

***The Sundered Fence, a Gasp of Emeralds***  
***and the Scent of the Knowable Journey:***

*An exploration of the poetics of the Californian  
landscape in recent work by Adrienne Rich,  
Brenda Hillman and Jane Hirshfield.*

## *Contents*

Introduction and Critical Paradigms	3
Adrienne Rich	11
Brenda Hillman	21
Jane Hirshfield	33
Conclusion	41
Notes and References	42
Bibliography	46
Appendix I – Interview Transcript - Hillman	48
Appendix II – Interview Transcript - Hirshfield	51
Appendix III – Copies of Poems – Rich	55
Appendix IV – Copies of Poems – Hillman	56
Appendix V – Copies of Poems – Hirshfield	57

## Introduction and Critical Paradigms

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To examine the work of contemporary California-based poets in this essay I have decided to use the ideas and practices of psycho-geography as a critical reference point. I am interested in exploring how these poets use and react to the physical environment, both urban and rural, in their work as this is a common practice in my own writing and one which I feel well qualified to examine using knowledge from my first degree in Geography, and as I am very familiar with California, having lived there for two years. Throughout I will also signal points of similarity between and difference from these writers' poetical practises, themes and concerns and my own in relation to my collection *The Wall Menders*<sup>1</sup>.

In order to elucidate the critical context I will first introduce some of the ideas and history of psycho-geography. I then go on to describe psycho-geography in a literary context in the work of some antecedent poets, namely Blake and Wordsworth, before turning to the more recent work of poets from California and my collection.

Coverly<sup>2</sup> introduces psycho-geography as a strangely familiar term (just so for any readers of Will Self's *Independent* column of the same name<sup>3</sup>), which is not capable of precise definition. He notes that it is a shifting series of interwoven themes including literary movements, political strategies, new age ideas and avant-garde practices. He describes its origins in Paris in the 1950s with Guy Debord and the Situationists, where it was intended as a tool to be used to transform urban life for aesthetic and later political ends. It is a means of exploring the behavioural impact of the urban environment i.e. the point at which geography and psychology collide. Coverly quotes

Debord's definition<sup>4</sup>: 'The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'.

Today, he notes that it is mainly a literary response to our modern technological landscape, citing the works of Ballard, Sinclair and Ackroyd, and it is in this context that I want to use psycho-geography in this essay. Coverly's definition chimes with Sampson's recent editorial in *Poetry Review*<sup>5</sup>, an edition entitled *Psycho-geographies*. She notes that this is:

hardly an original term. But what else to call the complex set of dialectics, not one but many, by which a personality and a place it inhabits shape each other? We're formed by culture, historical moment, and the physical setting in which we find ourselves: just as we in turn contribute to social and family culture, and work upon our environment - .

Coverly identifies four predominant characteristics of psycho-geography as follows: firstly, the activity of walking where the purpose is aimless wandering, the *dérive* or drift, observing and reporting back. As the act of walking in a city is often difficult, the terrain hostile to the pedestrian, it is seen as an act of sub-version, where the view at street-level can challenge the official representation of the city as a place when one can move quickly. The *dérive* involves cutting across established routes and exploring marginal and forgotten parts of the city, including mental journeys around one's mind or room when the city has become too hostile.

Secondly, the spirit of political radicalism, where psycho-geography involves a sense of provocation and trickery and the use of ironic humour. Thirdly, it aims to overcome the banal, drab monotony and sees the city as a site of mystery. In that sense psycho-geography seeks to identify the true nature of what lies beneath the flux of

everyday life. In surrealist terms, this is to transform our everyday experience and replace our mundane existence with an appreciation of the marvellous.

Finally, Coverly notes, that psycho-geography is pre-occupied with excavating the past. There is a sense in psycho-geography that there is an eternal landscape underpinning our own and a belief in the *genius loci* or sense of place with which we have some connectivity.

Coverly notes poetic antecedent psycho-geography in the work of Blake. Specifically he looks at 'London' and 'Jerusalem'. From the latter Coverly quotes Blake: 'My streets are my Ideas of Imagination'. He describes Blake as 'a walker, a wanderer whose poems describe the reality of eighteenth century street life, but are overlaid by his own intensely individualistic vision to create a new topography of the city.'<sup>6</sup> Thus in 'London' from *Songs of Experience* he notes that Blake 'wanders the streets witnessing the eternal features of urban life' and superimposes on them his own visions. Hence in the cries of infants and every voice Blake hears 'the mind-forg'd manacles', in the sigh of the hapless soldier he sees blood run down the palace walls and so on.<sup>7</sup> This remapping of the city then, is, according to Coverly, a rallying cry to overthrow the power structures of the day. Ackroyd<sup>8</sup> agrees with this analysis, calling the poem an expression of Blake's own convictions and revolutionary enthusiasms and written in radical code words, especially 'charter'd'.

To extend Coverly's antecedents I would add Wordsworth's writing about the affect landscape has on his emotions. Nature is never used solely for background effect or scene setting by Wordsworth. It always has an important role to play in the poems as it has a significant impact on his emotions and feelings. One of the many examples of

this is the passage in Book I of *The Prelude*, where, rowing on a lake in a stolen boat, Wordsworth becomes aware of the awesome and genuinely frightening quality of nature:

When from behind that craggy Steep, till then  
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff  
As if with voluntary power instinct,  
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,  
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff  
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,  
With measured motion, like a living thing,  
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned...<sup>9</sup>

To provide a more recent illustration, Californian-based Solnit uses many of the terms of psycho-geography in her writings on losing oneself and walking, which similarly explain the impact of landscape on the writer. For example, she concludes that ‘writing is its own desert, its own wilderness’<sup>10</sup>, by which she seems to mean that writing is a place full of possibilities, away from the bustle of cities and other lives, of untamed nature and wildness where experimentation and discovery can take place.

In Coverly’s analysis psycho-geography rarely strays out of London and Paris, the two cities it calls home. However as noted from Wordsworth’s *Prelude* above, and despite the fact that he also walked around the streets of London and Paris in making his ‘atlas of the making of a poet’<sup>11</sup>, as Solnit describes it, to confine psycho-geography to the urban environment and these two cities alone is to constrain its possible uses. Solnit, for example, in describing the songlines of Australia’s aborigines notes that these are ‘the most famous examples conflating landscape and narrative. The songlines are tools of navigation across the deep desert, while the landscape is a mnemonic device for remembering stories: in other words the story is a map and the landscape a narrative’<sup>12</sup>.

This is a helpful extension of the ideas of psycho-geography, even if the songlines themselves are not that well known outside Australia or the readers of Bruce Chatwin.

Psycho-geography, as a critical term in the poetic context, seems to be gaining in currency: the 2009 Spring issue of *Poetry Review* contains articles and a number of poems under this banner. It is interesting to consider why this is so and why the term Romanticism, which is, to my understanding, psycho-geography by another name to answer Sampson's question, is unfashionable in modern poetic parlance. There is certainly some element here of rebranding, of reinvigorating the ideas of Romanticism and refreshing them for the current age by finding new terminology and definitions and by reclaiming critical and artistic space from the past, applying it in new ways to the modern world, such as the urban context. This is especially so because, even though there is much more to Romanticism in terms of changing the modes of poetic expression, and political radicalism, it is forever associated, at least in the public mind, with the Lake District, clouds and daffodils<sup>13</sup>.

Pathetic fallacy will not really fit the bill as an all encompassing term either, as this tends to be associated with anthropomorphism (such as the speaking flowers of Tennyson's 'Maud') and personification of objects, rather than a means to explore the effect of landscape on the poet in a wider sense. Even so, some of the poems examined in this essay do use this rhetorical device. Despite its flaws, psycho-geography will have to serve.

In this essay then I am extending out from the city and moving a long way from Europe to explore a wider application of the ideas and techniques of psycho-geography in the current poetry of California. I am interested in exploring whether the effects and

uses of cityscape and landscape is psycho-geography, or something else, in an environment that I came to know well during the two years (2001-2003) I lived in Northern California and focussing on poetry published during this period. I will also illustrate the thematic and other echoes from these poets in my own work.

The broad critical paradigm that I apply to analyse the use and effects of cityscape and landscape is as follows:

- Non-relevance, where, whilst ostensibly about the city or landscape, this is mere detail, a backdrop and the poem could happen anywhere in a similar type of location. In practise I am not going to analyse poems where this applies;
- Relevance, where the cityscape or landscape response is either a starting point for the poem or an important detail in its context;
- Essential, where the poem could not happen anywhere else, analogous to a site-specific art work; and
- Essence, a more complex and harder to describe notion where the landscape is integral to the poem. It is in these kinds of poems where psycho-geography, arguably, truly resides.

Hirshfield's short, but very packed poem, 'Tree'<sup>14</sup>, inspired by the regrowth of the forests around her home just north of San Francisco, illustrates the notion of essence in that without the tree there is no poem. It is worth quoting this poem in full:



## Tree

It is foolish  
to let a young redwood  
grow next to a house.

Even in this  
one lifetime,  
you will have to choose.

That great calm being,  
this clutter of soup pots and books-

Already the first branch-tips brush at the window.  
Softly, calmly, immensity taps at your life.

This is not just any tree; it is a Californian Redwood (one of two possible species), a very special natural emblem for the state. *Sequoia dendron* (the Giant Sequoia) and *Sequoia sempervirens* (the Coastal Redwood) are only found in certain forests in California and Oregon and represent very special elements of the landscape that have inspired writers from John Muir (environmentalist and philosopher) in the nineteenth century onwards<sup>15</sup>. Hirshfield uses the actual form of the tree in terms of trunk and base to lineate her poem, again illustrating its use as essence, alongside the meaning of the poem, even if she uses an unnecessary abstract noun in the last line: without the tree there is no interaction with the poet and no realisation of the rest of the world beyond the self.

I see a number of similarities between Hirshfield's poem and my short poem 'Glacier':

Summer, and the ice shrinks faster than ever  
meltwater's part crystal in its hurry to be free.

We tell the children not to whinge on the switch-  
backed ascent, that they must see the glacier,

feel its gritty surface, touch until their finger-tips  
are stuck, iced-in. For their grandchildren they need

to stare into the blue heart, and listen.

Like Hirshfield's 'Tree', 'Glacier'<sup>16</sup> is focussed on one natural phenomenon and its visceral effect on those experiencing it, in this case my family. Without the glacier there is no poem, it is the whole purpose of the work and the walk. I use similar domestic images in terms of whinging children compared to Hirshfield's soup pots and books, and I chose a solid (long-lined) and layered lineation (couplets) to reflect the weight and build up of the glacier ice in the same way Hirshfield's lineation reflects the tree. Additionally, 'branch/finger-tips' and touch are important to the action of both poems.

Before moving on to look at Adrienne Rich's collection *Fox*<sup>17</sup>, Brenda Hillman's *Cascadia*<sup>18</sup> and Jane Hirshfield's *Given Sugar, Given Salt*, I want to provide a general introduction to my collection, *The Wall Menders* and its psycho-geographical credentials. This book was conceived in two parts: the first, subtitled *Taking a hammer* focuses on the destruction of the planet, and the second, subtitled *Mortar and lime*, deals with environmental repair and alternative ways of living in the world. Thus the book has one overarching eco-poetical theme and takes the reader on an emotional journey and has first a downward, then an upward emotional arc. Hillman too uses one grand thematic conception in her collection as I explain below. In this sense *The Wall Menders* as a totality is a psycho-geography. More than that, I use a number of the elements of psycho-geography in individual poems, especially geomorphological imagery and metaphor, which in my writing has always been a ready, easily accessible

currency<sup>19</sup>. I will illustrate these in the succeeding chapters, along with their resonances in Rich, Hillman and Hirshfield.

## Adrienne Rich

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To explore notions of psycho-geography in *Fox*, I look first at ‘Waiting for you at the Mystery Spot’<sup>20</sup>. In this poem it is people other than the speaker who do the walking ‘clambering’ (perhaps friends or family, Rich does not say in the poem): she rests on a redwood bench in the car park alongside picnicking visitors; as well as the roses that similarly clamber. As she wonders whether anything at the Mystery Spot is ‘occult’, using a quote “the mystrai streamed” from a translation of an Homeric hymn (presumably), she knows that in the car park everything is grounded, rational, normal, from the purses and bumper stickers in the shop, to even the ‘tiny beings flashing around in the sun’, which are only excited children with their families nearby. However this speculation leads to a revelatory observation. In a drift of thoughts, a kind of mental travelling, from ideas about the Mystery Spot, she says:

I sat listening to voices watching the miraculous migration  
of sunshafts through the redwoods the great spears folding up  
into letters from the sun deposited through dark green spots  
each one saying  
I must draw away I love you but  
Believe, I will return

Whether she means that literally the letters were spelled out on the ground (nothing, I suppose, is impossible in this particular location), or letters meaning postal messages, or rather and more likely that this is what her imagination saw and felt does not matter to the meaning of the poem. For the speaker this is a moment of anxiety and disruption, although Rich does not say this directly, it can be inferred by contrast from the next line ‘Then happiness!’ as her friends/family return.

Rich's reference to the *mystai* initiates in the death and birth rituals of ancient Greece celebrating the restoration of Persephone to Demeter, represents not only the restoration to her of now initiated family/friends, but also refers to the emotional range of her experience while they were away, as the *mystai* were apparently subjected to various ceremonies inducing terror and joy as part of the rebirth rituals<sup>21</sup>.

In this poem then, landscape, specifically the sun making patterns through the redwood trees, in a place where the laws of physics are already mixed up, 'tricks with gravity and horizon', disturbs the observer, reminding her of the unsettling emotions of lost love and she uses the language of mystery to describe it ('*mystai*', 'occult', 'miraculous', 'wonder'). This layering of the unusual landscape behaving abnormally as to both gravity and the sun through the trees, and the poet's emotions and reactions to it, is then an example of the essence of psycho-geography.

Similarly my poem 'Suffolk Beach'<sup>22</sup> deals with disturbances in both the landscape and in the poet's mental state. Here I describe the disorientation I feel in the east of England with the rising sun disturbing my westerly-facing world view: 'The sun on the sea should be always setting/.....not this disconsoling birth of light'. It is a metaphor for dislocation and the essence of psycho-geography. I used couplets to lineate the poem as representative of the slippage of the earth, one plane with another, although I do not usually tend to the concrete in my arrangement of words on the page.

In 'Signatures'<sup>23</sup>, in response to overt sexism from a WWII veteran, Rich explores the idea of country thus: 'an old woman's best country is her art'. Using an extended metaphor she suggests women climb rock faces avidly, leading her to ask 'those scrapings on the rocks/ are they a poet's signature?' (or those of a mother

carrying her baby on her back). In this poem then, whilst landscape certainly features it is neither the essence nor essential to the poem, but rather the metaphorical conceit in its argument. As such psycho-geographical elements are largely absent.

The same is true for the highly philosophical poem ‘Noctilucent Clouds’<sup>24</sup> where the truck stop is any such ‘futureless motel’ and stands for discovery and revelation:

Everything below  
must and will betray itself  
as a floodlit truckstop out here  
on the North American continent stands revealed.

It plays no greater part in the argument of the poem than as a foil.

‘Fire’<sup>25</sup> by contrast shows some of the elements of psycho-geography in the city in that it deals with a marginalised subject, Martin Burnhard (note the appropriateness of the name Rich chooses to the title of the poem) ‘pushed-out and living/ across the river’ and born on February 29<sup>th</sup> ‘almost without birthday’ and the subject of the poem’s hate crime: ‘incendiaries abound/ who hate this place stuck to their foot soles’, who is left after the fire ‘like a black spider on its back’. Also, the poem attributes to Martin the ability to observe the everyday environment and find it special, thus making him in our terms here a psycho-geographer:

I can tell you Martin knows beauty  
from the frog-iris in mud  
the squelch of ankles  
stalking the waterlily  
the blues beat flung across water from the old city.

The final lines in the second part of the two part poem ‘Second Sight’<sup>26</sup> is a description of psycho-geographical practice in that the woman protagonist:

Practised in urban literacy (she)  
traverses and assesses streets and bridges

tilting the cumbrous ornamental sewer lids ajar  
in search of reasons underground  
which there why this must be.

This a neat summation of Rich's brief meditation on the lives of particular women in a cityscape; the first one, pregnant and leaning over her balcony sees a nightmare vision of her unborn child's future and the second 'neither architect nor engineer' walks through the exhausted air of the city along 'paths [that] have failed as paths'. In her poem occasioned by the new millennium and ideas of the day of judgement 'If Your Name is on the List'<sup>27</sup>, Rich again ends her argument with a psycho-geographical notion. The poem's concluding thoughts: 'Don't let me go/Don't let me die, Do you forget/ what we were to each other' are prompted by psycho-geographical observations: 'Suddenly a narrow street a little beach a little century screams'.

Rich personifies the twentieth century and America in '1999'<sup>27</sup> above as a blazoned woman looking in a smoke-free mirror, where 'her eyes of coal and ruby' represent the wealth and industry of America, which is hung around her neck in the form of bricks and diamonds; and her brow is made of 'moonlit oyster shells' to represent the beauty of the American landscape; but where she is 'disgraced' by war and segregation in the 'barbed wire lacework'. Rich implies that the landscape before the conquerors, represented by the indigenous map spread behind her, is preferable to the current day. Landscape here is highly politicised just as Coverly maintains psycho-geography would require and as such the notion is essential to this poem.

'Clean Burn'<sup>28</sup> is one poem in my collection that is overtly political in that it focuses on the demonstrations ('they're shouting in the choke') against open cast mining ('black gape') in Merthyr Tydfil and questions the efficacy of clean-coal

technology ('strip-tease promises of a clean burn'). Of course the entire collection is intended as a political statement, a protest and a message of hope, but I intended to avoid polemic and present my eco-poetics in the same subtle manner Rich makes her political commentary here.

Other of Rich's poems where landscape or cityscape elements are important or relevant in our critical paradigm, but not essential, include the opening poem of the collection 'Victory'<sup>29</sup>, where the idea of a peopled landscape 'hogging down/the deep bush clear cutting refugees/from ancient and transient villages' is used as part of a metaphor for a disease in the first section and the speaker drives through the poem, through California (Joshua Tree National Park), bringing poetry with her to visit the sick person, not so much as a drift, but a journey with a specific end in mind.

The fifth section of 'Veterans Day'<sup>30</sup>, a poem concerned with the destruction of war, contains an evocative passage or reverie on water in California's landscape; 'Horned blazing fronds of Sierra ice', 'fogdrip', 'thick sweats on..... pitched out nectarines' and so on. This functions as a mind drift for the speaker, who turns back to the breaking story. Psycho-geographical elements are present here, but as detail only. Similarly, in the seventh and final section of the poem Rich returns to a grim vision of the landscape as a metaphor for returning body bags of dead soldiers 'occult blood/sweeping up through the great groves/where the intestinal interstate/blood-cords of the stags are strung from tree to tree'.

Only a few of my poems in *The Wall Menders* have an urban setting, but two of those that do ('My first Banksy' and 'In grimy towns'<sup>31</sup>) illustrate in their imagery the depressing and even violent effect of such an environment on the poem's speakers and



has some commonality in this sense with Rich's poems above. In 'My first Banksy' the setting is deliberately uninviting: '...spilled chips/ and take away cartons sinking/ in the dirt under the railway bridge' in order to contrast with the ironically uplifting effect of the graffiti art that the poem explores: 'brings a smile in the gloom'. 'In grimy towns' uses an image from an installation by Damien Hirst<sup>32</sup> as a brutal metaphor for the cyclical nature of love: 'finds others to fry in the blue hoof marks/ of butchers' shop walls'.

Finally I want to look at 'Terza Rima'<sup>33</sup>, which is a thirteen section poem literally and figuratively at the centre of Rich's collection. Her homage to Dante's *Inferno* starts by locating itself immediate and familiar (to Rich) sub-urban space outside a vacant house 'the realtor's swaying name/against this cloudheap this/surrendered acre' as the speaker prepares to go down into the underworld with only herself as guide ('I lead and I follow' is a phrase repeated in the poem). Here and in the rest of the poem Rich uses the landscape as impetus and jumping off point or as an essential image in its meaning, whilst in broader psycho-geographical literature the entire poem as journey is a common practice<sup>34</sup>. Here it acts as an image of emptiness, from which is used to speak meaning or find answers, the speaker must move away, none the less she hesitates about the journey 'trembling on the broken-crust' of the earth.

In the second part of the poem its frame of reference moves out into the wider Californian landscape and its geomorphological history. This locates the poem in an actual region rather than a generalised sub-urban space; one where persimmons can grow (this fruit is common to California):

Call it the earthquake trail:  
I lead through live-oak meadows  
to the hillside where the plates shuddered

rewind the seismic story  
point to the sundered  
fence of 1906 the unmatching rocks

The sundered fence is a much photographed image from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake<sup>35</sup> and functions in the poem as the first lesson to be learned, that is that the earth, and by implication our society, is unstable, unreliable and so on. The final line of this part ('This will never happen again') is an ironic response to people's (continued) denial about the likelihood of a major earthquake. This part of the poem then, uses landscape as an essential element to its meaning.

The hellish vision of the poem and urban society becomes clearer in part three where 'the death of history' ends with:

figures of men and women firmly pushing  
babies in thickly padded prams  
through disintegrating malls

into the new era.

Rich chastises herself for losing her way (and ours) in parts four and five and tries to explain it in part six as youth 'that clear/ sapphire on snow /a distinct hour/in Central Park', thus journeying back to her own younger life in New York, which was a 'public privacy' and 'a public happiness', echoing perhaps some of the psycho-geographical notions of the city. Thus in part seven she is no longer alone: there are novices, 'interrupting hourly with their own bad vigour', for which she points to commerce or love to move them along.

Part eight refocuses the journey by using film images ('the prostitutes field')

from Almodovar,<sup>36</sup> where the city is a sufficiently violent and threatening place to be called the ‘Ninth Circle’. This is the only direct reference Rich makes in the poem to *Inferno* and the circles of hell, apart from its title, which is the verse form Dante used and in the unrhymed and irregular form Rich nods to this throughout. From here she meditates on her writing in part ten and brings herself out from this descent to a real location ‘caught/on rainshower Fifth Avenue/in a bookstore’, a place of refuge and renewal: ‘I clasp my book to my heart’. Hope continues in part eleven ‘-some sniff or prescience/of a life that could be/lived’ derived from the smell of coffee and the taste of bitter chocolate. She rounds on critics who confine her with the epithet ‘woman’.

The last part of the poem returns the one and same novice/ guide (Rich playing both parts) to the frozen north, far from any city where ‘the moss is golden/the sky sponged with pink at sunset’ and inhabited by reindeer. Something has happened in her development intellectually, emotionally and so on; ‘exchanging places bites to eat/ a glance’, but the world is still ‘the broken crust’.

The central poem in my collection, ‘Mestra’s Tale’<sup>37</sup> is a retelling of one of the stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and to the extent that Rich is following Dante in ‘Terza Rima’, I am doing something similar here. My approach to this is to focus on a different way into the story and I have set it in the recent past in a quasi-real world where the mythical and magical are possibilities. I adopt a well used feminist practice of resistance to canonical male works in the same way Rich resists being accompanied on her journey, by reclaiming and retelling stories from a woman’s point of view<sup>38</sup>. Thus I am interested not in the father, but in creating a narrative for the played-upon daughter,

Mestra, and her experiences and I chose to emphasise this by having her tell her own story in the first person.

There are elements of the psycho-geographical in the poem too, for example, Mestra's wail after being raped by Neptune (here literally the sea) is couched in terms of coastal processes: 'cut off, inundated/ invaded by the sea' and so on, and her comfort is all in the landscape: 'a lawn of fern-shaped mosses in the light spaces of our wood' and folded in new leaves. Different landscapes are used in the poem as it moves from the Welsh oak wood and sheep fields to the Australian bush: 'a land of billabongs, spinifex and salt-bush', but these are less psycho-geographical in effect. They function as descriptive settings contrasting one with the other to represent plenty and famine.

It has, regrettably, not been possible to discuss any of the above analysis with Rich herself as she was not available for interview. In an essay<sup>39</sup> based on a 1990 diary entry, Rich says:

I live on a street of mostly older, low-lying little houses in a straggling, villagelike, "unincorporated" neighbourhood between two small towns on the California coast...It is an ordinary enough place....yet it feels fragile, as condominiums and automobile plazas multiply up and down the coast.

Fragility certainly comes through in the poems we have been looking at in not only the uncertain and unsettling nature of the physical landscape, but also the cityscape and its effects on both the poet and her society, and as she says in another essay in the same book, which describes the multifarious nature of American life and how it is housed: 'Poems fix this landscape'<sup>40</sup>. She goes on: 'in a history of spiritual rupture...poetry becomes more necessary than ever; it keeps underground aquifers flowing; it is the liquid voice that can wear through stone'.

Here she goes beyond the effects on landscape on the consciousness of the poet by using landscape metaphors in explaining her ideas of poetics. Having said that, another essay points to the significance of appreciating landscape in preparation for her work.<sup>41</sup> Probably more revealingly Rich explains<sup>42</sup> that ‘the exotic – that way of viewing a landscape, people, a culture as escape from our carefully constructed selves – our “real” lives – (is) a trap for poets’ because it can be treated as escapism and poets pay insufficient attention to the realities of the visited culture, which is probably why she focuses on the landscape she knows, and can therefore speak about with authenticity.

In an interview Rich has given more recently she makes comments on landscape that are potentially of relevance in this context. On California she says it is

the most bizarre place to be, in a certain sense. It’s so laden with contradictions. It is in some ways, almost flaunting of them. I think it flaunts more than any part of the country in the visual sense; the extraordinary visual degradation, the extraordinary beauty. There are still vast tracks of wilderness. There is this amazing ocean.<sup>43</sup>

This is undoubtedly comes through in many of the poems in *Fox*.

Note: Adrienne Rich’s poetic reputation rests on her feminist radicalism in ground breaking works such as *Diving into the Wreck (1971-2)* and the collected edition *The Fact of a Doorframe (1950-1984)* and her other essays and writings. I was interested in looking at an example of her recent work outside the framework of feminist criticism or as women’s writing. This is not to undermine or disagree with such approaches, but an attempt to do something different here.

## Brenda Hillman

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Even a cursory glance at Hillman's *Cascadia*<sup>44</sup> indicates that this is fertile ground for the psycho-geographer from the title of the collection itself, referencing the Cascade range of mountains<sup>45</sup> and a potentially mythological western land, to the Californian place names in the titles of the poems themselves, or referred to in the poems, or noted as the site of the poems: for example, place name titles include (Sediments of) Santa Monica, Emigrant Gap, (Pre-uplift of) the Sierra, Fresno (Lunette/Predella) and (The Rise of) the Napa hills. Other places referred to in the poems themselves include San Diego<sup>46</sup>, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Half Moon Bay and San Francisco<sup>47</sup>. Place names sites of the poems include San Juan Bautista<sup>48</sup>, Soledad<sup>49</sup>, San Raphael Archangel, San Fernando Rey de Espana, San Carlos Borromeo, San Jose de Guadalupe, San Buenaventura, San Miguel Archangel and San Gabriel<sup>50</sup>. As such, mapping all of this one covers a very large swathe of both Northern and Southern California, the Central Valley and the Sierra and visits some places more than once<sup>51</sup>.

The titles of poems, such as 'A Geology', 'Wood's Edge', 'Hydraulic Mining Survey', 'Never Mindshaft', 'The Formation of Soils' and 'Glacial Erratics', indicate subjects of interest. Similarly the focus on Californian cultural history and literature is clear from poems with titles such as 'Her Gold Rush', 'The Shirley Poem' and 'Patterns of Paint in Certain Small Missions'.

This then is Hillman's California, a geographical and cultural schematic on which and by which she explores a number of themes. These are best illustrated by

looking in detail at a selection of poems in this collection to determine their psycho-geographical credentials using our critical paradigm.

The opening poem in this collection is 'Sediments of Santa Monica'<sup>52</sup>. In keeping with its title, the poem is a fragmentary arrival on the beach at Santa Monica, arrival on a beach being perhaps a reference to evolution as primitive life forms emerged from the sea, fragmentary in keeping with the nature of geological deposits because the observations are lineated as such with short lines, two and single line stanzas and large spaces within lines, as well as being interspersed with quotations from the last stanza of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'<sup>53</sup> ('Ah love let us be true to one another').

The poem places itself very specifically in geographical space 'a left margin watches the sea floor approach', being the place where the ocean appears on a typically oriented map of California, and with a speaker watching the beach scene: 'A girl in red shorts shakes Kafka's/The Trial free of some sand', '.....these cliffs/Looked like ribbons on braids or dreds', '.....the ferris wheel/ God's Roladex'. Hillman uses this positioning to meditate on the intersection of geography and cultural evolution and development: 'It takes 30 million years' for the land to form, which is then personified: 'watches the watcher from Dover'. As Arnold's poem itself references Shakespeare's *King Lear*, so Hillman is building up literary layers reflecting the literal layers of sediment in the poem's landscape.

Schnicklefritz<sup>54</sup> notes that Hillman separates 'bits of text much in the way the earth separates and cracks, constructs faults'. Hillman explains<sup>55</sup> that her practice of collaging materials, voices, types of knowledge is because this is what the earth does

and because it is part of modernist/post-modernist practice. In an interview given for this essay, she says there is ‘a littoral place – a shoreline – where representation and abstraction meet’<sup>56</sup>.

By our time (‘after the Twentieth century’) this notion of the land watching us is changed as the cliffs are eroded into ribbons and dreams, of perfection one might intuit, have become ‘a sort of severe leakage’ and ‘The century has become a little drippy at the end’. Thus the watcher from Dover, Gloucester standing for us all, has been proved blind and unable to see what is really going on in our society, represented here by the land or perhaps more literally in the sense of our impact on the planet. This is not to say that Hillman ends the poem on a negative or pessimistic note as regards our growth ‘We are still growing but the stitches hurt’ and using the repeated quotation from Arnold: ‘Let us be/True to one another for the world’. In this complex poem Hillman illustrates the notion of essence. The poem is site specific, in that the land formation is Californian and locally the Santa Monica beach, and not anywhere else, and the way this is used by Hillman is to illustrate our development or failure thereof.

Hillman returns to the trope of sea and sediments in the opening of ‘The Rise of the Napa Hills’<sup>57</sup>, where ‘Mild layers stack up/without panic, like e-mail’. This is quite a striking, although forced, image and immediately brings the landscape into proximity with the realities of modern life. This conflation is repeated in the next line where ‘sediments settle under Oakville Grocery’<sup>58</sup> and then Hillman brings together the importance of soil to the produce in the grocery store by focusing on the real subject matter of the poem the ‘two versions of the actual; red, white’ wine. The Napa valley is one of the major areas of viticulture in California and so it should be no surprise that



Hillman introduces a vintner to the poem, but this winemaker is a kind of St. Peter figure interrogating the wine with ‘the twelve questions’. By this point the poem has moved away from landscape as subject matter and thus this is only something of relevance to the piece rather than anything more essential.

‘Wood’s Edge’<sup>59</sup>, by contrast, illustrates the relevance of landscape response in its opening as the mechanism by which the poem comes into being. The speaker approaches a wood; ‘Infinity lifted; / a gasp of emeralds./’I thought I felt/the tall night trees...’. The speaker’s reaction is one of astonishment (‘gasp’) and curiosity in the discovery (‘a wait not even/known yet’). The next action in the poem seems like an automatic one in modern life as the speaker holds up her mobile phone to see if it works (‘I held my violet up’). The signal squeak is reminiscent of bats, but quickly then the subject matter turns back to the woods which seem to sweep the speaker in, as if entering a square house, the square referring as well to planks of timber, where her hopeful relationship with another person can be explained by ‘a good square saying’. In these ways the poem moves from its initial landscape impetus and the effect on the speaker to hinting at a more integrated relationship between speaker immersed in landscape, in this case a wood.

My poem ‘New year’<sup>60</sup> uses the landscape as impetus for the poem and its central metaphor in a similar way to Hillman in the above poems. Here I take the clay soil, flint, sand and chalk under my feet in the Chilterns and use them in an extended building metaphor, a call to arms for environmental repair: ‘foundations for us to screeed’. This is less in essence psycho-geography, but landscape elements are a very important detail in the conception of the poem.

Hillman includes two long poems in this collection: 'A Geology'<sup>61</sup> and the title poem, 'Cascadia'<sup>62</sup>, both of which have the features of purposeful travelling through the landscape. 'A Geology' starts with an analysis of the land formation of California. Compared to boot-like Italy, California is 'the skin of a person about to sit down', which is at once wonderfully evocative and imprecise. It is just this inability to describe California that the poem explores. For example, the Coastal ranges, Hillman suggests, can be achieved by 'pushing a pile of wet papers from the left' and she focuses on the geological effects of earthquakes in dividing up the state and the subduction of the Pacific plate and other up-liftings and slippages of the land, along fault-lines, rock outcrops and movements and this recurs throughout the poem. She says: 'It's appropriate to discuss features when we speak of California/, daylight's treatment of a sudden/ movement in rock' and quite separately in an interview, Hillman has explained her interest in the Californian subduction<sup>63</sup>.

She uses these images as a continuous and large-scale metaphor for giving up a drug addiction (nicotine or heroin, it is not named, and as Hillman says in the interview for this essay, it is meant to represent a range of human desires, addictions, helplessness), 'the extraordinary stranger in our veins', with the ever present danger of slipping back into old ways (pun intended) and being overwhelmed by the landscape, for example: 'Subduction means the coast /goes underneath the continent, which is/ rather light. It was my friend. I needed it' (It here being the drug); 'A scarp hangs over the edge as it goes from/ Monterey to Santa Barbara. When we /were trying to quit it had to shout'; 'A bunch of fiery/ islands floated over and sutured themselves to us/ a hundred million years ago'; and 'Addicts stay on the porch together, lighting them, / and elsewhere, lighthouse cliffs recall the tremors/that brought them there'; and most

obviously (and possibly redundantly) in the concluding couplet lines of the poem: ‘This was set down in strata so you could know/ What it felt like to have been earth’.

Elsewhere in the poem a blanket is ‘like warm sandstone’ and the landscape has etched itself on the body:

stretchmarks on her body  
like public transportation, very coastal  
very Sierra traintracks that click-click  
down the sides of thighs.

The poem ranges up the coast, through the central valley and into the Sierra, name checking places as it goes, but this is not a linear journey. It dots around in a fractured way, echoing both the use of landscape and this disruptions caused by drugs. Hillman also draws attention to what a geology is in this context throughout the poem, such as: ‘A geology break in half to grow’; ‘A geology can’t fix itself’; ‘A geology has its appetites’; and ‘A geology is not a strategy’ and it seems clear that she is reading and quoting from a geology text book as she writes. This is indicated by such matter of fact lines as: ‘The Klamath mountains love /the veins of excellent stress, see figure 12’; ‘Rocks of the oldest time are barely represented’ and; ‘The number of faults in middle California is staggering’ amongst others. Hillman notes<sup>64</sup> that in writing the collection: ‘there was the notion of geology as mind, mind as geology’ and this comes through quite clearly here.

So deeply embedded is the landscape in the meaning of this poem, its effects and ruptures on the people of the poem, and even in the physical representation of the poem on the page that it seems to illustrate in full the notion of psycho-geographical essence and Hillman is certainly in the business of definition as to what California is: ‘a california/ is composed of moving toward, away or past’.

‘Cascadia’ is laid out in two sections vertically: the left hand column reads as a sparse travel diary or notes made in various hotels, motels and inns around California (Lompok, Ojai, Costa Mesa, Santa Monica, Lost Hills, Fresno, Redding and San Diego), where Hillman records the details of objects found in the hotel rooms or close-by outside. These are perhaps like signposts for the larger poem, but are faint and imply the submergence of California. The right hand column contains a much more detailed, intense and insistent poem which uses multiple, mutating repeated phrases; some invented, some seemingly found or quoted, some stock and almost clichéd and some highly inventive and new, and used in a way that is reminiscent of rock strata. Hillman has said<sup>65</sup> that she wanted the poem to go back and forth within itself and within time. This creates the patchwork of what Hillman calls ‘the search for the search’, which in the end is California itself:

In the earth for the search  
After considering which was west  
They came upon a piece of land  
It had fragments in its spine  
It had everything you wanted...

Whilst California is certainly an essential part of this poem in its impetus and detail, there is much less absorption of the landscape in the emotions of the speaker or the poems’ characters. It is a context and a location: ‘the idea of California’ as Hillman puts it<sup>66</sup>.

My collection was not devised with anything like this purposeful journeying around a particular landscape that Hillman undertakes. Nevertheless it contains movements from country to town, peopled landscape to empty tracts, coast to mountain, and even into space in terms of the location of specific poems. One poem however does

travel around the UK very specifically. ‘Foot and Mouth journey’<sup>67</sup> covers several trips we took to places of significance to us (Cumbria) or where we have family (Devon and Staffordshire) before leaving for California. I use these visits as opportunities to describe the devastating effect of foot and mouth disease was having at that time (2001) on the British countryside: ‘banks bled dry’ from south to north, and its reach as far as California on our entry into the US.

For Hillman the landscape is a way into poems like ‘Haste Makes Canning’<sup>68</sup>, where again the titling country provokes a poem of fragments and disturbance observed from a bookshop coffee bar, and ‘Glacial Erratics’<sup>69</sup>, where the ‘roomsized pebbles’ are used as an image for words and the process of writing. Similarly ‘Pre-uplift of the Sierra’<sup>70</sup> makes use of landscape elements (faultlines, glacial debris, mudstones and shales), but these are setting and details to the poem’s highly fragmented meditations. The geological development of the Californian landscape in ‘The Formation of Soils’<sup>71</sup> underpins (literally) the activities of the people of the poem and is described in human terms such as: ‘the sea got up to try to relax’ and ‘nickel laterites not ready/for the slots’ but does not go beyond this.

In ‘Hydraulic Mining Survey’ Hillman uses the history of the Gold Rush and the environmental rape (her word<sup>72</sup>) that it caused: ‘the Delta was impassable from this’ for political ends in her commentary on our debt laden society, written at the height of the Dot.com boom and anticipating its crash. The form of the poem, with the middle stanzas perpendicular to the opening and closing stanzas, illustrates the way in which the landscape has entered it. Snickelfritz explains this as:

The image of the text on the page suggests a river flowing between two granite embankments. This mirrors the subject matter that is in the poem. The form informs the content; the content informs the form.

Hillman has described<sup>73</sup> her poetic technique as attempting to wrestle with issues of boundaries and form, for example, she says:

It is impossible to put boundaries on your words, even if you make a poem. Each word is a maze. So you are full of desire to make a memorable thing and have the form dictated by some way that it has to be. But the poem is going to undo that intention....So the idea of boundarylessness sits uncomfortably with the idea of form....I would like the work to go on being extremely inventive in ways that seem process-oriented, but never formless.

‘The Shirley Poem’<sup>74</sup> takes as its source Clappe’s Gold Rush era (1850s) letters from the Californian mines<sup>75</sup>, and its opening states the business of the poem in psycho-geographical terms: ‘Physical earth reveals itself as persons’. She goes on to develop this image in the naming of gold veins as part of a body and selecting parts of the Shirley Letters that deal with the death of people. She focuses on reading and women’s bodies in particular, and marries gold with the body:

The change in a woman’s body  
is the change in a california.  
Gold seeps at its own pace  
as if the body were dead.

However unlike some of the other poems in this collection, landscape in this is essential but not the essence of the piece. Some of the same can be said for the way I use the soil and mud in ‘Cobbing’<sup>76</sup>, where the earth reveals itself to people’s bodies and sense of touch rather than as standing in place of the body. The poem is about the tactile enjoyment of running the earth through one’s hands and feet in order to build a home: ‘Best when wet, malleable/ and our bare feet touch/ in its straw nest’, in what is essentially a love poem.

Hillman's approach to nature writing is different from mine. Whilst in the grand scheme of my book I am asking questions about our world and what we should do to save it from crisis, there is less philosophical focus on the meaning of nature than in Hillman. She considers<sup>77</sup> that

the whole of nature must be reconceived, and I do feel that you can be a post-modernist and query the very concepts of "nature". What does it mean to have a nature exactly? It's a long way from me to the pine tree out the window.

Hillman generously agreed to answer a few of my questions by email, the complete transcript of which can be found in Appendix I. In this she articulates the importance of the Californian landscape in her approach to writing *Cascadia* as follows:

I had the notion that California geology, with its fractures and fissures, is very like consciousness – not whole, not one thing – and that as a metaphor for human making, it has everything to do with how we think...as we see it effected in the syntax of language.

This comes though clearly in much of my analysis of her poems. Whilst she does not specifically recognise the term psycho-geography, she explains that she 'was attempting to write a feminist psycho-eco-geo-experimental lyric poetics that would fit into the nature tradition, but be very different from it' because she has always been 'drawn to the notion of a lively and unusual relationship to matter, animisms and so on'. This is an important confirmation for an essay exploring psycho-geography.

As to the typography, patterning and physical representation of the poems on the page, I asked Hillman to comment on three of the poems discussed above: 'A Geology', 'Hydraulic Mining Survey' and the Mission poems. Her responses are as follows:

In A Geology, which has to do with addiction and—in a larger sense—the range of human desires, I was drawn to methods of accident, intuition and constraint as additional tools for a compositional method. Having read OuLiPo (Ourvoir de Litterature Potentielle – a 1960s movement to develop new structures for writing) documents I gave myself tasks - for a while I wrote words on pieces of

paper and chose them blindly, four at a time, to serve as sort of nails for the corners of pages. Then I wrote toward them in a state of emotional fervor. The problem I often have with the mathematical methods is that they become purely intellectual exercises so I wanted to use both 'lyric and constraint'—both the sense of the materiality and structure of words, and a generalized emotional state to effect the metaphor. My aim, if there was any such thing, was to let the unconscious keep the words in mind, and the 'rule' was simply to use the corner words at least once in the page itself. That gave a sort of guidance.

This is an intriguing idea as a compositional device, experiment, or surreal practice, as well as being confirmation of Hillman's ideas of emotion and landscape metaphor prescient to this essay.

In Hydraulic Mining Survey the poem began from a trip I went on with Gary Snyder and others to see the sites where hydraulic mining for gold had washed the mountainsides into the Sacramento river delta. I was moved and horrified by the look of the mountain. Again, even though the look is controlled—and the form is about control—it is meant to be the site, the intersection of the uncontrollable and constraint. I turned the stanzas on their sides because that's what the miners had done to the mountains.

Again this is a conflation of poem on the page and its meaning used in a concrete way and is interestingly, quite different from the analysis given to it by Schnikelfritz noted above.

The story with the mission poems is a bit more complex: I am enchanted by pattern as an aid to meditation, am in love with abstract patterns in the California missions, and I was drawn the idea that pattern and the daily work of the artist is sacred, not just the faces of Jesus and Mary and the saints. I had decided by way of formal experiment to make my way around California to investigate the missions, and took my tablet and sat in each mission and wrote about a state of feeling—usually a strange or 'in between' feeling of dread or reverence or ecstasy or some combination—in any case, I thought about the native people who were asked to work on the art and decoration of the missions—and about the quotidian task of the artist, to praise what is. Thus the punctuation around the poem is like the mediation on daily sound—like bird song, or the footsteps, or any sound patterns that keep us company while we are making art. I used punctuation to represent this.



Hillman has taken notions of the concrete one stage further in her writing practice in the Mission poems in *Cascadia*, which while not subject to close reading in this essay, are part of her psycho-geography, resulting as they do from another planned journey around California.

## Jane Hirshfield

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Jane Hirshfield's California is less obviously signalled in this volume compared to Hillman's total absorption in the landscape, but it is none the less there in terms of the trees, rocks, animals, her house in Mill Valley and so on, as well as some specific places where she sets her poems. I want to start the analysis in this section with one of these: 'Elephant Seals, Ano Nuevo Preserve'.<sup>78</sup>

This is the only one of the poems in this collection that locates itself specifically in California by means of its descriptive title alone. However the poem is less in essence psycho-geographical than its title might imply. Hirshfield uses highly inventive and surprising image to describe the Elephant seals<sup>79</sup> such as: 'shoulder-hunched stone' for their solidity; 'two-ton beetle' for their weight; 'ground-fallen rainclouds' for their colour; and 'prize-winning melons out-buckling their skin'. She developed some of these images before being able to realise them in the context of the seals, as she explains in the interview given for this essay, a full transcript of which can be found in Appendix II, but once found, the seals are 'fully seal'.

Here the meditation in the poem is contained in the fourth stanza and its last line. The stanza uses the idea of layers of an onion (not in itself a unique metaphor) to define or explain a thing in relation to the world. In this case the seals are 'one side rampantly onion....the other impassive soil'. The last line does something similar, but this time using negations: 'In every unknowable earth-fold, unknowable ardour'. Thus, whilst the poem's language is of earth and soil, these are part of its metaphorical landscape and as such, psycho-geographically speaking, are of relevance rather than

essential to the piece. The same can be said about my collection's title poem 'The wall menders'<sup>80</sup>. Whilst it employs a lexicon of dry-stone walling, fused with the language of music, in a way that I intended to be surprising (not unlike the way Hirshfield's imagery works here), to describe the working and emotional relationship between a redundant miner and his son, these are essential elements in the poem as opposed to making the poem's focus an expression of the effect of the landscape on its speakers..

Much the same can be said of the use of landscape imagery in Hirshfield's 'Clock'<sup>81</sup> which explores the unstoppable effluxion of time: 'the clock of the tree becomes its beetles and lichens'; 'The living clock of fallible springs runs/ side by side with the death-clock of quartz';

Even the clock of blue up-risen granite  
carries within it  
the cooling clock of its own erosion to gruss.  
Whole ranges this way disappear.

Hirshfield's landscape meditation continues in 'Rock',<sup>82</sup> where the rock has agency, appears stubborn, but it 'broods, is one thought', it does not question silence and it is not discomfited by the weather: 'The work of a rock is to ponder whatever is'. When it has done with pondering ('its thinking worn-out') and it is reduced by geomorphological processes 'it will be carried away by an ant.....caught..... in a thought of her own'. However the landscape imagery here is of essence to the poem, much like the Redwood tree noted in the introduction.

My poem 'The stability of scree'<sup>83</sup> chimes with these poems thematically (and also with 'Autumn Day' and 'Metempsychosis', which are discussed below), in that it uses an extended metaphor as its essence. Here lovers are enmeshed in an upland landscape: '...on the mountain's flank, our limbs/stacked and locked', welcomed by it,

very much part of it and in harmony with it. It is a ‘sonnet-ish’ lyric where the volta is a disturbance on the slopes, a rock fall, which stands for a change in the relationship. Adjustment and its subsequent resumption are the results: ‘... and we must start over, meshing/ our bodies for comfort against the slope’.

Similarly in ‘August Day’<sup>84</sup> without the ‘dozen ripening fruit trees, /curtain of pole beans, thicket of berries’, there would be no poem. Hirshfield acknowledges this is the opening line: ‘You work with what you are given – ‘ meaning both as subject matter for the poem and as source of happiness. The kitchen garden is the impetus for an August day ‘pitiful, lonely, lazy’ spent ‘lost to the earth and to heaven, / thoroughly drunk on its whiskeys, I wander my kingdom’. Hirshfield immerses herself in the goodness of the earth and finds essential blessings, luck and happiness (‘A bear would be equally happy’). This is similar in tone to my ‘Foraging’<sup>85</sup>.

In a different, but not dissimilar, way in ‘The Contract’<sup>86</sup> Hirshfield takes an apparently very simple gardening metaphor: pruning a rose bush, a gift, and uses it to explore the nature of loss and resurrection: ‘Impossible to believe/that so little left will lead to fragrance’. The rose comes with a great deal of poetic ‘baggage’ as a motif for love, sex, sexuality and so on, which the reader of course brings to the poem. As such it can be read as the end of a relationship. This explains the otherwise oddity of the poem’s title and the word ‘signature’ in the last stanza, which seem to reference the marriage contract and divorce papers. The poem ends on the word ‘loss’ as this is how a trimmed rose appears, but is inherently hopeful: ‘Core-wood splinters green under the shears’.

There are several poems in my collection<sup>87</sup> that use gardening as their subject matter and this is noteworthy in the context of Hirshfield's poems. One that deals with more than celebrating the enjoyment of gardening is 'Imagine my garden'. Here a torture victim takes solace in mental journeying to the physical comforts that his/her (I am deliberately unspecific) home and garden can provide: 'warm water', 'springy moss', 'the sun's heat', 'the gentle brush of flowers'. Even though, as the opening lines make clear in their irony, such solace is probably unattainable.

In 'The Room'<sup>88</sup> there is a sense of journey or travelling in that Hirsfield's guest for whom the redecorated room is intended is the person who does the travelling to this specific location. The impetus for the 'sanding and painting' in the poem is expressed in mysterious terms: 'Then something spiralled, /stirred in a corner, demanded' and the speaker gave in to the demands, such that they effected future actions and all the while the mystery continued: 'And during all that time, no idea at all/ of why these choices of furniture, this use. /Late the realisation that something was being courted'. This working out of unknown feelings and ideas in this poem, and which are settled on as exhilaration, fear and hope, prompted by an interior landscape, seems to be another illustration of the essence of psycho-geography in Hirshfield.

The gripping first stanza of 'Poem with Two Endings'<sup>89</sup> is a surprising conflation of a natural world simile with a surreal domestic interior:

Say "death" and the whole room freezes -  
even couches stop moving,  
even the lamps,  
like a squirrel suddenly aware it is being looked at.

and the poem repeats this motif in another surreal line: 'A shopping mall swirls around the corpse of a beetle'. Whilst the poem's essence is a somewhat mysterious meditation

on death and the relationship between life and death, it has elements of the psycho-geographical in these lines. Hirshfield makes the contrast between the human-made world and that of nature in order to illustrate the ideas she wants to explore in the poem. In the interview given for this essay, Hirshfield explains that this poem explores the insignificance of personal loss in the end:

Death takes life, life takes death, each absorbing the other into its own ongoing story. Poems stop, we notice and mourn the beetle. But I do not intend that poem to argue with, or against, the forces of life-continuance. The title is "Two Endings" because both statements, both views, are completely correct. Everything vanishes. Everything goes on.

‘Self-Portrait in a Borrowed Cabin’, with its painterly description, explores the relationship between people and the natural world and our notions of ownership: the place the poet is staying is not hers; the raccoon “belongs” to the couple next door; the humming bird and the deer are hers; and she is theirs. The poem uses these motifs to describe how travellers try to make themselves at home even for a short while, and even when their interior life is troubled (‘nightmares’), nature can provide ‘paradise, bliss’. These final words are in italics in the poem, on the one hand acknowledging a cliché and the other emphasising the emotional state of the self-portrait and thus the essence of psycho-geography.

Several poems in the collection deal with Hirshfield’s ideas about writing. One such is ‘Like an Ant Carrying Her Bits of Leaf or Sand’<sup>90</sup>, where from the opening two lines of the poem we are alerted to an extended nature/writing metaphor and the nature of both processes as being hard to explain: ‘All day the ant obeys an inexplicable order./ All day the port obeys and incomprehensible demand.’ Hirshfield is neutral about the effect of writing on the world: ‘it changes or does not change by these labors’, but the

closing couplet moves away from the metaphor and claims a different and public role for poetry: 'The ant's work belongs to the ant/ The poem carries love and terror, or it carries nothing.'

Poems where landscape elements are important details include 'Rebus'<sup>91</sup>, where clay 'the slip and stubbornness,/ bottom of river' asks a question about the choices we make in our lives and; each pebble in 'Poem Holding its Heart in One Fist'<sup>92</sup> that 'keeps its own counsel' is the impetus for the poem's meditation on the hidden nature of words, objects, processes. Chekhov's reading of train timetables on his deathbed features in 'In Praise of Coldness'<sup>93</sup>, which imagined journeys allow Hirshfield to ask the central question of her poem: 'To what more earthly thing could he have been more faithful?' than the 'scent of the knowable journey', which beings in psycho-geographical concepts into the philosophy of the poem by asking these kinds of questions about the effect of journey on the psyche.

Finally, the last poem in the collection, 'Metempsychosis'<sup>94</sup>, speaks of the desire to trans-migrate one's soul in death, to be a moving palm tree (albeit of Borneo not California), becoming 'an ant road, a highway for beetles' and: 'To follow it all the way into leaf-form, bark-furl, root touch,/ And then keep walking, unimaginably further'. This poem takes us back to the beginning of this essay to the essence and very business of psycho-geography as Hirshfield asks: 'Yet even today, to look at a tree/ and ask the story who are you? is to be transformed'.

Hirshfield explains her arrival in California and the influence its landscape has had on her poems as follows:

I arrived in Northern California in a red van with tie-dyed curtains in June 1974 and have lived here steadily since then – in a canyon in the middle of a national forest, in a city, in a windowed cabin overlooking the ocean, and now in a small house on the hem of Mount Tamalpais (Marin County, just north of San Francisco). It took about four years before the California landscape came sufficiently into my psyche to enter my poems, I had to hike, plant, listen my way into the place where I'd come to live – had to cut fire break, to sleep by a stony and powerful creek, where mountain lions walked at two in the morning, to put miles of climbing and descending its ridgelines into my legs. To care about such things is, perhaps, one small marker of coming to be of this place....I realized how intimately I know this soil – know exactly the depth the rocks begin, know where the roots are, know the scent and texture of good soil that holds all<sup>95</sup>.

This seems to be a good summation of the influence of the landscape on the poet, even after the passage of many more than the four years Hirshfield says that it took to work its way into her work and her ways of seeing and thinking about the world. She has said<sup>96</sup> that:

human experience and any sense of human meaning emerge from the meeting of the inner and outer worlds and of moving through our engagement with others, whether those others are people or the existence of trees and insects and rivers and stones.

This seems to echo the process at work and the experience of reading many of her poems in this collection.

Hirshfield kindly agreed to answer a few of my questions for this essay. A full transcript of the email correspondence can be found in Appendix II. In this Hirshfield explains her relationship to landscape in the context of her writing as follows:

I am a writer who draws on the immediacies around me. What I see, hear, taste, and the small incidents that catch the attention often become the seedstock of new thought. The world is a cornucopia that does not empty, continually spilling new things to notice

and as that she lives in a semi-rural place at the foot of a mountain, in a house surrounded by a garden, with a redwood tree tapping at her window, this is very



immediate. As to recognition of the terms psycho-geography and seeing any resonances in her work, Hirshfield says:

I think we are shaped by the shapes we walk among, sleep amid, by their pressures upon us and the liberations they open within us' and goes on: 'Psycho-geography, yes? That what we see every day shapes our world view and selves. This is why it's called "worldview." It is a view. What we look out at looks back into us and alters who we are.

She considers the house and garden poems of Given Sugar, Given Salt to be part of the landscape in this sense (the 'human realm is often treated similarly to the natural world'), which has been reflected in my choice of poems for analysis in this essay. She explains that in editing an anthology, she came to understand:

the house as an archetype for the self and its larger relationships. Whenever a poet writes of houses, he/she writes of the state of the self. This is also true when a poet writes of exterior landscapes--I've said, somewhere in Nine Gates or one of the more recent essays, that every description is a portrait of a state of soul. But the house is especially strongly the domicile and embodiment of psyche.

## Conclusion

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I have explored the varied responses and reactions to and use of landscape by three poets from California in this essay. I chose these particular poets because I was familiar with their work and the landscape in which they write from my own experience of living in California between 2001 and 2003. Whilst the poets are all women, I did not want to focus on feminist critical paradigms or constrain readings of their work to the category of women's studies, which would be to limit its range and the way it can be read. As such, I chose to explore a different mode of critical practice, namely psycho-geography, which seems to be gaining popularity in writing practice and as a critical model at present.

In preparing this essay, I have reflected on the influence of these three poets and the framework of psycho-geography on my own writing. In its essence I see psycho-geography as Neo-Romanticism and I have looked briefly at its literary roots in the context of Blake and Wordsworth. I have tried to signal such points of similarity and divergence between my work and my three chosen poets throughout in terms of theme, journeys, poetic impetus and use of imagery and metaphor, for example Rich and Hillman's use of landscape dislocation and disturbance, as well as myth and history; Hillman's journeying; and Hirshfield's meditations on home and garden, but the essay's primary focus has been a close reading of three collections using a psycho-geographical paradigm. To the extent that the use of landscape is more often than not a given in my work, which is typically expressing emotion, either personal or imagined in both my lyrics and narratives, psycho-geography seems a useful definition, but only if it is

understood to go beyond mere landscape detail and this is the use to which I have tried to put it throughout.

Like the three poets of this essay, I think there is still a great deal that can be done with landscape as essential metaphor, imagery, device, and emotional foil. Its use in poetry is by no means hackneyed, nor should it be relegated as old fashioned, or even belonging to a dated period of literary history. Using a new critical paradigm gives poets and other writers a renewed vigour with which to continue to explore all our landscapes.

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- <sup>1</sup> Noakes, Kate. The Wall Menders, Two Rivers Press, 2009,
- <sup>2</sup> Coverly, Merlin. Psycho-geography, Pocket Essentials, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Self, Will. Psycho-geography, Bloomsbury, 2007, which collects many of these columns in book form.
- <sup>4</sup> Coverly, *ibid*, p.10.
- <sup>5</sup> Sampson, Fiona (Ed.), Poetry Review, Spring 2009, p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Coverly, *ibid*, p.40.
- <sup>7</sup> Coverly introduces only the first verse of this poem in his analysis. The later examples I have inserted into his argument for completeness.
- <sup>8</sup> Ackroyd, Peter, Blake, Vintage, 1999, p. 161.
- <sup>9</sup> Wordsworth, William. The Prelude, Book One, Oxford, 1984 (l. 406-412).
- <sup>10</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, A Field Guide to Getting Lost, Cannongate, 2006, p.133.
- <sup>11</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, Wanderlust: A History of Walking, Verso, 2001, p.106.
- <sup>12</sup> Solnit, *ibid*, p. 72.
- <sup>13</sup> Owen Sheers also makes this point about Romanticism in his 2009 BBC series *A Poet's Guide to Britain* in the episode on Wordsworth.
- <sup>14</sup> Hirshfield, Jane. Given Sugar, Given Salt, Harper Collins, 2001, p.73.
- <sup>15</sup> A good description of the redwood can be found in Pakenham, Thomas. Remarkable Trees of the World, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2002, p.34 et seq.
- <sup>16</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Rich, Adrienne. Fox, Norton, 2001 p. 61-2.
- <sup>18</sup> Hillman, Brenda. Cascadia, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> Earlier examples in my published work include 'Pedernal Mountain', 'Ocean to Interior', 'Yucatan', 'Pablo', 'Two Cedars', 'Night Boat', 'Sunday Tea', 'Riddle', 'Thames Jacket' and many others in my first collection, *Ocean to Interior*, *Might Erudite*, 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> The Mystery Spot is in the hills above Santa Cruz, near to where Rich lives. It is a well known tourist attraction and a place of gravitational anomaly. Further information about it can be found at its website [www.mysteryspot.com](http://www.mysteryspot.com).
- <sup>21</sup> Although, according to Taylor, Thomas. Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries, Lighting Source, 1997, the precise nature of some of the ceremonies is lost and this inference is speculative at most.

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- <sup>22</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.11.
- <sup>23</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p.20.
- <sup>24</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p.37.
- <sup>25</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p.27.
- <sup>26</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p.33.
- <sup>27</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p.40.
- <sup>28</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.24.
- <sup>29</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p.3.
- <sup>30</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p13.
- <sup>31</sup> Noakes. *Ibid*, p. 20 and 22.
- <sup>32</sup> *A Thousand Years*, 1990.
- <sup>33</sup> Rich, *ibid*, p. 41.
- <sup>34</sup> For example, Sinclair, Iain. *London Orbital*, Granta, 2002.
- <sup>35</sup> Photographs of such fences can be found in Collier, Michael, *A Land in Motion: California's San Andreas Fault*, University of California Press, 1999. p.51 and 56.
- <sup>36</sup> Pedro Almodovar, Spanish film maker.
- <sup>37</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.29.
- <sup>38</sup> Of the other writers who have engaged in such re-writing I cite especially Carol Ann Duffy (*The World's Wife*) and Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*).
- <sup>39</sup> Rich, Adrienne, *Woman and Bird*, *What Is Found There: notes on Poetry and Politics*, Virago, 1995. p.3-8.
- <sup>40</sup> Rich, *What is an American Life?*, *ibid*, p.118-119.
- <sup>41</sup> See the opening paragraphs of *Rotted Names* in Rich, *Ibid*. p.197 where daily desert sojourns in Southern California are a prelude to reading Wallace Stevens and thinking about her own work.
- <sup>42</sup> Rich, *Tourism and Promised Lands*, *ibid*, p. 228.
- <sup>43</sup> Quoted from an interview with Michael Klein in The Boston Phoenix, June 1999. Available at [www.bostonphoenix.com/archive/lin10/99/06/RICH.html](http://www.bostonphoenix.com/archive/lin10/99/06/RICH.html). Downloaded on 15 September 2008.
- <sup>44</sup> Hillman, Brenda, *Cascadia*, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- <sup>45</sup> As Hillman helpfully notes in the epigram of the title poem, Cascadia is also the name of the name of the landmass that existed to the west of California 130 million years ago when the state itself was under water.
- <sup>46</sup> In 'El Nino Orgonon' (Hillman, *ibid*, p. 4)
- <sup>47</sup> In 'A Geology' (Hillman, *ibid*, p. 8, 12, 14)
- <sup>48</sup> 'Adjacent Wounded' (Hillman, *ibid*, p.23)

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- <sup>49</sup> ‘Frail Substitute’ (Hillman, *ibid*, p. 51)
- <sup>50</sup> The mission poems (Hillman, *ibid*, p. 61-69)
- <sup>51</sup> See annotated map in Appendix 1.
- <sup>52</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.3
- <sup>53</sup> Arnold, Matthew, Selected Poems and Prose, Everyman, 1993, p.77.
- <sup>54</sup> Schnickelfritz, Victor in a review of *Cascadia* at [www.greatamericanpinup.blogspot.com](http://www.greatamericanpinup.blogspot.com) /2005. Downloaded March 2009.
- <sup>55</sup> See email interview in Appendix II.
- <sup>56</sup> See Appendix II for the full transcript.
- <sup>57</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.52.
- <sup>58</sup> Oakville Grocery is an upmarket chain of grocery stores in California.
- <sup>59</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.15.
- <sup>60</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p. 41.
- <sup>61</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p. 7 et seq.
- <sup>62</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.55 et seq.
- <sup>63</sup> See Hillman’s interview with Sarah Rosenthal at [www.raintaxi.com/online/2003fall/hillman](http://www.raintaxi.com/online/2003fall/hillman). Downloaded March 2009.
- <sup>64</sup> Rosenthal interview, *ibid*.
- <sup>65</sup> Rosenthal interview, *ibid*.
- <sup>66</sup> Rosenthal interview, *ibid*.
- <sup>67</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.27.
- <sup>68</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.27.
- <sup>69</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.49
- <sup>70</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.46.
- <sup>71</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p.48.
- <sup>72</sup> Rosenthal interview, *ibid*.
- <sup>73</sup> Rosenthal interview, *ibid*.
- <sup>74</sup> Hillman, *ibid*, p. 36 et seq.
- <sup>75</sup> See for example this edition – Smith-Baranzini, Marlene (ed), Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe – The Shirley Letters, Santa Clara University/Heyday Books, 2001.
- <sup>76</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.44.
- <sup>77</sup> Rosenthal interview, *ibid*.
- <sup>78</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.63.

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<sup>79</sup> Ano Nuevo Preserve is a few miles north of Santa Cruz in Northern California and is home to a large breeding colony of Elephant seals. Further information can be found at [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=523](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=523)

<sup>80</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.42.

<sup>81</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.81.

<sup>82</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.64.

<sup>83</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.18.

<sup>84</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.66.

<sup>85</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>86</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>87</sup> Noakes, *ibid*, especially 'Imagine my garden' (p. 14), 'How to garden' (p.49), and 'The white garden' (p.46).

<sup>88</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.7.

<sup>89</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.55.

<sup>90</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.52.

<sup>91</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.12.

<sup>92</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.14.

<sup>93</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.31.

<sup>94</sup> Hirshfield, *ibid*, p.87.

<sup>94</sup> Buckley, Christopher and Young, Gary (Eds.), *The Geography of Home: California's Poetry of Place*, Heyday, 1999, p.133.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Hirshfield at [http://blogs.csmonitor.com/the\\_poetic\\_life/2005/05/](http://blogs.csmonitor.com/the_poetic_life/2005/05/)  
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## Appendix I

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### Questions on Cascadia and responses received by email correspondence with Hillman in March and April 2009.

1. Can you say something about the importance of the Californian landscape to you personally, in general terms in your writing, and specifically in your approach to writing Cascadia? Could you expand on the idea that earth/geology is mind and vice versa?

i had the notion that california geology, with its fractures, fragments and fissures, is very like consciousness- not whole, not one thing—and that as a metaphor for human making, geology has everything to do with how we think. psychological expression – what we call spiritual expression, as we see it effected in the syntax of language—is very much like the dynamic processes of earth--

2. Does the term/practise/philosophy of psycho-geography mean anything to you? If it does, do you see any elements of this in your work in this book (for example Woods Edge, A Geology and so on)?

i don't exactly recognize the term, but i intuit a kinship! the term i'm most familiar with right now is ecopoetics— i would say i was attempting to write a feminist psycho-eco-geo-experimental lyric poetics that would fit into the 'nature' tradition but be very different from it— i really wanted to question territory, because of the whole gold-rush metaphor

a friend told me what i had written was a 'geo-theology' – i guess theology might be going too far— i'm not going to get into my metaphysics b/c that would be a very long answer! but i've always been drawn to the notion of a lively and unusual relationship to matter, animisms and so on-- a kind of ur-consciousness—nothing whole or easy—i do like to talk to rocks and i see nothing wrong with having a variety of strange practices that make a continuum with my poetics. the rocks don't boss me around or anything; they just sit there. this is much less harmful than george bush saying jesus told him to invade iraq

3. Can you say comment on the importance of inter-textual work or collaging as one reviewer has called your approach (with reference to Sediments of Santa Monica, A Geology, others)?

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again, i was drawn to the idea of collaging materials, voices, types of knowledge, in this book because that is what earth does—you know, several things are amusing to me about various issues in modernist (and post-modernist) practice—and one of them is that there is a littoral place—a shoreline—where representation and abstraction meet—

let me see if i can explain that in one sentence: in trying to collage materials – taking the materials from other source in exactly a way that i learned from modernist writers—we all did—like stein, pound, eliot—i was trying to make a reality that earth would recognize as itself, yet that would be [obviously] something apart, completely woman-made-- i hope this makes sense

4. Why did you pick out certain words for the corners of each page in A Geology? Could you comment on the arrangement of other poems like Hydraulic Mining Survey (this seems almost concrete) and the various patterns around the mission and other poems? I imagine that this is related to your exploration of boundaries and form, but could you elaborate on this and how form tries to reflect the slippage of landscape, if that is indeed your intention.

in “a geology,” which has to do with addiction and—in a larger sense—the range of human desires, i was drawn to methods of accident, intuition and constraint as additional tools for a compositional method. having read OuLiPo documents i gave myself tasks--...for a while i wrote words on pieces of paper and chose them blindly, 4 at a time, to serve as sort of nails for the corners of pages. then i wrote toward them in a state of emotional fervor. the problem i often have with the mathematical methods is that they become purely intellectual exercises so i wanted to use both ‘lyric and constraint’—both the sense of the materiality and structure of words, and a generalized emotional state to effect the metaphor. my aim, if there was any such thing, was to let the unconscious kept the words in mind, and the ‘rule’ was simply to use the corner words at least once in the page itself. that gave a sort of guidance.

in ‘hydraulic mining survey’—the poem began from a trip i went on with gary snyder and others to see the sites where hydraulic mining for gold had washed the mountainsides into the sacramento river delta. i was moved and horrified by the look of the mountain. again, even though the look is controlled—and the form is about control—it is meant to be the site, the intersection of the uncontrollable and constraint. i turned the stanzas on their sides b/c that’s what the miners had done to the mountains. ugh.

the story with the mission poems is a bit more complex and (since my back is still capable of only short emails!) i have to make it brief: i am enchanted by pattern as an aid to meditation, am in love with abstract patterns in the california missions, and i was drawn the idea that pattern and the daily work of the artist is sacred, not just the faces of jesus and mary and the saints. i had decided by way of formal experiment to make my way around california to investigate the missions, and took my tablet and sat in each mission and wrote about a state of feeling—usually a strange or ‘in between’ feeling of dread or reverence or ecstasy or some combination—in any case, i thought about the

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native people who were asked to work on the art and decoration of the missions—and about the quotidian task of the artist, to praise what is. thus the punctuation around the poem is like the mediation on daily sound—like bird song, or the footsteps, or any sound patterns that keep us company while we are making art. i used punctuation to represent this--

5. In A Geology - what's the drug? nicotine, heroin, both? others? Not that it really matters I guess, but I was just curious.

this poem presents experiences of many people in it, as well as the idea of such an experience—it is meant to address a range of human desires, addictions and a sense of helplessness—not all bad, of course, though the drug-references are not meant to be approving. i had a strong addiction to cigarettes myself, finally finished—but it's not really the point of the poem. as you say it's not as important what is at stake in the inciting force but how the metaphor works—the poem refers to many other forms of desire as well. the implication, of course, is that what holds us to substance, matter and earthly states is the same thing that draws semi-conscious matter unpredictably to itself—and language to itself! i'm hoping the metaphor works in multiple ways.

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## Appendix II

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### Questions on Given Sugar Given Salt and responses received from email correspondence with Hirshfield in May 2009.

1. Can you say something about the importance of the Californian landscape to you personally, in general terms in your writing, and specifically in your approach to writing this collection?

I am a writer who draws on the immediacies around me. What I see, hear, taste, and the small incidents that catch the attention often become the seedstock of new thought. The world is a cornucopia that does not empty, continually spilling new things to notice. Though I've lived in this house and garden since 1984, and in this part of the world, in general, since 1974, new things continue to spill into notice and into the poems. I don't know quite the moment that the redwood tree next to the house grew large enough that a high wind would cause its branches to touch the house--but that very not knowing is part of what awakened the poem "Tree." Redwoods grow very large. Houses don't move away from them. Eventually this will become a real problem. The immensities of tree time (for a coastal redwood) against the brevities of a human life suddenly came to consciousness, and there was the poem. Similarly, the dents in the soft fir floor of this house in "Ladder" had been there for years before I wrote about them.

The newer book, AFTER, is full of poems about the mountain I see from my bedroom window....does it appear in GSGS at all? A poet who works as I do is perhaps like a blind person, tracing the touchable very slowly--for a long time the hands are touching the bark of the fruit trees. Then they touch the mountain, and begin to register its presence and effect.

I live where I do by choice. I have a disposition for wanting a life not entirely dominated by the artifacts and noises of the wholly human, and always thought I'd end up somewhere even less domesticated than this. But this house with its garden and proximity to open space and permeability to the world of creatures will do. That the first poem of the book, The Envoy, has a human space through which rat and snake travel is about right. (That's not my own house, by the way, but a cabin in the monastery, in the middle of a large wilderness area, where I lived for three years in the 70s, and to which I return each summer for a week.) No one really wants a rat in their room, or a snake. Yet I do not want a life undisturbed by the mysteries of such porousness. Life, death, the hidden devourings and hungers and vanishings--for me, this is the breath-catching and awakening edge of aliveness.

2. Does the term/practise/philosophy of psycho-geography mean anything to you? If it does, do you see any elements of this in your work in this book?

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I don't know the term, but it makes an immediate sense to me. I've been known to say that "architecture is fate." I think we are shaped by the shapes we walk among, sleep amid, by their pressures upon us and the liberations they open within us. You might look at the poem in AFTER, "Vilnius," if that's not outside your mandate-- it speaks to the living on a flank of the mountain, where I can see it, rather than up on the mountain (where I would have the "big" view of the bay and all the buildings and cities around it). I didn't covet that view, when I was looking at houses, though I suppose if I'd ended up in a house that had it, my poems would be completely different than they are. Psycho-geography, yes? That what we see every day shapes our world view and selves. This is why it's called "worldview." It is a view. What we look out at looks back into us and alters who we are.

GSGS has a lot of my house in it, as well as the natural world. If I were writing about landscape and this book, I'd include the house poems simply as part of the landscape, continuous with it. The garden too--that mediation realm between wildness and interior. An old apricot tree dropping its fruit in wind becomes an image for a poem about, I suppose, the carpe diem urgencies, in the face of my own aging. The apple of "Apple" is from my own tree. These are intimate intersections.

3. Can you describe how you see the natural world (e.g. in 'Tree', 'Rock' and 'August Day') and the way the human world contrasts with it (e.g. Poem with Two Endings)? Is the human world always villainous?

I may leave the heavy lifting in answering this question to you. I rather liked that I'd managed to bring a shopping mall into my poetry--but I don't see it as villainous. (You may have better insight here than I do, of course; Robert Frost claimed his poems weren't about death.) I see it as a trope for our human world, yes, and its propensity to go on, hugely and indifferently, around the insignificant personal loss--a person in huge grief walks around in a mall, and goes unnoticed. But the poem ends by saying that all of life is just the same, and that this is a good thing, a balance. Death takes life, life takes death, each absorbing the other into its own ongoing story. Poems stop, we notice and mourn the beetle. But I do not intend that poem to argue with, or against, the forces of life-continuance. The title is "Two Endings" because both statements, both views, are completely correct. Everything vanishes. Everything goes on. Where else can it go? And we humans, inside our personal loves and hearts, we cannot take that large view--we miss the vanished, we remember, we cannot, cannot, cannot understand how it happens that we live when the gone one does not.

I think if you look more at the house imagery in the book you'll see that human realm is often treated similarly to the natural world. (If you look and come up with a different answer, let me know.) What I want is permeability, in every crook of my life. Images from industrial life and urban life are rare, but not nonexistent--I liked, for instance, getting the manufacture ingredients of ink into my work, in that poem, or the

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phonograph and other human artifacts in the "On Attending Neither the Lecture...". How do these substances and experiences enter the realm of the archetypally available comprehensions--this for me is one of the interesting things to look at in poetry, and one reason poetry is slow to take up that vocabulary with any success. "Hawk" or "heron" continues to have a resonance that is very different from "airplane," and the gesture of flight brought into the psyche by one is very different from that brought in by the other.

4. I'm interested in the use of abstract nouns - I'm often being "pulled up" for this in my own writing. This seems less problematic/worrisome in America. Is this your impression also? I was thinking of the use of 'immensity' in the last line of 'Tree'.

The use of abstract nouns is also a taboo in American poetry. "Show don't tell", "no ideas but in things" (William Carlos Williams), etc., remain guiding precepts. In general I believe that wariness of the abstract is appropriate. Yet somewhere along the line these naming abstractions entered my work. I just have to hope those poems are effective for others. I'm sure there are readers who find the practice offputting. But these are colors in our palette of comprehension, and I refuse to give them up, since they want to come into my poems. It's just as in the previous book--"heart" is a word any good writing teacher will redline out of a poem, including me. I was visited by "the heart" in poem after poem, and let it happen. A writer who turns persistent visitation away is a writer headed for silence.

5. In 'Elephant Seals' you use some highly inventive imagery to describe the seals. Could you describe your process here? This is the only poem in the collection that has specificity of place, could you say how it came about?

Oh dear. I wish I could remember that poem's gestation better for you. I had a set of a few images first, the only one of which I can be sure of now is the walnuts. The seals were what I thought of when I pondered the images and wondered what work they might do, to become a poem. So one reason the imagery is highly inventive is that it preceded the seals, and then once the seals were there, I had a template of odd comparison already in place. This is not the kind of thing one ought to publicly confess, I suspect, and it is not my normal way of working. But there you have it: I had to give the images a home, they found it in the seals, which only live in a few specific places, so there comes the title. The poem worked its way backward into a particular place in the world, rather than emerged from one. (Once the seals were there, the poem was worked on a great deal more, of course, until it became a wholeness.) But I also don't think the mechanics of a poem's genesis should govern its life, or its reading by others, or even by the poet, once it has become itself. It is now fully seal, just as the lampblack in ink is now fully ink, and the kerosene and glass and light that made it have vanished.

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6. There are a number of poems featuring interior landscapes. Could you explain the importance of such spaces in your work/thought processes?

I think I've already addressed this in earlier answers, to a great degree. I'll add one more dimension to this though-- in 1994 when I was gathering the poems for *Women In Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*, I noticed how many of the poems I found referred to houses, and came to understand the house as an archetype for the self and its larger relationships. Whenever a poet writes of houses, he/she writes of the state of the self. This is also true when a poet writes of exterior landscapes--I've said, somewhere in *Nine Gates* or one of the more recent essays, that every description is a portrait of a state of soul. But the house is especially strongly the domicile and embodiment of psyche. If you look back all the way to the 1994 book, *The October Palace*, you can see that being worked out in a number of poems (not particularly consciously, but not unconsciously either). I feel the palace as an image of our own full multiplicity--a person's rooms are countless. But there are poems that look in a more "homely" way, at "floor," and "door," and "window."

Bachelard's *The Poetic of Space* was an important book for me, so rich I could scarcely bear to read it. Also the architect Christopher Alexander's *"A Pattern Language."* I feel these realms and their effects acutely. The self does not end at the skin.



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## **Appendix III**

### **Copies of Poems - Rich**

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## **Appendix IV**

### **Copies of Poems – Hillman**

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## **Appendix V**

### **Copies of Poems – Hirshfield**

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