms of ratchapruenk
<b>Hmong</b>	indigenous ethnic group of Chiang Mai and other parts of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and China
<b>Irwin River</b>	river of the Midwest region of Western Australia
<b>Kad Bantha</b>	wild food market in Lamphun, Thailand
<b>kwongan</b>	Aboriginal word for the unique heathland vegetation of Southwest Australia
<b>luang</b>	general Thai honorific meaning 'uncle'
<b>mang mon</b>	winged termites in Thailand swarming from May to September following rain
<b>metanoia</b>	profound transformation in one's spiritual understanding of life
<b>Phleng Chat Thai</b>	Thai National Anthem
<b>Point (Pt) Lookout</b>	mountain located in New England National Park, New South Wales, Australia
<b>Quabbin</b>	reservoir in Massachusetts, USA, built between 1930 and 1939



<b>ratchapruék</b>	golden rain tree, <i>Cassia fistula</i> , a flowering tree in the family Fabaceae, national tree of Thailand and symbol of Songkran
<b>Songkran</b>	Thai New Year
<b>Tuluang Yut</b>	venerable Buddhist monk whose funeral preparations lasted one year
<b>Wat Pabong</b>	Buddhist temple in Pabong village, Chiang Mai, northern Thailand

# Exploring Sense of Place in Poetry:

## A Critical Commentary on *The Village*

### Introduction

Although I was not born in a village, most of my adult life has been spent searching for ‘the village’—an ideal dwelling place for body and mind, a refuge from the maddening pace of globalisation, a locus of human-nonhuman exchange. Indeed, I have lived in villages—Amherst, Massachusetts and Bar Harbor, Maine, both in the USA; Albertslund, Denmark; Armidale, Australia; and Pabong, Saraphi, Thailand—but have never stayed for good. My conception of ‘the village’ thus hybridises many real and imagined—possible and preposterous—villages around the world while also juxtaposing diverse Western and Eastern topographies. Suggesting the seasonal rhythms of pastoral life, the word *village* emerged in English during the late-fourteenth century and derives from the Old French term *vilage* for ‘houses and other buildings in a group’ as well as the Latin *villaticum* for ‘farmstead’ (Harper, 2018, para. 1). In contrast to the wilderness or Outback, the village is an environment constructed over time by people and reflecting particular cultural codes that visitors—non-villagers, outsiders, newcomers, foreigners or, in Thailand, *farang*—must attempt to understand and accept.

The creative work, *The Village*, submitted for the Module 4 assessment, is a sequence of eighteen original poems and eighteen photographs (some original and some drawn from Wikimedia Commons). The work is divided symmetrically into three parts: (I) To and Towards, (II) Here and There, and (III)

Elsewhere and Back. Part I comprises six poems from Western Australia and New South Wales, whereas Part II focuses on the natural and cultural worlds of Pabong village, Chiang Mai, Thailand. The third part features six poems from Canada and the United States. My many movements—physical, metaphysical, emotional and spiritual—between continents have inspired the writing of this sequence. Themes of society and landscape, domesticity and wildness, community and individualism, stasis and movement, retrospection and immediacy, and lucidity and illegibility interweave through the poems. *The Village* also touches on ideas—and, to be certain, problems—of translation in poetry, specifically, between Australian, North American and Southeast Asian contexts but also between human and other-than-human languages. To assist readers with this prominent translational aspect, I have included a glossary of place names and non-English words at the end of the sequence in the spirit of Basil Bunting (2009) and other poets who opted to clarify obscure terms in this way.

The following critical commentary appraises *The Village* according to the three categories of voice, form and experimentation. The analysis of each category examines at least one poem from each of the three parts of the sequence. As such, I discuss more than half of the eighteen poems, although some are treated in far more detail than others. The final section and appendices outline my recent efforts to publish some of these poems in international journals. Throughout the commentary, moreover, I approach the concept of ‘sense of place’ as translocal, transnational and, accordingly, not limited to a bounded locality but, in contrast, ‘mobile, expansive,

heterogeneous, and highly relational' (Keller, 2017, p. 193). I reflect on how voice, form and experimentation mediate sense(s) of place(s) in *The Village*.

## Voice

Voice encompasses the vocality, sonicity, tone and address of poetry. According to *The Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics*, voice is 'an oral metaphor employed in the description and analysis of the written word', emerging through rhythm, rhyme, refrain, alliteration, assonance and other sonic devices (Richards, 2012, p. 1525). Put differently, voice is the 'material or medium' out of which 'soundworlds' arise and from which a speaking position develops (Smith, 2014, p. 1). Lyric voice, for instance, associates the poem's speaker with the author's perspective, presence or intention (Richards, 2012, p. 1525). The commonest and most recognisable mode of poetic voice is what John Redmond (2006) describes as the 'default poem' based on the 'I-persona' of first-person narration and generating 'a field of self-display, a channel for colourful autobiography' (p. 17). The technique of polyphony, however, destabilises the singular, unified voice of the lyric mode. Introducing complexity into poetic composition, the use of multiple voices enables the poet and reader to approach a poem as more than a linguistic channel for self-expression or egoistic gratification (Redmond, 2006, p. 36).

The sonnet 'Two Old Trees Embrace' from Part I is narrated from the first-person plural voice of two Antarctic beech trees (*Lophozonia moorei*), which only grow in Australia. The poem is a modified Petrarchan sonnet adhering to an ABBAABBA CDCDCD rhyme scheme including an octave followed by a



sestet. The traditional Petrarchan subject is the erotic desire of a male lover for an idealised yet unattainable woman, personified by Laura, with whom Petrarch was wholly enamoured (Feldman and Robinson, 1999, p. 4). The Petrarchan sestet begins with the volta, marking a passage from dilemma to resolution (Feldman and Robinson, 1999, p. 4). In the first seven lines of my poem, the trees speak of the cryptogams—spore-bearing plants such as mosses—that envelop them ‘like thick tempura’ (l. 7). In contrast to the standard Petrarchan sonnet, the volta of my poem is positioned in the eighth—rather than ninth—line as the trees begin to accept their sessile fate but, nonetheless, imagine distant places accessible to mobile creatures. The polyvocality—the trees as a ‘we’ rather than a ‘them’—reinforces the idea that plants have an inner world of thoughts, disappointments and aspirations. On another note, I originally misspelled the technical term *cryptogam* (a biological group) as *cryptogram* (an encrypted text) but have corrected this error during the editing process.

‘Two Old Trees Embrace’ demonstrates the linkages between voice (polyvocality), form (sonnet) and sense of place (the ancient Gondwanan habitats of Point Lookout, New England National Park, NSW). Using the plural ‘I-persona’, the trees evoke their own sense of the natural environment that they have inhabited for centuries. ‘Jai Yen, or Cool Heart’ from Part II also deviates from the confessional and observational mode of the ‘I-persona’ by adopting the first-person voice of an elderly Thai woman. In writing this poem, as an English-speaking Anglo-American male outsider contemplating gender inequalities in Thai society, I attempt to disrupt the dichotomised gendering of

poetic texts as either masculine (authored by a man with a 'male voice') or feminine (composed by a woman with a 'female voice') (Wheatley, 2015, p. 86). In fact, this is the first poem I have ever written from a woman's perspective. The focus, moreover, departs from my usual preoccupation with the natural world and wilderness often to the exclusion of culture. The woman articulates her daily corporeal and emotional hardships. The social expectation of *chai yen*—maintaining a cool heart—demands that she should appear unaffected, unfazed, detached and stoic notwithstanding the degrading behaviours of her community and family. She finds refuge in her own sense of place before motor vehicles and petroleum products invaded the village and when she still had hope for the future.

Part III reverts to a more conventional first-person voice but 'Artificial Intelligence', for instance, makes use of lyric peculiarities ('a Jersey Boy, a Jersey Bot, a Jersey // Butthead' (ll. 13–14)) and narrative anomalies. A memory of my father's (mis)pronunciation of *robot* as *robutt* provokes a chain of associations related to childhood, domesticity, animality and frustrated ambition: 'the *ahh* becoming *uhh*, the *uhh* becoming *arghh*' (l. 6). I evoke sense of place in the poem through details of the inside of the house as well as the 'sandy strata' (l. 18) beneath it. The poem discloses scales of dwelling—from site and locality to region and planet, and towards the galactic with the references to the robot R2-D2 from *Star Wars* (Heise, 2008). I drafted this poem for Dean Parkin's writing exercise in Module 3 but have revised it considerably for Module 4.

## Form

Generally speaking, *form* refers to the structure or shape of a poem, apart from its content, including microscopic features (lineation, punctuation, capitalisation and rhyme scheme) and macroscopic patterns identifiable as sestinas, terza rimas, villanelles, blank verse and so forth (Wolfson, 2012, p. 497). Despite their relative stability over time, traditional forms, such as sonnets, evolve from generation to generation: 'if a form is to live, its adjustment is not just a possibility, it is a necessity' (Redmond, 2006, p. 115). The question of what constitutes form, however, looms large, particularly with the increasing development of experimental and interdisciplinary techniques by contemporary poets. As Chivers (2012) points out, the concept of form ranges from odes and villanelles to poetic texts using only one vowel and works generated with computer programming. For *The Xenotext* (2015), as a case in point, poet Christian Bök developed lab-based genetic techniques to enable bacteria to compose Petrarchan sonnets and free verse in response to his source poems. Bök's work embodies 'the promise and opportunity of the blank page' and exemplifies the assertion that 'to write a poem is to create, or even to become, a new form of life' (Redmond, 2006, p. 1).

Written in free verse, 'Gondwanan Beech Walk' from Part I is a walk-text that deploys a visual-concrete approach to bring the materiality of the walking track to life on the page. The poem is free of capitalisation and punctuation, except for an opening 'T' and concluding full stop, respectively. The frequent occurrence of ampersands and gerunds evokes the embodied—and, oftentimes, physically exacting—experience of trekking continuously without

stopping to rest. The curves in the poem approximate the walker making a turn. What's more, the pronounced gap between the title and first line suggests the vertiginous space negotiated by walkers in the high-altitude environment of Point Lookout. Here, sense of place arises through the interplay of poetic form, somatic diction (e.g., 'panoramic vertebrae' in the fourth line) and topographical precision (Point Lookout, Bellinger Valley and Weeping Rock). Comparable formal strategies play out in 'Wedge Acres' from Part III, which narrates a childhood experience of sitting on the stump of an oak tree freshly cut down by my father. The poem's macroscopic features conjure the severity of the blade. Couplets and short lines produce a splintery effect throughout the mise-en-page. Minimal punctuation in tandem with tactile-aural word choices—e.g., *shellacked* and *gnashed*—build momentum towards the final image of a sawdust pile sprayed with chainsaw grease.

In writing Part II of *The Village*, I attempted to adapt—or, at least, appreciate and draw inspiration from—traditional Thai poetic forms, namely, hlong, chan and kap (Hudak, 2017). For instance, kap chabang is a form devised in the nineteenth century using sixteen-syllable stanzas and encouraging Buddhist moral values. Although I have not yet been able to transpose aspects of Thai metre to my own writing, the poem 'Mang Mon' adopts the alternation between the long and short lines that I have noticed in some English translations of classical Thai poetry. This lineation, at the same time, mimics the frantic flight patterns of the winged insects following rain. Also from Part II, 'Kad Bantha' employs three-line stanzas with a long opening line and shorter second line followed by an abbreviated third line presented in Thai



and conveying phrases I have heard sellers utter at markets. In the first stanza, *aroi mae* means 'very delicious'. The addition of *krub* indicates that the seller is male. As a further illustration of the value of form, when I began drafting 'Funeral for Tuluang Yut', I felt overwhelmed by the sensory complexity of the scene that I recalled as well as the multiple components of the ceremony that I neither understand nor have the lexis to describe. My use of non-rhyming tercets helped to ease the feeling of being entirely out of my depth. The form enabled me to control the rapid succession of images, sensations and emotions triggered in both experiencing and remembering the monk's funeral. Each tercet serves as a manageable phenomenological unit: 'A dragon boat with elephant tusks / and a trunk will escort / the monk to chiwit phayhlang mrna' (ll. 13–15). On the whole, Part II addresses the intricacies of translation and evolves from an ever-expanding sense of place mediated through my reading and writing of poetry. As Wheatley (2015) reminds us, 'the circulation of texts between languages and across contexts is a part of any healthy tradition' (p. 126) and, I would add, any healthy writing practice.

## Experimentation

To an extent, all poets experiment with language. Some poets, however, push back vigorously at what is recognised normally as poetry, language and discourse. An experimental poem tends to eschew framing devices and legible narratives in favour of the indecipherable, fractured, disrupted, mysterious and impossible (Wheatley, 2015, p. 129). Some features of the experimental mode are parody, pastiche, parataxis and 'intense engagement with lexis' (Wheatley,

2015, p. 114). The poet Ian Gregson likens an experimental poem to 'a chimera that combines the familiar and the unfamiliar, the world and an interpretation of the world' (qtd. in Wheatley, 2015, p. 111). For poet-critic Joan Retallack (2007), moreover, 'the launching question of every formal experiment catapults one towards the unknown (often improbable) possible' (para. 14). Retallack (2007) observes that the so-called 'experimental' verse of early-twentieth-century poets, namely, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, is marked by 'descriptive discontinuity' and the 'resignation of our usual demands for visualisation and causality' (para. 6). Wheatley (2015), furthermore, characterises a typical poem by Prynne as 'a mysterious fetish object, designed for unknown rites and addressing us in an unknown language' (p. 113). Some experimental poetry engages with other art forms to reconstitute particular literary traditions. In Forrest Gander's *Core samples from the world* (2011), for example, photography amplifies the poet's ethical concerns around 'traveling (literally as well as imaginatively) to other continents and cultures, generating through "the roads you take" another version of a global sense of place' (Keller, 2017, p. 193).

Without wholly rejecting legibility and narrativity, 'Letter from Armidale about Driving' from Part I experiments with typography through its erratic use of underlining, bolding, strikethroughs, elisions, multiple font types and *scriptio continua*. Some of these typographical features are apparent in the final line of the concluding stanza: 'This ~~letter~~ has nothing todowithdriving'. Producing an unsettling reading effect, my poem could be described as a fractured verse-letter or disrupted epistle. Redmond (2006) observes that epistolary poetry tends to move between 'subjects trivial and serious', 'discourages pretension'

and calls attention to the compositional moment (p. 124). In this poem, trivial details—such as cumbersome NSW motor vehicle registration requirements—intersect with more grave themes of death, technology, ethical responsibility and nonhuman life. Typographical manipulation becomes ‘performative’—not only describing an action but performing that action (Bennett and Royle, 2014, p. 262)—when, for example, the penultimate stanza intensifies the description of the speaker’s limited night vision through the small, bold lettering of the words *dark*, *see*, *tyre* and *groceries*. These typographical oddities, moreover, disclose the speaker’s thoughts and generate contradictory meanings. As a case in point, with its strikethrough, the line ‘it is ~~nearly~~ spring’ (stanza 7, l. 3) expresses the speaker’s realisation, in writing the letter, that it is not late winter but early spring in Armidale. The strikethrough additionally reveals that the letter-writer is perhaps new to Australia where spring occurs from 1 September to 1 December. On reflection, it would be difficult to reproduce these typographical effects in a performance of the poem, thus affirming that particular textual features work on the page only.

Included in Part II, ‘Ratchaphruek’ is a polyvocal poem that employs non-rhyming couplets to narrate a short conversation between two speakers: a golden rain tree (*Cassia fistula*) and a motorcyclist. The poem, moreover, experiments with the inclusion of word clouds condensing taxonomic, ethnobotanical and ethnopharmaceutical information about the tree extracted from the following online sources: [Agroforestry Database](#), [Centre for New Crops and Plant Products](#), [Encyclopedia of Life \(EOL\)](#), [ENVIS Centre on Medicinal Plants](#), [National Health Portal of India](#) and [Plants for a Future](#) as well as the

peer-reviewed journals [Pharmacognosy Research](#) and [Pharmacognosy Journal](#). The word clouds distill the technical descriptions of the tree down to essential terms (e.g., fistula, fruit, stems, pods and pulp) while also introducing texture into the mise-en-page with shapes that visually approximate the flowers, or *dok koon*, of the tree. The word clouds, moreover, resemble fingerprints, suggesting the individual persona of the tree encountered by the motorcyclist. My decision to include word clouds was serendipitous. I initially imagined a poem that structurally evoked the pendulous yellow racemes of *C. fistula*—as viewed by the motorcyclist from below—but was unable to actualise this vision through text circles and word art in MS Word. I opted, instead, for a concrete approach incorporating word clouds as ‘mysterious fetish’ objects, as Wheatley (2015, p. 113) would put it. The composition in its present form mimics a macro-photo-scale perspective on the flowers, as depicted in Photo Sequence II.

In Part III of *The Village*, ‘South from Roseberg, Oregon’ narrates—in the default mode of the lyric ‘I-persona’—a hitchhiking incident in a lorry. The poem, however, begins to deteriorate structurally in the fourth stanza. The stretching of the word *placed* over the last four lines underscores sense of place as translocal, mobile and relational. The attenuation of the final two stanzas, furthermore, suggests the intensity of the arid environment through which the truck passes as well as the role of ‘multiscalar perception’ (Keller, 2017, p. 53) in generating sense of place. My experimentation with fractured syntax within an otherwise traditional lyric narrative was inspired by American poet Ed Roberson’s collection *To see the earth before the end of the world* (2010), which



ruptures textual flow to reinforce the perceptual discontinuities that mark the experience of natural environments.

## **Editing and Publishing...and Editing**

I conclude my commentary with a brief overview of the process of arranging, editing and publishing poems from *The Village*. To begin with, a prominent feature of the work is its even three-part arrangement based on deictics: To and Towards, Here and There, and Elsewhere and Back. Commonly used in topographical poetry, deictic language provides 'textual cues' directing the reader's attention to the speaker's spatial or temporal position (Verdonk, 2002, p. 35). Organised around these deictic signals, the sequence progresses from Australia to Southeast Asia to North America. The inclusion of six poems and six photographs in each part reinforces the idea that each 'place'—country, region, continent—is no more important than the others in engendering topaesthesia. To be sure, what is most vital to the sequence is the passage between these places.

I have also begun to send some of these poems to international journals. 'Ode to Luang's Rice Paddy' has been accepted by *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English*, a peer-reviewed journal established in 1980 and publishing scholarly articles, book reviews and creative work. I selected *SARE* because of its focus on Southeast Asia but also because I noticed that the Poetry and Fiction section of its latest issue is underpopulated. In fact, only one poem is featured! I thought, 'perhaps they are looking for creative content and would be more responsive than poetry-only international journals that are often swamped

with submissions'. I decided to send the ode because of its more traditional pastoral quality in contrast, for instance, to the experimental 'Ratchaphruek'. These hunches were correct. Including the time required for blind peer-review, the poem was accepted within a week. The unidentified reader observes that 'the rhythm and musicality of the piece undergirds the entire poem with a well-controlled hand; it is, at once, uplifting and deeply contemplative' (see Appendix 1 for the full report). With this confidence boost, I have since submitted poems to the journals *Rambutan* and *Anak Sastra* with plans to send work to *Asia Literary Review* and Australian magazines.

The recent case of 'Ode to Luang's Rice Paddy' reveals the synergies between editing and publishing. Following suggestions from peers in the online workshop for Module 4, I decided to remove 'nasally' as a descriptor of 'cantillations' for fear of adjectivitis. The *SARE* reader, however, quoted this line as textual evidence of the poem's movement between the micro and the macro. As a result, I have preserved 'nasally' in the *SARE* version but have dropped the adjective in the version included for assessment. On another note, the editor of *SARE* astutely pointed out the repetition of 'by' in the first stanza (see Appendix 2 for her email). Having revised the poem numerous times before submitting it, I am still puzzled about my oversight. This example demonstrates the importance of constructive criticism and the value of incorporating feedback into a poem.

## Final Thoughts

Grounded in the idea of place-in-motion, *The Village* explores the self-realisation made possible through visiting culturally and geographically distant landscapes. Although the sequence is about my quest for ‘the village’—a state of being and becoming rather than a fixed locality—I have attempted to avoid exoticising the human and nonhuman residents of these places. In other words, I have chosen to resist the ideal of pastoral harmony and accept that there are problems in ‘the village’: death, drugs, violence, pollution, corporatisation, boredom, disorientation, isolation, community disintegration and so on. These problems, nonetheless, should not preclude one from searching for better ways of living sustainably on the planet and more equitably with one other.

## Appendix 1

### External Reader’s Report

[SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English](#)

Poem Submitted: 22 May 2018

Poem Accepted: 28 May 2018

What is most immediately apparent in this poem is its lyrical nature, quite fitting as an ode to nature (here, glorifying Luang’s paddy field in Luang Wat Pabong). It is very beautifully done, and I like it particularly for its evocative and lively description of the paddy field against the backdrop of Wat Pabong. The rhythm and musicality of the piece undergirds the entire poem with a well-controlled hand; it is, at once, uplifting and deeply contemplative.

Vivid images and nature descriptions bring immediacy to the poem, again quite in line with the ode's drawing both an 'intellectual' and 'emotional' response from the reader. The focus on Luang's paddy field (in 3 stanzas) moves effortlessly back and forth between the micro (for eg., 'frog chatter and duck jabber') to the macro (for eg., 'nasally cantillations of monks drift from gold-spined / Wat Pabong ...'). The background context is also set in the 3 stanzas' movement from 'after dark' to 'at dawn' to 'noon', and within these demarcations come the detailed descriptions associated with each that give the poem its vivid liveliness. Time's linearity is cast against the underlying circularity of a deeper, more encompassing sense of 'time' that remains the same, season in and season out.

Without needing to go into further detail, I think this is a strong piece. I was happy to read it. Just a note: 'enthused by rainspew, tempered / by tempest of Songkran'. As far as 'enthused' is concerned, I personally dislike these so-called verbs, but that is probably neither here nor there.

## Appendix 2

**Email from Editor, Sharmani Gabriel**

[SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English](#)

Dear John,

I trust this finds you well.

I have received the reader's report on your submission, which endorses my own view of your poem. The comments appear after your poem in the attached file. We are very happy to carry your piece in our forthcoming July issue. I would



need a bio blurb from you for our Notes on Contributors' page. The reader makes a comment on the use of 'enthused' (in the second stanza). I am very happy to let you have the final say on this. I have another question though about this line—'by' is duplicated in line four. Is this an error? Thank you so much again for thinking of *SARE*. It's a privilege to carry your poem. All very best wishes, Sharmani

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