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FIELD GUIDES FOR LEAVING:
A POETIC EXPLORATION OF THE HYPERLOCAL IN BURLINGTON, VERMONT

A Thesis Presented

by

Rachel Foster

to

The Faculty of the Honors College

of

The University of Vermont

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Carolyn O'Connor Francis. I love you, Nonnie.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Motivations: Evolution of Place and Poetics	6
Motivations: Climate Crisis	10
Literature Review: American Environmentalism and Ecocriticism	11
Literature Review: Ecopoetry	16
Notes on <i>Field Guides for Leaving</i>	25
<i>Field Guides for Leaving</i>	28
Works Cited	55

Abstract

In times of instability, we look to the land and our community for comfort. *Field Guides for Leaving* is a collection of seventeen (17) poems written through a hyperlocal lens that focuses on minute details about the poet's natural and cultural landscape in Burlington, Vermont. The poems use poignant and succinct observations of the hyperlocal to both represent a longing for stability and create an antidote to instability. To cultivate a sense of place, the poems draw parallels between culture and nature to relate emotional landscapes with physical ones. This thesis contributes to the fields of ecopoetry and green studies in its study of the hyperlocal, intentional place-making, and interest in the relationships that we form with place and nature. The poems grapple with personal, communal, and climatic instability such as graduating from college, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change.

Key words: ecopoetry, green studies, place, hyperlocal, in/stability

Introduction

“The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom...in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification...but in a momentary stay against confusion.”

-Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes”

“[Poetry is] about learning to listen, much like in music....You can train your ears to the earth. You can train your ears to the wind. It’s important to listen and then to study the world, like astronomy or geology or the names of birds.”

-Joy Harjo, “The First Native American U.S. Poet Laureate”

In times of crisis, we look to the land and poetry to find comfort, balance, and stability. Poetry is not just a stay against confusion but a stay against the crisis of instability, whether that instability is founded in a personal, communal, or climatic level. *Field Guides for Leaving* arrives out of a context of crisis of varying degrees and relativity; most immediately, it responds to the impending concept of leaving a locale, specifically Burlington, Vermont, and consequential feelings of distance between the speaker, myself, and the land I currently but will not always inhabit. Other tensions with which these poems grapple include, most urgently, the climate crisis; loved ones living in disparate places; mental health as it interacts with external factors; and the global health crisis of COVID-19.

I have chosen poetry as the medium through which to represent these tensions because poetry, more than prose, allows for incoherence and the representation of tangled sentiments that

are based not in reason or linearity but emotion and imagery. For me, poetry makes sense out of incoherence, and speaks for me when I am unable to speak on my own. U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo, a member of the Mvskoke/Creek Nation, expresses a similar sentiment: “Poetry is the voice of what can’t be spoken, the mode of truth-telling when meaning needs to rise above or skim below everyday language in shapes not discernible by the ordinary mind” (“An Interview with Joy Harjo”).

I officially began this project in June 2019, but like most creative work, it is inaccurate, and even antithetical, to define it as strictly beginning in June. Rather, this project is a more self-aware and intentional iteration of the poetry I have been writing for much of my life, and represents a culmination of my last four years in the scholarly ambience of UVM and the environmental and cultural context of Burlington. I wrote the majority of these poems while planning to move to Utah after graduation, which translated into themes of leaving and displacement, but COVID-19 disrupted these plans. I completed *Field Guides for Leaving* in the midst of a pandemic that forced me to re-evaluate my plans to uproot myself and move across the country. Instead, driven by personal and communal instability as a result of COVID-19, I am rooting myself in Burlington until the present feels more stable. I have drawn comfort and routine from my interactions with place as the pandemic has evolved: daily walks, visits to Red Rocks, birdwatching and skygazing in my backyard. I wait for leaflets to unfold on the lilac trees separating my yard from my neighbor’s. The buds on the rhododendron across the street swell larger every day and soon they will burst with pink blossoms. Writing *Field Guides for Leaving* brought me closer to the natural and cultural ecology of Burlington, and exposed me to the emotional consequences of alienation from place. At the same time, I learned how to build

stability through braiding myself with place, and to nurture a balanced and informed relationship with the land on which I live. My focus on the hyperlocal—minute details such as the cardinals winging behind my house, trembling pine needles in a puddle on campus, snow drifting from a crooked oak limb on North Street—and watching such details change with the seasons gave me a greater respect for and understanding of Burlington. Thus when COVID-19 emerged, I instinctually looked to the land, and in particular the hyperlocal, for respite and wisdom. *Field Guides for Leaving* is the result of that search.

Motivations: Evolution of Place and Poetics

My poetry has always been based on observations of nature. When I lived in the suburbs of Syracuse, New York, I wrote about suburban nature: robins perched on fence posts, a lawn mower shredding the August heat, brilliant green moss crawling out of the cracks in our patio after a storm. During summer visits with my grandparents on the Saint Lawrence River, my writing seemed captivated by the movement of the river and the rhythmic life of the water fowl that inhabit its shores. Great Blue Herons, the solitary kings of the river, became an important symbol of serenity for me, and I look for them everywhere along the east coast.

Moving to Vermont changed my writing. A mentor remarked that he could see my new landscape mirrored in my poetry as I shifted my focus from the suburbs and waterways of upstate New York to natural landmarks in North Western Vermont like Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains. I began to question the concept of home, place, and belonging, as I developed an attachment to this place and managed my dual sense of home in Syracuse and in Burlington.

Having only lived in one place for the first segment of my life, I did not know how to conceptualize or come to terms with belonging to more than one place, or what that meant for the (dis)connection I felt to the land of each place. My discovery shortly after moving here that my maternal grandmother grew up in Burlington further stimulated my preoccupation with place. My family had been rooted in Burlington from the 1860s until my grandmother left for Syracuse in the 1960s, and I was the first to come back. I began to think about places as magnets, and wondered about buried roots that had called me back to Burlington. The fact that my father briefly attended college at SUNY Plattsburgh and also had a connection to Lake Champlain during his youth contributed to my curiosity. Themes of place, movement, and separation began to seep into my writing, mixing with the nature themes that already frequented my notebooks.

When I studied abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, my writing lapsed for a few months, as I found myself lacking my usual source of inspiration. Inundated by the activity of the city, I missed what I considered “nature,” and I didn’t have the space I needed to make concentrated and poignant observations. Being surrounded by another language also distanced me from my poetry, and I hardly wrote during the time that I was there, too busy trying to create and understand the Spanish language to create poetic language. Confronted with both my inability to communicate nuanced ideas in my second language and with the irrelevance of my native poetic language in that space, I developed a frustration with the failure of language. The little writing that I produced in Buenos Aires was riddled with modernist and postmodern motifs like fragmentation and alienation, manifested through white space and other techniques. These concepts and techniques were new for me, and represented a shift in my writing. Still, it was not the few poems that I produced during that time that was most significant to my writing life;

rather, it was what I learned while I wasn't writing that had the biggest impact on the completion of this thesis. My writing patterns have always fluctuated between periods of what I call absorption and creation, a cyclical rhythm that mimics the seasonal growth and hibernation of many plant and animal species. During my lapse in creation in Buenos Aires I was still absorbing poetry, even if I wasn't writing it.

Prior to Buenos Aires, I had always said that I didn't write about people because it was too hard and I liked nature better. I looked for the similarities between people and nature, usually as a means to understand myself and the community I found myself in, but I was always searching for similarities across the divide of humanity and nature. In Buenos Aires that division began to blur. Living in a city made me realize that cities are ecosystems of their own, though on the surface they seem to exist in a different realm than our conception of nature. Thus my conception of nature began to change to include culture. I learned how to pay attention to urban nature: the green *pájaros* that weigh down the powerlines, the jacarandas that turn the city purple in early spring, the two hundred-year-old *gomero* trees that bow in the center of every park. Many of the patterns I witnessed in urban nature also existed in urban culture; we are also weighed down after a rainstorm, and perk up at the first sight of sun. Human chatter also rises in the city at the same time every day according to our natural schedules. We are also crowded and squabble for space, and know how to make a home in the smallest corners of the city. Because I grew up in the suburbs, my understanding of nature has always been linked to culture and civilization. In the suburbs, we control nature; we exploit and wrap ourselves around nature, often painfully. Living in a city enabled me to see the overlap and the potential harmonies between nature and culture.

I returned to Burlington and my last year and a half of college with these thoughts in mind. I had grown quite attached to Buenos Aires over the past five months, and leaving it again jolted my conceptions of home and place. Both comforted and discomforted by familiarity, I reacquainted myself with Burlington. At the same time, just having left a place where I began, built, and left a life and home in a concentrated span of five months, themes of leaving and instability were always on my mind. The reality that I would soon be leaving Burlington was unignorable, especially as I began to plan for my Honors thesis, which would consume my creative brainspace for the remainder of my time at UVM. I felt shaken and rushed, unstable; I found myself, as always, turning to poetry and nature for stability.

I turned mostly to the hyperlocal in my immediate environment, the minute details in the places I frequent the most. The stability I sought in the hyperlocal often co-occurred with change, as the poems in this collection revisit the same images, themes, and places through different temporal, seasonal, and emotional lenses. Paying attention to the hyperlocal is a means to see and understand place, and document the changes that transform, yet also maintain, the world we inhabit. Undertaking this ecopoetry thesis and writing about the hyperlocal helped me stay grounded, and also gave me a medium through which to honor my environment. I wanted to honor and see the locale of Burlington before I left it as a means to bridge the disconnect I felt with the land.

Many of us have this relationship with the land. Americans are “a footloose people,” writes Scott Russell Sanders in *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Sanders 14). The roots we set down are often not permanent, and “the American tendency toward transience” manifests in approximately eleven moves over an average American’s lifetime, according to *The*

Atlantic's synthesis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Chandler). This is not the only factor contributing to our disconnection from the land: we are distracted by technology and occupy the third space of screens for much of the day. Climate change, industrialization, disappearing natural areas, urbanization, and the general consequences of our species' impact on the planet all threaten the Earth's own stability and its presence in our lives. The urgency of the climate crisis places even more pressure on the necessity to find ways to connect with, learn from, and cherish the land, in poetry and in our lives, while we still can.

Motivations: Climate crisis

As our awareness of climate change grows it becomes ever more imperative that we focus on the environment in our art and literature. Since the 1970s the total avian population of North America has decreased by twenty-nine percent, amounting to nearly three billion fewer birds, as a result of habitat loss (Pennisi). July 2019 was the hottest month on record for the planet, beating out July 2016, the previous record-holder (Bateman). As a result of these temperatures, 197 billion tons of ice melted off of Greenland's glaciers into the Arctic Ocean in July 2019, 36% more ice-melt than the historical average for July (Lewis). These changes are happening at home as well; the state of Vermont has a webpage dedicated to the impacts of climate change in Vermont, including shorter winters, higher precipitation, more intense storms, an increase in Lyme-carrying tick populations, and the encroachment of invasive species such as the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid ("Climate Change in Vermont"). The average winter temperature in Burlington has increased by a total of seven degrees Fahrenheit since 1970, the largest jump

nationally (“ON THIN ICE: How Climate Change is Shaping Winter Recreation”). We see this anecdotally too; this past winter was an uneasy one, with a number of unseasonably warm days juxtaposed with ice storms and only a handful of blizzards. This instability affects many spheres, including Vermont’s winter tourism economy, the seasonal migration of birds and insects, the budding of trees and perennial plants, and our emotional reliance on a stable planet.

Climate change is altering the surface of the Earth as we know it, further disrupting our already tenuous relationship with it. Our federal government under the current administration is refusing to take action; rather, it has rolled back or weakened over 90 environmental regulations put in place by past administrations (Popovich et al). The climate crisis is urgent, but politics are not treating it as such.

The humanities and fine arts have an important role in shaping our collective narrative and re-awakening our passion and attention. Bill McKibben, in his introduction to the anthology *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, writes that environmental literature “drove the political side of the [environmentalist] movement more often than the other way round” (*American Earth* xxiii). I believe that ecopoetry in particular, with its attention to detail and the intersections of poetry and environmentalism, has the power to shake us free from the distraction and apathy that envelops us, driving us toward awareness and action.

Literature Review: American environmentalism and ecocriticism

American environmentalism can be traced back to the 19th century and the writings of early thinkers, conservationists, and naturalists such as Vermonter George Perkins Marsh, John

Muir, Florence Augusta Merriam Bailey, Henry David Thoreau, Ellen Swallow, and Graceanna Lewis. The contemporary environmentalist movement has its most tangible roots in the latter half of the twentieth century, and was inspired in particular by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* which gained widespread popularity after its publication in 1962 and catalyzed the social, political, and literary shift towards a more conscious attention to the impact our species has on the planet. *Silent Spring* focuses on the environmental effects of excessive pesticide usage, namely DDT or Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, a chemical compound found in many pesticides advertised for agricultural usage. Carson criticizes companies for misleading marketing and calls attention to a "silent spring" caused by bird and insect death as a result of mass pesticide spraying. The book received overt criticism from chemical companies and evoked outrage among public opinion, but the public won out; two major impacts of *Silent Spring* were the banning of DDT for usage in agricultural pesticide spraying, and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970.

Another influential text from the end of the twentieth century is Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, published in 1989. As a result of this book and further publications, McKibben came to be an important figure in the twenty-first century environmentalist movement. *The End of Nature* has a wider focus than Carson's book, detailing statistical evidence of climate change such as the acidifying of the oceans, the declining population of red spruce trees in Vermont, a declining bird population, and the melting of ice sheets in Greenland. These statistics have been updated and built upon since 1989, so the specifics that McKibben cites are no longer as precise or relevant; however, it is important to note that the concept of climate change was circling in

scientific and literary communities well before the turn of the twenty-first century, influencing scholarly works, activism, and poetry.

Integral to McKibben's text is the vocabulary that he uses to discuss "the end of nature." Nature itself isn't ending—we will still have the Green Mountains and Lake Champlain—but "we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society" (*The End of Nature* 64). It is important to note that this separation between humans and nature is a result of a dualist culture often founded in European tradition. Many cultures such as the Abenaki tribe, who live within the state of Vermont, do not conceptually separate themselves from nature. McKibben is writing from the perspective of the hegemonic culture in the U.S. when he draws a distinction between culture and nature. He considers all things that are touched by humanness as part of the "human" world—for example, a highly touristed river is not quite nature anymore because it exists under a heavy human hand. Similarly, he argues, nature as we know it is ending because climate change and pollution are the results of human impact spilling outside the borders of the human world and even dissolving such borders. There is not a single place on earth that remains even indirectly untouched by humans. We change even the surface of the ice on Antarctica and the acidity of the deep ocean, places where no humans live.

These changes, and the wide breadth of human influence on the planet, can be described by the term "Anthropocene," which was coined in 2000 by Nobel Prize winners Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to mark what they believe is a new geological epoch shaped by human impact (Keller 2). They divided the Anthropocene into 3 stages: the "Industrial Era," from 1800-1945, characterized by the industrial revolution; the "Great Acceleration," from

1945-2015, characterized by the nuclear age and increased technological innovation; and the current stage, in which humans become the “Stewards of the Earth System,” from 2015 to the present (Keller 4). This last stage arose out of the urgency of the Great Acceleration, and is characterized by both the realization that human activity has widespread global impacts, and by the initiation of social and political efforts to modify such impacts (Keller 4). Whether or not we have actually become “stewards” of our planet is debatable; in some cases, personal and political policy do work towards limiting the effects of human activity on the planet. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, the Trump administration has rolled back regulations intended to minimize damage to the environment, and the validity of the climate crisis is still questioned by some politicians. In some ways, then, Crutzen and Stoermer’s publication does not accurately represent the current relationship between the majority of our species and the planet; most of us are not truly “Stewards of the Earth System,” and the Anthropocene has not been declared an official geological epoch. Still, the term “Anthropocene” has at the very least permeated public and scholarly discourse, and represents a shift in attention towards the planetary impact of human activity.

In the twenty years since Crutzen and Stoermer’s publication, the language to describe our climate situation has changed to reflect public opinion, scientific accuracy, and the urgency of climate change. The term “climate emergency” was adopted in 2019 by many scientists, politicians, journalists, and citizens to describe our current climate crisis. Evidence of the emergency include rapidly melting ice sheets in Greenland, thawing permafrost, uncontrollable wildfires, and rising, warming, and acidifying seas (Fountain). In December of 2019, eleven thousand scientists from 153 countries declared in *BioScience*, a journal published through

Oxford University, that “planet Earth is facing a climate emergency” (Ripple et. al 8). Evidence of climate change is now innumerable, and is studied by thousands of scientists all over the world, including at UVM’s own Gund Institute for Environment. Climate change has also become an object of study by ecocritical theorists and scholars, who work in fields ranging from environmental studies to literary studies.

Writer and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh writes in his 2016 text *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, “The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 9). The climate crisis is inextricably linked to capitalism, consumerism, and the commodification of land and resources as objects or producers of desire. We also link these objects to cultural narratives of social values and desires that we consume in literature and media. Ghosh notes the relationship between the appeal of a convertible to notions of freedom and independence: Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, car culture, the cultural allure of road trips, images of “James Dean and Peter Fonda racing toward the horizon,” and of course the massive carbon emissions put out by the motor vehicle industry in the U.S. (Gosh 10). Culture, and by extension literature, has an intimate relationship with how we view nature and how we establish our values; thus literature plays an important role in reshaping our relationship with nature and creating a culture steeped in sustainability.

The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism, edited by Laurence Coupe, is a collection of essays that focus on literature and the environment. Coupe includes essays that discuss the rhetoric of N/nature; the failure of language to depict nature but also our reliance on language to comprehend nature; the ethics of using nature as a muse or object in literature; and, the ability for postmodernism to embody not nihilism but instead, as in Greg

Garrard's contribution to the collection, a "Radical Pastoral" (*The Green Studies Reader*). Coupe highlights thinkers who write critically about the language and meaning of nature and how it manifests in literature. At the same time, Coupe discourages ecocritical discussions that focus only on the nuances of language and linguistic constructs because, as Kate Soper notes in *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, "It is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier" (Soper 151). It is important to create and analyze literature that questions the language and linguistic significance of nature. It is simultaneously important to create literature that bears witness to both nature and the pollution and degradation it undergoes, so we are paying attention to the theoretical discussions surrounding N/nature while also paying attention to nature itself.

Poetry easily inherits these concepts because it already serves as an act of documentation and attention, and engages in discourses of nuanced language and symbolism. Ecopoetry as a branch of Green Studies manifests ecocritical discussions and interweaves them with poetic technique and literary history, to contribute a poetic voice to new environmentalist movements.

Literature Review: Ecopoetry

Ecopoetry draws influence from Transcendentalism, an American literary movement that arose during the Industrial Revolution, and complicates it with tensions surrounding our evolving relationship with the planet and technology. Ecopoetry has been around for decades and can be seen in the twentieth century work of Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, and Mary Oliver, among

others. The movement remained unarticulated in academic terminology until Leonard Scigaji's 1999 text *Sustainable Poetry: Four Eco-poets* and Jonathan Bate's 2000 text *The Song of the Earth*. Scigaji and Bate coined the term "ecopoetics," and represent the beginnings of scholarly awareness of ecopoetry. Bate's text begins with a defiant declaration of the meaning of poetry in the twenty-first century:

This is a book about why poetry continues to matter as we enter a new millennium that will be ruled by technology. It is a book about modern Western man's alienation from nature. It is about the capacity of the writer to restore us to the earth which is our home.
(Bate vii)

Thus was established the intention of ecopoetry. Ecopoetry is related to traditional lyric nature poetry in its focus on the planet, but its political and postmodern context makes it distinct. Ecopoetry uses ecocritical concepts to draw readers back into awareness— awareness of place, of planet, of climate crisis, of N/nature— and work against alienation. At its root, ecopoetry pays special attention to the relationship between culture and nature, often through the lens of the Anthropocene, to create a better understanding of that relationship and, perhaps idealistically, to change it. Ecocritical scholar Lynn Keller uses the term "self-conscious Anthropocene" in her 2017 text *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* to define growing cultural awareness of human activity and its impacts on the planet. Her text examines how the self-conscious Anthropocene manifests in North American poetry, and she selects poems that take "'nature' to be a far more inclusive and culturally imbricated category than has been the case in our traditions of nature writing" (Keller 3). This connects to McKibben's concept of "the end of nature," but instead of declaring that nature has ended, Keller

and other ecocritical scholars rather change the definition of nature to include culture. The changing conditions of our planet affect how we talk about nature in ecopoetry, and our awareness of the role we play in such changes affects how we talk about our relationship to nature. This is the difference between nature poetry and ecopoetry; ecopoetry could instead be called self-conscious nature poetry, as it is nature poetry written through the awareness of climate change, with an enhanced attention paid to our species' relationship with the planet. The shift from nature poetry to ecopoetry was a result of changes in our cultural understanding of nature.

Nature poetry, as it existed during Romanticism, responded to the perceived rift between human society and nature, and represented nature as a refuge to which people could return in order to escape from the man-made industrial world (Keller 10). Ecocritical scholars at the end of the twentieth century wrote about nature poetry in much the same way; Keller writes, "they saw poems about nature as returning readers to a sense of being at home on earth" (Keller 10). Bate mimics this mindset in his text *Song of the Earth*, in which he describes ecopoems as creating imaginary and literary "parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated" (Bate 64). In other words, Bate's definition of ecopoetics refers to poems about nature that restore our connection with nature and our vision of it as a haven and refuge, especially when we are unable to experience that vision in our own environments.

Keller focuses on new manifestations of ecopoetry. She examines poetry that "resists being approached as an escape" from the realities of our world, but instead seeks to explore and illuminate the climate emergency and its implications (Keller 11). The shift in how we represent

nature in poetry is related to our cultural conceptions of nature. We used to perceive nature as “a sacred and vanishing space offering escape from industrialized modernity,” undisturbed from human activity (Keller 13). This is emblematic of Romantic beliefs of the dualism between humans and nature, which encourages humans to escape to nature but removes them from the responsibility to care for it as home. This conception of nature is not a sustainable one, nor is it realistic to our climate emergency. J. Scott Bryson, in his 2005 book *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Contemporary Ecopoetry*, writes that ecopoets cannot play into this dualist Romantic concept of nature, but acknowledges that there is a homecoming that must be had. We are alienated from nature, but rather than use poetry as a Romantic escape, ecopoets must instead be “place-makers, attempting to move their audience out of an existence in an abstract postmodernized space... into a recognition of our present surroundings as place and thus as home” (Bryson 11).

Margaret Ronda’s 2018 text *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature’s End* explores similar shifts in ecopoetry. She uses McKibben’s concept of nature as we know it ending—the nature that exists separate from human influence—as the foundation of her analysis. If nature as we know it is ending—or is already over—what happens to poetry, which has used nature for centuries as a muse and subject?

Ronda begins her introduction with quotations by Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the founders of Transcendentalism, an American branch of Romanticism. Emerson defines nature as “essences unchanged by man: space, the air, the river, the leaf” (Ronda 10). The parallel between Emerson’s and McKibben’s definitions are telling, as Emerson’s writings have become entrenched in American culture, especially in our conceptions of our relation to nature. Another

quotation of Emerson's that Ronda uses, however, is not so idyllic: "All the parts [of nature] incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man" (Ronda 10). This quotation reveals the darker side of our relation to nature, namely the entitlement we feel to the land, which is at the root of human acts such as climate change, non-renewable resource extraction, land exploitation, pollution, and over-consumption.

Even at the heart of Transcendentalism, which worked to re-braid the connection between humans and the land, there existed an ideology of domination, control and exploitation that placed humans as superior to and owners of all flora, fauna, and the land itself. This ideology is embedded in not only societal conceptions of nature but poetic ones, too. Ronda notes that Emerson's suggestion to *use* nature is manifested in "imaginative or material purposes" (Ronda 10). By imaginative purposes, she means literary representations of nature, the ways in which "the poet 'conforms things to his thoughts' in his work, using nature to her own ends" (Ronda 11). Here, Ronda proposes an argument, which I will change into a question: is poetry a form of exploitation of land, as poets use the land as muse and subject?

This is an important question to keep in mind, but is not the extent of Ronda's analysis. Ronda takes the assumption that poets use the land as muse and subject, and examines it through the lens of climate change and other factors that change nature as we know it. If poets have historically meditated on nature as a space of refuge separate from human influence, and as McKibben suggests, that schema of nature no longer exists, Ronda wonders "what happens when the figurative potential for natural renewal or refuge becomes no longer possible" (Ronda 12).

It is in this moment in poetic history that we lie, Ronda argues. The changing conditions of the planet—a warming climate, warming seas, more intense storms, unfamiliar weather

patterns, the movement of species into different regions as a result of a warmer climate—forces poets to reimagine how to represent nature, as we navigate “the changing of American poetry” in a “postnatural age” (Ronda 13). As the condition of our planet becomes “increasingly urgent and seemingly insoluble,” we have no choice, as eco-poets and poets of any sort, but to cope with that change in our poetry (Ronda 20).

We cope with it in various ways. J. Scott Bryson writes that Wendell Berry, Joy Harjo, Mary Oliver, and W.S. Merwin all have a dual pursuit in their poetry “(1) to *create place*, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us; and, (2) to *value space*, recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable” (Bryson 8). Berry’s poems are quiet and reverent examinations of his environment, and are most often written in the third person, valuing space by removing the “I” from his poems, though it is clear the “I” is an essential part of making such observations. Conversely, Oliver’s poetry often includes her direct point of view, but many of her poems also feature contemplations of how she is just an observer, and even an intruder, to the world she describes. Oliver’s poems simultaneously test the bounds of language to capture the wild, pose subtle political contexts, and display an acute awareness of the delicate relationship between people and the planet. Her manifestation of these themes is especially powerful in “Entering the Kingdom,” from the 1979 collection *Twelve Moons*. The speaker describes being in a forest and being seen by crows as “possibly dangerous” (Oliver 21). Then the speaker writes, “The dream of my life/ Is to lie down by a slow river/ And stare at the light in the trees—/ To learn something by being nothing/ A little while but the rich/ Lens of attention” (Oliver 21). In other words, she wants to enter and belong to not just the place but the space of the kingdom, and be allowed to stay there. She wants

to be a piece of the wilderness she admires. But the poem ends with her leaving the kingdom. The crows balk at her and she knows she must leave because “They know me for what I am./ No dreamer,/ No eater of leaves” (Oliver 21). This is a perfect example of Oliver creating place while honoring space. Though the speaker wants to remain in the place she has described so beautifully, she knows that she does not belong there. The space of the forest, and any other wilderness, does not belong to her. Her inherent presence tarnishes the sacred space of the forest. The only way to really cherish it is to cherish it for a moment, then leave and let it exist on its own.

Derick Burleson takes a different approach to ecopoetry in his poem “Outside Fairbanks,” published in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* in 2013. His poem focuses more intently on the overlap of culture and nature, describing with patient detail the hyperlocal and place-names of Fairbanks, Alaska such as “the valley,” “gold mine,” “aspen,” “late fall,” and “Gold Hill Road” (Burleson 198). Burleson invites us to understand the *where* of the poem, so we can enter into the place with him. While he does so, he also offers other details that tell us about the ecological circumstances in which this place finds itself. In his observations, Burleson notes “the poison pond the gold/ mine left,” the mist as it “gilds the golden/ aspen leaves with acid dew,” and watches as “a semi rumbles down Gold/ Hill Road below, hauling who/ knows what hazard toward town” (Burleson 198). Burleson uses these hyperlocal remainders to comment on the everyday destruction caused by human industrial activity. He juxtaposes the remainders with details that reflect natural beauty, such as wild cranberries, the northern lights, mist, and chickadees. The poem acknowledges that these are “such strange juxtapositions” to encounter, beauty and destruction existing simultaneously (Burleson 198). It is the same even within his

home: “And I wonder// what gasses my oil stove breathes/ out, keeping me close and cozy/ while the cold season rises” (Burlison 198). With this line, our awareness of place is further refined. We can see Burlison standing beside the heat of his oil stove in his cold kitchen, watching the morning rise around him and reflecting on the previous night. An underlayer of intimacy is added with this new detail. The poem speaks to the parallel realities outside Fairbanks of the aftermath of human influence, the beauty and resilience of nature, and the intimate human life that lives in and around the affected place. We gain this information from Burlison’s commitment to the hyperlocal, and the attention he pays to his immediate culture and nature.

Ed Roberson’s 2010 collection *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* is very different from Oliver and Burlison’s iterations of ecopoetry. His poetry, rife with postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, experimentation with form, deconstructed language, white space, and destabilized conceptions of time, place, and space, is an example of the postmodern pastoral. Roberson examines our conception of and relation to nature, and interrogates the ability of language to discuss and represent the world. Although Roberson destabilizes language with disjointed syntax and unconventional forms of punctuation, his book also depends upon vocabulary. The distinction between “Earth” and “World” is present in the title of the collection and is contextualized throughout.

The tension between language dismissal and language reliance is clear in two adjacent poems in the first section of Roberson’s book: “11. What Word,” and “We look at the world to see the earth.” “What word” questions language and privileges “this caught breath almost a silent/ language among us” over spoken or written language (Roberson 19). Out of that

breath bursts “The wakened world” (Roberson 20). The syntax in this poem is difficult to follow, as it does not read smoothly but is disjointed by space, punctuation, and the language itself:

“word bubble
breath break that wakens . . . and we would rise
. . .” (Roberson 20).

The following poem, “We look at the world to see the earth,” relies on language to distinguish between the vocabulary “world” and “earth,” a conceit that works as the foundation of the collection. The poem ends with a clear distinction: “*the world/ is mortality, the earth goes beyond us/ is the ours of cosmos/ is our hour of cosmos*” (Roberson 22). In other words, “world” is the human experience, which inhabits but is not always part of “earth.” “Earth” is immortal, and is not reliant on the human population but holds and is affected by the “world.” Roberson writes at the heart of the poem, “We look upon the world/ to see ourselves in the brief moment that we are of the earth” (Roberson 22). He repeats this second line in the next stanza, breaking the line into fragments: “to see ourselves/ in the brief moment/ that we are/ of the earth” (Roberson 22). This line, at the heart of the poem, which ends the section entitled “Topoi”—an element of Ancient Greek rhetoric meaning line of argument—is the thesis of the collection. Roberson is looking at the world to see the earth, with the knowledge that he must also see the earth before the end of the world.

This is the intention behind Roberson’s collection. His method for carrying out his thesis takes many forms, but the form that is most relevant to my process is his appreciation of the hyperlocal of the world, using it to see the earth. He examines the small things—gulls turning in the air, spider webs, antennas, cicadas—to see the earth. His collection does not fall under Imagism, but the images that he does use are delved into profoundly, giving them a deeper poetic

and conceptual life. This imaginative view of the hyperlocal, using it to connect to larger themes of climate crisis, place-making, and space-awareness, parallels my attention to the hyperlocal in my poetry, though my style and reliance on language tends to align more closely with Oliver and Burleson's poetry. All of these poets, and the myriad others whose work I have absorbed in the anthologies *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, *Urban Nature: Poems about Wildlife in the City*, and *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral*, have influenced my work in *Field Guides for Leaving*.

Notes on *Field Guides for Leaving*

This collection of seventeen (17) poems is a blend of postmodern pastoral influences and lyric poetry. The poems grapple with the usefulness of language but still strive to render the world in vivid imagery. My poetry engages with and contributes to critical conversations surrounding place and nature, and contextualizes them in the hyperlocal of Burlington, Vermont. This is accomplished through a mixture of form and free verse poetry, though even in the form-based poems I do not strictly adhere to traditional structures. Some poems employ postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, white space, experimental visual format, and nontraditional language; however, I refrain from destabilizing readers, as I hope that my poems can represent instability but not exacerbate the instability and alienation from place that many readers already feel. Rather, I hope that my poetry can be a haven when nature cannot be. Through *Field Guides for Leaving*, I endeavor to cultivate a sense of place that will transfer

beyond the bounds of this collection and into the ways that we interact with place and land on an everyday basis, bearing witness to and cherishing the hyperlocal.

The following notes on the poems are not intended to explain or give overt coherency to the poems. I believe this would contradict the art of poetry, which I consider to be its reliance on image and language rather than rationale to create meaning. I also do not want to superimpose my voice as the poet over readers' interpretations of my poems. Still, I believe it is important for the purpose of this thesis to briefly contextualize these poems and discuss their forms and roots.

Other than the preface, the poems are organized chronologically and are split into four sections, based on the seasons and delineated by fragments of the extended villanelle “portraits of movement.” Each line of the villanelle highlights an observation of the hyperlocal in Burlington. The refrains represent the duality of movement and stillness, creating a dialogue between the speaker and her environment.

- Preface: This serves to acknowledge and honor the unbridgeable space between the speaker (myself) and my environment.
- “portraits of movement: I (*summer*)”
 - “Sonnet for beginnings and endings,” a Shakespearean Sonnet
 - “Summer evenings after rain,” linked haikus followed by a tanka
 - “¿Cómo te va?,” a free-verse question poem
- “portraits of movement: II (*fall*)”
 - “506 North Street,” a free verse poem named after my street address

- “Haibun for Iberia Flight #6253,” a Haibun or prose poem followed by a haiku
- “And then it will be Friday,” a free-verse poem with the title and first line borrowed from overheard dialogue in Kentucky
- “Staghorn Sumac,” an imitation of Wendell Berry’s “The Appletree”
- “portraits of movement: III (*winter*)”
 - “Epistle for the crows on December 11th,” an epistolary or letter poem
 - “Acidifying,” a free-verse poem
 - “It’s too cold to open the windows,” a free-verse poem
 - “To Dismantle,” a monostich and extended metaphor poem
 - “January is about survival,” a catalogue poem inspired by a blog post by the Vermont Center for Ecostudies about how animals survive in the winter
 - “Snow peels up,” a free-verse poem inspired by Ed Roberson
- “portraits of movement: IV (*spring*)”
 - “Concussion,” a free-verse poem, inspired by Ed Roberson
 - “how do you know when to put anything anywhere?,” a monostich poem intended as a continuation of “To Dismantle,” hence the same visual format



Field Guides for Leaving

Rachel Foster

Contents

Preface	30
portraits of movement: I	31
Sonnet for beginnings and endings	32
Summer evenings after rain	33
¿Cómo te va?	34
portraits of movement: II	35
506 North Street	36
Haibun for Iberia flight #6253	37
And then it will be Friday	38
Staghorn Sumac	39
portraits of movement: III	40
Epistle for the crows on December 11th	41
Acidifying	42
It's too cold to open the windows	44
To Dismantle	45
January is about survival	47
Snow peels up	49
portraits of movement: IV	50
Concussion	51
how do you know when to put anything anywhere?	53

Preface

I don't know enough
about that grey bird
nesting
over the intersection
of Pearl
and North Union.

portraits of movement: I
summer

lake champlain drips into stillness
a robin blinks toward the dawn on north street
i churn in my living room

the sky blooms wide over camel's hump
yesterday's heat buzzes in the windowpane
lake champlain drips into stillness

bikers cough exhaust fumes on North Winooski
seagulls catch wind on their wings and spin over the lake
i churn in my living room

Sonnet for beginnings and endings

We do not fit
together today. Nettle
stings my palm,
gravel like shards of sun
in my eye.
I squint against the shimmering
surface of the lake.
The world is too big
to see with both eyes,
so I close one.
Yellow flits
between tangled birch leaves,
some memory of spring.
Today, August,
clouds the back of my throat;
heat rumbles
in the west.
A garbage truck coughs to life,
dragging its tired
bones down the street.
The pen between my fingers
quivers.
I am afraid of the emptiness
beneath my second-story window:
no roof, no tree branches, just a web of air.

Summer evenings after rain

The gnats rise to hum
the air away. Raindrops pearl
on the windowpane.

A pair of robins
flicks water from their blue wings,
dives into the brush.

Wind blinks a response
to the rustling leaves: yes,
let us move slowly;

let us meditate
on the dewdrops bubbling
on the lawn; let us crawl

with the moss across
the oak's wrinkles, bark itching
our skin. I long towards

gracefulness. Puddles
collect twigs in the driveway,
a prelude to fall.

Remember the squirrel
that climbed headfirst down the ash,
disappeared in sun?

This time we won't catch minutes
in our teeth before we swallow.

¿Cómo te va?
for ES

How does the world spin
for you? Does the wind catch

in the tangles of your hair?
Where does it hurt

when the cardinal bites you awake?
If you took a step

into the glitter of your driveway
would you taste cement

in the grooves of your toes?
Would you turn your head

sideways and count the ants scaling
your garage door? Is it really yours

if your lease ends in May?
What do you call a place

that cradled you for four years?
How many hometowns

can you collect beside the lint
in your car's cup holders?

When you leave
what will the sky look like

when it isn't moving?

portraits of movement: II

fall

morning is two hours late and lonely
maple leaves cradle raindrops thinner than the white of my pinky nail
lake champlain drips into stillness

spiderwebs stretch across a birch limb at perkin's pier
the sky drifts towards sunset through the smudges on my glasses
i churn in my living room

how do the leaves decide when to loosen?
raindrops fall like nickels on the darkened street
lake champlain drips into stillness

506 North Street
for DC

Dev can name all the leaves taped to our kitchen cabinets.
Tulip poplar, sugar maple, dogwood. Light breaks
on the yellow walls at 4 pm every day, like an egg yolk spilling

through the window. On good mornings
the kitchen smells like caramelized onions and coffee
and I listen to chickadees as I wash my dishes. The red oak

in our backyard lost its leaves last week. The robins flew off
to Mexico so I sit in the silence of my sunny kitchen
and think back to July. Cottonwood fell like snow

over our driveway. Rhododendron bloomed in clumps
in our neighbor's front yard, but now it curls
on our kitchen table beside car keys and trembling aspen.

I do not know what month it is. If I think hard enough,
I can smell lilac musk spinning
through our open windows, that day in early June

when we stacked lemon slices and tubs of Greek
yogurt on the counter to wait for our new refrigerator.
One day I would like to break

the sky open and throw myself into it, but for now I look at the gingko
leaves lying flat on the windowsill like a pair of small hands.
They cradle the air. I cradle them back.

Haibun for Iberia Flight #6253

We trip over air currents and home in the grey plush of our seats. Seatbelts click closed. I'm assigned to 33B, middle seat, above the wing. Like an astronaut ripping their suit open and pouring out, I dissolve into the air, my cells glinting in the moonlight like stars. I will land somewhere in Europe or the Atlantic Ocean or keep drifting in the lower kilometers of the stratosphere. I gargle with measurements so it sounds like I know where I am. The plane bounces off clouds like a pinball. Turbulence shakes its spine. I am soaring in my seat: 33B, middle seat, above the wing. My watch says 6 pm, but when I land in New York 6 hours from now it will still be 6 pm, and I will drag my suitcase through the fluorescence of the airport wondering about chronology. A man behind me snores through dinnertime, when the flight attendants rattle their carts down the aisle, speaking in Spanglish: *pollo o pasta*, chicken or pasta, *pollo o pasta*, chicken or pasta, *pollo o pasta*, chicken or pasta, I get lost. In 33B, middle seat, above the wing. The engine of the airplane sings beneath my feet. I rip the split ends from my hair because only I get to decide how I split and where I end. If I keep picking there will be nothing left of me but dust, but at least I'll be small enough to hide in the hems of the seat cushions. I will lose all form and formula. I will slip right through to the dark.

I litter the ground
with skin cells. Keep a part
of my body airborne.

And then it will be Friday
for EA and CF

Tomorrow is Thursday,
and it is going to be Thursday all day.
The sun will rise in central Kentucky
and spill over the sheared cornfields,
nuzzling into the collarbones of corn stalks
until the ground hatches awake with light.
I will watch the air flush amber
through the smear of the backseat window.
Tufts of orange grass will bleed gold
on the hillside. If I try to name them,
they will shrink.

In Vermont, the day will open
quietly. Snow will stumble into waking
and gather in formless clumps
beside our driveway. The marigolds
we planted in August will glimmer
a shadow of a color. By midday,
they will drown in snow.
The sun will seep into the sky
and never rise.

Staghorn Sumac
after Wendell Berry

In the essential movement
of things, staghorn sumac
stretches out, yawning
among the half-lands
of 89 South,
raising fists of red.
Phragmites glisten,
wind-caught, with a sun
foreign to them
and their noxious roots;
staghorn sumac stretches out
behind the gleam of the phragmites'
wavering. The thicket
of branches and twigs is
also a kind of necessary
movement—freckled with leaves,
rustling and crooked light
imposed on the still
lineaments of December, a cluster
of bird sounds among them.
Staghorn sumac crawls
down 89 South, the
shock of its red
fists cracking the grey sky,
continuing the dogged
congruity and reach
of its insistent growth;
black-capped chickadees appear
and disappear, flickering
among the crescendo.

portraits of movement: III

winter

icicles lose themselves in the backyard
frost carves hummingbird bones into the windows
i churn in my living room

footprints pressed into snow freeze at dusk
we are still even when we are not
lake champlain drips into stillness

pine needles tremble beneath ice on the waterman green
we are moving even when we are not
i churn in my living room

Epistle for the crows on December 11th

You roost in the skies
over Main Street. The sidewalks
beneath you are fractured with ice
and I roll down my car windows
to listen to you roar.

Ten blocks west,
Lake Champlain churns
with sunset. I watch it swell
through my windshield
as I somersault over the cliff.

I am afraid of the wordlessness
of your howl.
If you dove from the air
to tear open my chest,

I would let you.

Acidifying

The red oak arching over North Street
is losing some snow tonight.
Snowdrift crawls like fingers
across the road. I pause
my walk downtown, untuck my chin
from my coat collar, reverse the path
of the fallen with my eyes.
Snowflakes melt into acid
on my tongue. Later, I'll google, *is acid rain a bad thing?*
but for now I collect the sun
draining from the sky,
I collect the cold
pressing into my skin,
I collect the Old North End,
hushed, huddled
behind warm windows,
drinking tea, sizzling onions
for soup on the stovetop.

On my old street corner, I step into the slush
to let a snowplow blunder
down the sidewalk.
The man driving it does not look at me.
I wonder what the sky
looks like in Montana
right now. I can only see this one,
clouded, a strip
of electric blue on the horizon.

Today, rattling up Smugglers' Notch
on the ski lift, I rise above snowy evergreens,
curled into themselves like bleached
coral reefs in the Caribbean. Clouds crumple
over the peak of Morse Mountain.
The snowflakes plunging
towards the Notch
prick my cheeks and curdle

on my tongue, so I spit them out

and wait to feel the tremor
of their landing.

It's too cold to open the windows

I hope the neighbor still turns
his spoon in his cereal bowl at dawn,
and clinks it in the kitchen sink
a few feet and two windows from my sunroom.

We'll have to think of new words
to describe the sky
when the ones we have
stop working, but at least

the sun will still turn
in the bowl
of the sky each night
before sinking into Lake Champlain.

I'll peer through the silence
at the last strip of pink on the horizon
and let it cleave me open
in the shape of its name.

To Dismantle
for EA

Tonight I brought the blizzard
in my head on a run
downtown to scatter

my thoughts over Church Street
and the brittle air of December
ripped my lungs to shreds—

strung bronchi
around the honey locusts
shivering out of the sidewalk,

flung alveoli
into the stale plateau of the sky
where they splintered like stars—

so I cowered lungless
beneath the blue lights of the Christmas tree
to regenerate before walking home,

and an hour later, eating tacos
in the dim of my living room,
the sky gasped and spit snow

over the street, even though yesterday
it was 50 degrees outside
and I took my jacket off as I walked up the hill,

my cells straining
towards the strange sun,
which flickered in the white sky

and pooled in my collarbones like a question
none of us have an answer to,
so when the sky dropped

to the ground tonight and shattered
like an eggshell upon the muddy land,
I broke myself open;

I clamored to the front yard
to catch my alveoli on my tongue
and swallow myself home.

January is about survival
after the Vermont Center for Ecostudies

January 10th

Leaves rattle on the pale oaks.
An empty maple singing
with starlings drips
toward the ground.
January,
and the treeline
is still falling apart.
A cardinal smears red
across my backyard
and plucks a puckered
holly berry from the air.
The branch twitches.
The cardinal cracks open
and rejoins the wind.

January 11th

Unshed rain sags
on the powerlines.
Water drips from the gutters
into the spongy grass.
The two-tone song of a chickadee
flashes from the tangles
of the oak in my backyard.
Raindrops break
over my forehead
and soak into my coffee.
The soil heaves
open, departs the Earth.
I hum in response.
The sidewalk shuffles over
to make space.

January 12th

The morning whistles.
The iced branches
of the rhododendron
across the street
clang together like bells.
Wind twines
up the frozen trunk
of the cherry tree
next door. I trace
its twigs, breaking off icicles
the size of my pinky.
The tree creaks
when I bend it towards me.
If I exhale,
we will shatter.

Snow peels up

snow peels up
 from the edge
 of the lawn

light splinters in ice
 cracks against the green
 bursting from the grass it's february

it's february
 it's feb
 ruary—

buds push up
 from the edges
 of an oak on north willard

i want to tell it about time
 i want to apologize without my tongue

if you are afraid
 of inertia
 (do not) look

at that birch tree
 stark and aching
 over the sidewalk

in the light of 4 pm
 i can feel my bones
 brighten

i crunch on ice
 someone else will scatter
 across town

i want to tell it about time
 i want to apologize without my tongue.

portraits of movement: IV

spring

seventeen robins bud from the ash trees on mansfield avenue
i scramble over boulders and broom moss at red rocks
lake champlain drips into stillness

crushed cherries bleed into the sidewalk on north prospect
a robin rings on a chimney top
i churn in my living room

seagulls scream over the silence of college street
sun leaks upon the floor
lake champlain drips into stillness
i churn in my living room

Concussion

 crows flock to the trees
in my backyard
 dropping stars
 like pebbles
behind them.
 it is night.
 hours build like fog
over the lake
 and surge over my head.
 water dissolves
my thoughts;
 i do not remember
 if coherence
is more painful
 than fragments.
 the crows
settle down clicking
 in the vast crowns
 of the oaks.

the electric guitar

in the living room

grates against my skull.

i tear out my eyes

and dig for tree roots

in the front yard

to lie down inside them.

how do you know when to put anything anywhere?

I stand in line beside the ash trees
at the bottom of Loomis
my hands outstretched to cup the light,

giddy in a city tumbling over itself
on the first day of sun in March
to touch the scattered bits of sky

that pool in our yellow balconies,
exposed street corners,
and thawing crags at Oakledge,

so when I leave the house and lurch west
towards the lake and the people
taking their lunch breaks at Perkin's Pier,

I stop on Loomis to gather some light
for the shaded streets downtown
because every day I wait for buds

on the gingkos of South Winooski
and if I bring them sun they might blink
their chartreuse heads at me;

but a construction truck blaring the wrong way
down North Union bites the sun into dust,
and if I hold it I'll fade too, so this time I don't look

at the gingkos when I glitch downtown
to the boulder outside Leunig's
where I sit to watch the world roll by,

everyone walking with their jackets
off, tripping parallel to one another;
it's the first good day

and nothing has fallen apart yet,

we walk too close to each other
and pass coffee from hand to hand—

yes, I would cement into the pavement
if I could, stay there like the bottle caps
and fruit stickers browning in the cracks

so I never forget what a memory is
and when it creases the power lines
to ring in the dawn, I'll keep it

inside my sweater seams
and I won't think about the stack
of W2s and medical bills that spills

across our kitchen table because
nobody remembers to call the post office
when they stumble between cities,

and we don't remember to tell the trees
either, we peel ourselves away
like paper birches shedding bark

over the sidewalk on upper Main,
throwing their roots skyward and leaving
without waiting to be found.

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