

The Forest, The Desert and The Road:
Chronotopes of American Spaces in
Twentieth-century Long-form Poetry;
and a Creative Work, 'Hotel America'

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Abstract

Part One (60%): The Forest, the Desert and the Road: Chronotopes of American Spaces in Twentieth-century Long-form Poetry

In this thesis I address the following questions: what is an ‘American space’? How is this space represented in, produced and/or contested by literary texts? Using the Bakhtinian theory of chronotopes, I undertake an analysis of the ways in which three twentieth-century long-form poems—Susan Howe’s ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in ‘Time’, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*—represent, produce and contest specific American spaces (‘America’ defined as the contiguous United States). The key chronotopes identified for this study are: the forest, the desert and the road. I argue that these chronotopes, each corresponding to a critical place and time in American history, are employed by Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser, to unsettle national mythologies and narratives of settlement, in particular the ‘frontier thesis’ advanced by influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner. My thesis, which reads the three primary texts alongside broader cultural and historical contexts, is situated at the intersection between literary studies, American studies, history and cultural geography.

Part Two (40%): ‘Hotel America’

In *The American Scene*, Henry James writes: ‘one is verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just *be* the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself’. In the creative component of this thesis, I present a collection of poetic narrative sequences, titled ‘Hotel America’, which centres on the chronotope of the hotel in American history and culture. Each sequence is set within a real American hotel, from geographically and historically diverse locations and times. In this creative work, I extend upon my analyses of the chronotopes in the critical component of this thesis to explore the ways in which the chronotope of the hotel has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the composition of American spaces.

Declaration page

This is to certify that:

- (i) this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing;
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- (iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Bella Li

Preface

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Text from Susan Howe, ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’, in <i>Singularities</i> (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 14–15.	p. 44 (Figure 1.1)	N (redacted from open-access version of thesis)
Image and text from Michael Ondaatje, <i>The Collected Works of Billy the Kid</i> (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 5.	p. 71 (Figure 2.1)	N (redacted from open-access version of thesis)
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**Part One: The Forest, the Desert and the Road: Chronotopes of American Spaces
in Twentieth-century Long-form Poetry**

Introduction: Of Poetry, Chronotopes and American Spaces

In ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’,¹ historian Frederick Jackson Turner charts the origins and political and cultural development of the nation through the concept of a westward-moving frontier. The term ‘frontier’ is not defined. It manifests, according to Turner, in a range of specific ‘types’: among them economic, agricultural, racial and political. Underpinning all of these types, however, and determining their progression, are the geographical frontiers: a catalogue of natural features—mountains, rivers, deserts, plains—constituting a ‘wilderness’ that initially confronts and then is overcome by ‘civilisation’. This conception of the land as wilderness, and of a single line advancing west in neat stages, is now recognised as a colonial fiction. With its omissions and oversimplifications, Turner’s frontier thesis has been subject to sustained criticism over the last seventy years and is now thoroughly discounted as fact.² As New Western Historian Patricia Limerick observes: ‘Turner was, to put it mildly, ethnocentric and nationalistic. English-speaking white men were the stars of his story: Indians, Hispanics, French Canadians, and Asians were at best supporting actors and at worst invisible. Nearly as invisible were women, of all ethnicities.’³ Yet, it is as *fiction* that this story of American origins and development had, and maintains, its cultural power.

Turner’s myth of the American frontier is a ghost in the machine of American history, inaugurating in popular consciousness the figuration of a distinctly American space, producing a distinctly American culture and society. As Turner put it: ‘The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.’⁴ What is this ‘American space’ that Turner found seeded in the frontier and that has persisted beyond its limits? Of what is it composed? How is it represented in, produced and/or contested by poetic texts? In this thesis, I seek to address these questions on both critical and creative grounds. In the critical component of this thesis, I use the Bakhtinian theory of chronotopes to undertake an analysis of the ways in which three twentieth-century long-form poems—

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover, 2010), 1–38. Delivered as a paper at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, 21 July 1893; first published in the *Report of the American Historical Association for 1893* (199–227), then in the first edition of *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920). References in this thesis are to the Dover edition.

² See, e.g., Gregory H. Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 8–16.

³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), 21.

⁴ Turner, *Frontier*, 1.

Susan Howe's 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time',⁵ Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*⁶ and Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*⁷—represent, produce and contest specific American spaces. 'America' is defined for the purposes of this thesis as the contiguous United States. The key chronotopes identified for my study are: the forest, the desert and the road. I argue that these chronotopes, each corresponding to a critical place and time in American history, are employed by Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser, to unsettle national mythologies and narratives of settlement, in particular Turner's frontier myth. My thesis, which analyses the three primary texts in light of their broader cultural and historical contexts, is situated at the intersection between literary studies, American studies, history and cultural geography.

In the creative component of this thesis, I present a collection of poetic narrative sequences, titled 'Hotel America', which centres on the chronotope of the hotel in American history and culture. In *The American Scene*, Henry James writes: 'one is verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just *be* the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself'.⁸ The hotel and its variants (including the inn and the motel) has been termed a 'non-place' by spatial theorist Marc Augé—that is, a space 'of circulation, consumption and communication',⁹ one of the products of 'supermodernity'¹⁰—and is a prominent and ubiquitous feature of twentieth- and twenty-first century American spaces. Each sequence of this creative work is set within a real hotel, from geographically and historically diverse locations and times within America. In this creative work, I extend upon my analyses of the chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road in the critical component of this thesis, to explore the ways in which the chronotope of the hotel has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the composition of American spaces.

Significance and relevance of primary texts

Each of the primary texts in my study is situated at a critical place and time in American history. Howe's 'Articulation' takes as its subject matter The Falls Fight, a violent skirmish between Puritan settlers and Native Americans in seventeenth-century New England. Ondaatje's *Collected Works* centres on the final year in the life of the infamous outlaw Billy the Kid in New Mexico and Arizona at the close of the nineteenth century.

⁵ Susan Howe, 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', in *Singularities* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1990) ('Articulation').

⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) (*Collected Works*; *CW*).

⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, 'The Book of the Dead', in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Muriel Rukeyser (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978) (*Book of the Dead*; *BOD*).

⁸ Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 102 (original emphasis).

⁹ Marc Augé, *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 2008), viii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* is an examination of the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy, one of the worst industrial disasters in US history, in 1930s America. In their engagement with these specific places and times each poet helps to elucidate the nature of American spaces, and show how poetry may work to intervene in their representation and production.

In this study, I collect my long-form poems under the historical period in which they were written and published—the twentieth century. ‘Articulation’ was first published in 1987,¹¹ *Collected Works* in 1970,¹² and *Book of the Dead* in 1938.¹³ Rukeyser’s work has been situated within the Objectivist strand of modernism;¹⁴ Howe’s has been associated with the postmodern LANGUAGE poetry movement;¹⁵ and Ondaatje’s has been categorised as postmodern ‘historiographic metafiction’.¹⁶ These associations, classes and categories, however, are by no means settled: Aarthi Vadde, for instance, contends that Ondaatje’s works ‘exceed the label of historiographic metafiction’;¹⁷ William Montgomery argues that ‘Howe is typically read as a major voice within the American late modernist tradition’, rather than the postmodernist one;¹⁸ and Rukeyser’s work has historically, as Adrienne Rich notes, presented a difficult case for canon makers.¹⁹ As Vadde argues, ‘history, like modernity, is an unfinished project and, more importantly, an unstable genre’.²⁰ In my analyses of these three long-form poems, in which the unstable genre of history features, my intention is not to make general statements about long-form poetry of the twentieth century, or to narrowly locate these particular texts among various

¹¹ Susan Howe, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (Windsor, VT: Awede Press, 1987).

¹² Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1970).

¹³ Muriel Rukeyser, ‘The Book of the Dead’, in *U.S. 1* (New York: Covici Friede, 1938).

¹⁴ See Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For a discussion of Objectivism, a movement of the 1930s, see 23–7.

¹⁵ See Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). Reinfeld acknowledges Howe’s distancing of herself from this movement (126). Regarding Howe as a postmodern poet, see Jessica L. Wilkinson, ‘The Contemporary Poet-historian and the Articulation of Marginal Voices’ (PhD Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2010), 7; and Paul Naylor, *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 18.

¹⁶ See Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press), 1988: ‘Historiographic metafiction questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing, of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we *make* sense of it’ (22).

¹⁷ Aarthi Vadde, ‘National Myth, Transnational Memory: Ondaatje’s Archival Method’, *Novel* 45, no. 2 (2012): 257–75, 258. See also Lee Spinks, *Michael Ondaatje* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 53.

¹⁸ William Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), x.

¹⁹ Adrienne Rich, introduction to *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, ed. Jan Heller Levi (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), xi–xvi, xiii. See also Chapter Three of this thesis.

²⁰ Vadde, ‘National Myth’, 257.

twentieth-century literary periods or movements. In his reading of *Collected Works*, Lee Spinks perspicaciously argues that by ‘rushing intemperately to a “postmodern” reading of the poem, we risk effacing its most enigmatic and troubling feature: the sheer *unreadability* of the figure of Billy himself.’²¹ Much of the close textual analysis I undertake in this thesis is an attempt to grapple with precisely this feature of all three of my primary texts. I emphasise, instead, a certain nexus between text and historical and social context; one that is of significance in relation to the object of this study—American spaces—as well as to my central analytic tool—the chronotope. Moreover, the particular figuring of American space with which each primary text engages—Turner’s frontier thesis—traces its own genesis and ascendancy to the turn and course of the twentieth century.²²

Though I class my primary texts under the genre of ‘poetry’, ‘Articulation’, *Collected Works* and *Book of the Dead* are all generic hybrids—each consists of a combination of lineated poetry, prose poetry and prose, as well as, in the case of *Collected Works*, visual materials such as photographs and illustrations. This feature of all three texts has been well remarked in the critical literature. As Jessica Wilkinson argues, ‘Howe develops an innovative perspective on historical writing and recovery, infusing history with fiction, rejecting metanarratives, and breaking the rules set by traditional narrative forms’.²³ Of *Collected Works* (which has been variously described as a ‘scrapbook’,²⁴ an ‘album’,²⁵ a ‘long poem’,²⁶ a ‘serial poem’²⁷ and ‘a poetic song-cycle’),²⁸ Marc Colavincenzo notes that ‘[a]lthough it is listed among Ondaatje’s poetic works usually, the book absolutely resists all genre classifications due to this hybrid mix’.²⁹ *Book of the Dead* has similarly been characterised by critics such as Shoshana Wechsler as ‘a hybrid work ... that erases the boundaries between art and document, lyric and epic, pen and camera’.³⁰ As with Paul Naylor, in his study of contemporary ‘investigative’ American

²¹ Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 54 (original emphasis).

²² Turner’s thesis was first delivered as an address in 1893 (see above n. 1).

²³ Wilkinson, ‘Poet-historian’, 7.

²⁴ Kathleen I. Bethell, ‘Reading Billy: Memory, Time, and Subjectivity in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature* 28, no. 1 (2003): 71–89, 71.

²⁵ Perry Nodelman, ‘The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid’, *Canadian Literature* 87 (1980): 68–80, 68.

²⁶ Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 3.

²⁷ Ian Rae, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet’s Novel in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 111.

²⁸ Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern*, 84. See also Rae, *Poet’s Novel*, 119.

²⁹ Marc Colavincenzo, ‘Trading Magic for Fact,’ *Fact for Magic: Myth and Mythologising in Postmodern Canadian Historical Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2003), 148. See, by contrast, Sam Solecki, *Ragas of Longing: The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Solecki excludes *CW* from his study because he doesn’t consider it to be poetry (5).

³⁰ Shoshana Wechsler, ‘A Ma(t)ter of Fact and Vision: The Objectivity Question and Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 45, no. 2 (1999): 121–137, 121. See also Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 139.

poetry,³¹ I have chosen authors who write *poetically*, rather than according to traditional (that is, strictly lyric or epic) poetic forms, and who ‘assume the boundaries between genres are permeable’.³² The generic hybridity of these long-form poems is a significant feature of the way in which their authors engage with the representation, production and contestation of American spaces.

All three long-form poems are also distinguished by a poetic methodology of collage, a modernist practice transposed from the visual arts in the early twentieth century, in which ‘outside’ sources are incorporated into the body of the text. Critics including Stephen Collis,³³ Jessica Wilkinson³⁴ and Peter Nicholls,³⁵ have discussed Howe’s use of ‘appropriative writing’;³⁶ and Howe has stated: ‘I used quotation in my painting in the same way that I use quotation in my writing, in that I always seemed to use collage’.³⁷ Manina Jones, speaking of Ondaatje’s work, identifies ‘a ‘collage’ technique that self-consciously transcribes documents into the literary text’;³⁸ a technique she terms “documentary-collage”, since its central gesture is citational’.³⁹ This technique, in evidence in *Collected Works*, is also noted by critics such as Douglas Barbour,⁴⁰ and by Ondaatje himself: in the afterword to the 2008 Vintage Canada edition, he describes his initial draft as ‘a manuscript somewhat like a valise containing the collected raw material for a collage’.⁴¹ *Book of the Dead*, which Michael Davidson notes is ‘unique among Rukeyser’s poems in its direct quotation of nonliterary materials’,⁴² has also been called a ‘documentary collage poem’;⁴³ and Rukeyser similarly speaks of her poetic method as ‘the method of collision. The work, laid on, as it were, stroke by stroke, emphasizes placing and timing, the relations between the parts’.⁴⁴

³¹ Naylor states: ‘I use the term *poetic* as a way of including more than “verse” ... Verse is a subset of the poetic, as is the prose poem, essay poem, visual poem, and combinations thereof’ (*Poetic Investigations*, 10; original emphasis).

³² Ibid.

³³ Stephen Collis, *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-scholasticism* (Victoria, B.C.: ETS Editions, 2006). Collage is a central technique in what Collis terms ‘anarcho-scholastic’ texts (17).

³⁴ Wilkinson, ‘Poet-historian’.

³⁵ Peter Nicholls, ‘Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History’, *Contemporary Literature* 38, no. 4 (1996): 586–601.

³⁶ Wilkinson, ‘Poet-historian’, 5.

³⁷ Susan Howe, cited in Lynn Keller, ‘An Interview with Susan Howe’, *Contemporary Literature* 36, no. 1 (1995): 1–34, 3.

³⁸ Manina Jones, *That Art of Difference: ‘Documentary-Collage’ and English-Canadian Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 13–14.

³⁹ Ibid., 14 (original emphasis).

⁴⁰ Douglas Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 40.

⁴¹ Michael Ondaatje, afterword to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008), 113–18, 116.

⁴² Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 149.

⁴³ Wechsler, ‘Fact and Vision’, 122.

⁴⁴ Muriel Rukeyser, ‘The Speed of the Image’, Folder 4, Box I-43 (Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), 5.

For the purposes of this study, I characterise my primary texts as ‘long-form poems’. The term ‘long-form’ (and its alternatives, including ‘serial’, ‘long’ and ‘sequential’)⁴⁵ is difficult to define. Length is, of course, a factor—‘Articulation’, *Collected Works* and *Book of the Dead* have all appeared, at some point in their publication histories, as standalone editions. As with the distinction between the short story, novella and novel, however, there is no universally applicable quantitative or qualitative measure. As Ian Rae notes, in his study of Canadian ‘poet-novelists’, including Ondaatje, ‘no fixed formula can define the lyric, long poem, and novel’.⁴⁶ In his introduction to an anthology of long-form Canadian poems, *The Long Poem Anthology*,⁴⁷ Ondaatje himself speculates on the characteristics of the form, citing poet Jack Spicer:

The serial poem is often like a series of rooms where the lights go on and off. It is also a sequence of energies which burn out ... There is further a special analogy with serial music: the voice or tongue, the tone, of the poem sounds individually ... but sounded in a series, it enters a field ... A ‘necessary world’ is composed in the serial poem.⁴⁸

While Ondaatje does not provide his own definition, he states that ‘[i]n some way the old gentle story ... has an affinity with the long poem ... the business of “collecting” and “sorting” applies *here* more than in most of the poems of our time’.⁴⁹ In Rae’s placement of the long-form poem between the genres of lyric verse and the novel, there is a similar implied relation to ‘story’, or more precisely narrative, that resonates with the poems chosen for this study, as well as with the subject of national spaces. I do not attempt to arrive at a generally applicable definition of ‘long-form poetry’. For the purposes of this study, I take the term to include poems, such as my primary texts, that are composed of a number of shorter poems, fragments or sections—these shorter poems, fragments or sections being intended to be read together as one whole, or, to use Spicer’s phrase, form a ‘necessary world’. A practical difficulty arises with respect to analytic terminology: how should one refer to the individual parts of a long-form poem? As there is no consensus in the critical literature, my approach in this thesis differs for each poem: I use, generally speaking, ‘poem’, ‘fragment’ or ‘section’, as appropriate.

⁴⁵ ‘Articulation’, for instance, has also been described as a ‘poetic sequence’: see Nick Selby, “‘Created Space’: Mapping America as Poem in Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and Susan Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line*”, *Journal of American Studies* 39, no. 1 (2005): 41–64, 43; and ‘a serial poem’: see Naylor, *Poetic Investigations*, 52; and Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 80.

⁴⁶ Rae, *Poet’s Novel*, 9.

⁴⁷ Michael Ondaatje, introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*, ed. Michael Ondaatje (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), 9–18.

⁴⁸ Jack Spicer, cited in *ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁹ Ondaatje, *Long Poem*, 17 (original emphasis).

As Winifried Fluck argues, in *Space in America: Theory History Culture*, ‘in order to gain cultural meaning, physical space has to become mental space or, more precisely, imaginary space ... The crucial issue here ... is representation’.⁵⁰ The central analytical tool I use in this thesis, to explore the manner in which my primary texts engage with American spaces, is the concept of the chronotope, formulated by Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. In the essay ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’,⁵¹ Bakhtin gives the following definition of the chronotope:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature ... In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.⁵²

As the editors of an essay collection on the chronotope observe, Bakhtin’s theory suffers from a lack of definitional precision.⁵³ Sue Vice expresses a common frustration: ‘The concept of the chronotope may be puzzling or hard to grasp because it seems omnipresent to the point either of invisibility or of extreme obviousness.’⁵⁴ The range of interpretations in literary and cultural studies is remarkably broad: four decades after Bakhtin’s essay was first translated into English, the chronotope has been applied to the analyses of, to name a few examples: the asylum in *Jane Eyre*,⁵⁵ outer space in comics,⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Winifried Fluck, ‘Imaginary Space; Or, Space as Aesthetic Object’, in *Space in America: Theory, History, Culture*, ed. Klaus Benesch and Kerstin Schmidt (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 25–40, 25.

⁵¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258.

⁵² Ibid., 84 (original emphasis).

⁵³ See Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart, ‘Bakhtin’s Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, and Perspectives’, in *Bakhtin’s Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, ed. Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer, Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman and Bart Keunen, (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), 3–16, 5.

⁵⁴ Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 201. See also Liisa Steinby, ‘Bakhtin’s Concept of the Chronotope: The Viewpoint of an Acting Subject’, in *Bakhtin and His Others: (Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism*, ed. Liisa Steinby and Tintti Klapuri (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 105–26: ‘The chronotope has proved to be a valuable tool of literary analysis, despite the fact that it is far from clear what Bakhtin actually meant by the concept’ (105).

⁵⁵ Suzanne Rosenthal Shumway, ‘The Chronotope of the Asylum: *Jane Eyre*, Feminisim, and Bakhtinian Theory’, in *Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, ed. Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 152–70.

the figure of David Bowie,⁵⁷ the collective output of Raymond Carver,⁵⁸ the concept of multiculturalism,⁵⁹ and the entire nineteenth century.⁶⁰

What such diverse applications of the theory show is that the chronotope remains an elastic, perhaps, but certainly an elusive concept. Michael Holquist, the co-translator of Bakhtin's essay into English, observes that: 'at the conclusion of [Bakhtin's] 200-page monograph ... many readers will find themselves hard pressed to answer the question, "What exactly is a chronotope?"'⁶¹ The term 'time-space', which Bakhtin 'borrows' from scientific discourse, is the enigmatic core of the concept, one that involves a high degree of abstraction: what it asks us to consider is what we mean by 'time-space' in literature.⁶² While I do not propose to answer a question that continues to vex Bakhtinian scholars, I am interested in how the concept of the chronotope can be applied in this particular study. In 'Chronotope', Bakhtin allowed for the development of his theory, stating:

We do not pretend to completeness or precision on our theoretical formulations and definitions. Here and abroad, serious work on the study of space and time in art and literature has only just begun. Such work will in its further development eventually supplement, and perhaps substantially correct, the characteristics of novelistic chronotopes offered by us here.⁶³

While extensions of chronotopic theory were therefore both foreseen and encouraged, such extensions must nevertheless be convincingly argued.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Annalisa Di Liddo, 'Chronotopes: Outerspace, the Cityscape, and the Space of Comics', in *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 63–101.

⁵⁷ Will Brooker, 'Time Again: The David Bowie Chronotope', in *Enchaining David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, ed. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moor and Sean Redmond (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 87–101.

⁵⁸ G.P. Lainsbury, 'A Critical Context for the Carver Chronotope', *Canadian Review of American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1997): 77–91.

⁵⁹ Dawn Morgan, 'Andrew Suknaski's "Wood Mountain Time" and the Chronotope of Multiculturalism', *Mosaic* 29, no. 3 (1996): 35–51.

⁶⁰ Hayden White, "'The Nineteenth-century" as Chronotope', *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 11, no. 2 (1987): 119–29.

⁶¹ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), 109.

⁶² Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 84. Bakhtin refers to the term 'space-time' in mathematics and Einstein's Theory of Relativity, though states: 'The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely)' (84). Bakhtin uses both 'time space' and 'time-space'; I use the hyphenated form to emphasise the indivisibility of time and space in the concept.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁴ Many applications of the theory cite the 'definitional' paragraph above, but do not undertake the necessary task of interpretation—see, e.g., Di Liddo, 'Outerspace'. For an exemplary instance of the application of chronotopic theory in literary analysis, see Julia Mix Barrington, 'Phantom

Applicability of chronotopic theory to primary texts

Bakhtin's theory of chronotopes is advanced in an essay titled 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', through a (roughly) chronological examination of European novelistic genres, 'beginning with the so-called "Greek romance" and ending with the Rabelsian novel'.⁶⁵ The question of genre is therefore the first to be addressed in this study, which takes as its subject three long-form poems. A number of scholars have made arguments for the applicability of chronotopic theory to poetry, many of which derive from interpretations of the chronotope in conjunction with other Bakhtinian concepts: for instance, Joy Ladin, based on the identification of competing 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces in poetic texts;⁶⁶ Donald Wesling, based on the characterisation of poetry (as a subset of literature) as fundamentally dialogic;⁶⁷ and Dawn Morgan, based on the concept of 'novelization'.⁶⁸ The approach I take in this thesis, while sharing similarities with Wesling's and Morgan's, centers on Bakhtin's general conception of the genre of the novel in relation to the primary texts in my study.

The term 'novel' is not explicitly defined in 'Chronotope'. As Will Brooker observes, Bakhtin's use of the word in the essay is 'broad—stretching back far beyond and before the conventional eighteenth century landmarks ... to include the ancient Greek romance—and ... other forms such as oral storytelling and song'.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, in essays such as 'Epic and Novel'⁷⁰ and 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse',⁷¹ Bakhtin also applies the label 'novel' to a wide range of generically diverse texts (in some cases, not texts at all), including: Socratic dialogues, Menippean satire, stories from folklore and the oral tradition, and, not least, poetry. 'Chronotope' includes discussions of specific poems (including Dante's *Divine Comedy*,⁷² though Bakhtin calls it neither a 'poem' nor a 'novel', but a 'work'),⁷³ as well as poetry in general, including a (brief) mention of a 'lyric-epic chronotope' and various kinds of 'idyll' chronotopes in Alexandrine, Hellenic and Roman poetry,⁷⁴ poetic genres that predate the Greek romance.

Bark: 'The Chronotope of the Ghost Ship in the Atlantic World', *Gothic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017): 58–70.

⁶⁵ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 85.

⁶⁶ Joy Ladin, "It Was Not Death": The Poetic Career of the Chronotope', in Bemong et. al., *Bakhtin's Theory*, 131–56.

⁶⁷ Donald Wesling, *Bakhtin and the Social Moorings of Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003).

⁶⁸ Morgan, 'Wood Mountain', 37. In Bakhtin's own writing see Mikkail M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *Dialogic Imagination*, 3–40, 70.

⁶⁹ Brooker, 'Time Again', 88.

⁷⁰ Bakhtin, 'Epic'.

⁷¹ Mikkail M. Bakhtin, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', in *Dialogic Imagination*, 41–83.

⁷² Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 156–8.

⁷³ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 103.

While in principle poetry and poetic discourse are antithetical to the novel and novelistic discourse in much of Bakhtin's writing, in practice the barrier between forms is neither solid nor fixed. In 'Epic', Bakhtin states: 'the novel is a prose genre (although there exist excellent novels in verse)'.⁷⁵ Examples of 'excellent novels in verse', according to Bakhtin, include Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*,⁷⁶ Byron's *Don Juan*,⁷⁷ and Browning's *Childe Harold*.⁷⁸ In 'Prehistory', Bakhtin opposes the novel to 'all other genres—*poetic* genres in the narrow sense' (without specifying what 'in the narrow sense' means),⁷⁹ and then undertakes a close analysis of *Onegin* as an *exemplary* instance of a novel.⁸⁰ In 'Discourse in the Novel',⁸¹ an essay in which the opposition between poetic and novelistic genres is perhaps most vigorously stressed, Bakhtin gives the following qualification (albeit in a footnote): 'It goes without saying that we continually advance as typical the extreme to which poetic genres aspire; in concrete examples of poetic works it is possible to find features fundamental to prose, and numerous hybrids of various generic types exist.'⁸²

The unstable nature of the border between poetry and the novel is a consequence of Bakhtin's conception of the novel as completely new, revolutionary and perpetually evolving genre. In 'Epic', Bakhtin writes:

I will attempt below to approach the novel precisely as a genre-in-the-making, one in the vanguard of all modern literary development. I am not constructing here a functional definition of the novelistic canon in literary history, that is, a definition that would make of it a system of fixed generic characteristics. Rather, I am trying to grope my way toward the basic structural characteristics of this most fluid of genres, characteristics that might determine the direction of its peculiar capacity for change and of its influence and effect on the rest of literature.⁸³

For Bakhtin, the novel is a 'fluid', chameleon-like entity, possessed of an unlimited ability to shape-shift. The consequence, as Holquist observes, is that the novel is 'best conceived either as a supergenre ... or not a genre in any strict, traditional sense at all'.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ Bakhtin, 'Epic', 9.

⁷⁶ Bakhtin, 'Prehistory', 43–9.

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, 'Epic', 6.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁹ Bakhtin, 'Prehistory', 43 (original emphasis).

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43–9. Bakhtin does not use the qualifier 'verse', but refers to *Onegin* as a 'novel' and Pushkin as a 'novelist' outright.

⁸¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *Dialogic Imagination*, 259–422.

⁸² Ibid., 287.

⁸³ Bakhtin, 'Epic', 11.

⁸⁴ Michael Holquist, introduction to Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, xv–xxxiii, xxix.

Despite the elasticity of the novel's borders, however, there are two stylistic features of the genre that are consistently identified by Bakhtin as constitutive. The first of these is the concept of dialogism. In 'Discourse' Bakhtin writes: 'The novel can be defined as a diversity of speech types (sometimes even a diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized'.⁸⁵ Dialogism, for which the precondition is the collision of such speech types, voices and languages (all of which carry competing ideologies) arises from the artistic incorporation of the heteroglossia that stratifies all apparently unitary national discourses.⁸⁶ It is 'the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel'.⁸⁷ 'Articulation', *Collected Works* and *Book of the Dead* have been identified by a number of critics as polyphonic and dialogic: as Nicholls contends, 'voice' for Howe 'is polyphonic rather than original, an elaborate weave of quotation and pastiche';⁸⁸ Lucia Boldrini considers Ondaatje's practice of appropriating historical voices and concludes that his works 'can thus be said to be polyphonic and dialogic, in Bakhtin's sense';⁸⁹ and Davidson observes that *Book of the Dead*, with its incorporation of congressional testimonies, medical reports and interviews, contains a 'polyphony of voices'.⁹⁰ As such observations attest, the dialogism in these texts arises to a large degree from the poetic methodology of collage employed by their authors, which, as Jones argues, 'encourage[s] multi-voicedness by incorporating a number of outside texts'.⁹¹

The second constitutive stylistic feature of novelistic genres for Bakhtin is the temporal orientation of the author and reader (or speaker and listener) vis-à-vis the subject of the literary text, a feature given detailed treatment in 'Epic'. Of the distinction between epic and novel, Bakhtin writes:

The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests.' The important point here is not that the past constitutes the content of the epic. The formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is rather the transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past ... the epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past ... epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries ... Both the singer and the listener ... are located in the same time and on the same evaluative (hierarchical) plane,

⁸⁵ Bakhtin, 'Discourse', 262.

⁸⁶ See, generally, *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁸⁸ Nicholls, 'Unsettling the Wilderness', 589. See also Naylor, *Poetic Investigations*, 64.

⁸⁹ Lucia Boldrini, *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 13. Boldrini terms *CW* a 'heterobiography' for the multiple voices expressed through the speaking 'I'.

⁹⁰ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 146. See also John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935–1968* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 37.

⁹¹ Jones, *That Art*, 16.

but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance. The space between is filled with national tradition. To portray an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one's contemporaries ... is to undertake a radical revolution, and to step out of the world of the epic into the world of the novel.⁹²

In this study, which deals with national history and the representation and production of *national* spaces, Bakhtin's distinction between the way in which epic and novel engage with the past is of particular import. The genre of the epic, which Bakhtin here equates with the genre of poetry ('the epic ... has been from the beginning *a poem about the past*'),⁹³ has as its subject 'national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families', and is characterised by the separation of this world from the speaker and listener of the text by 'epic distance'. In 'Chronotope', these features are reiterated in the characterisation of 'epic time' as 'an "absolute past", a time of founding fathers and heroes, separated by an unbridgeable gap from the real time of the *present day* (the present day of the creators, the performers and the audience of epic songs)'.⁹⁴

'Articulation', *Collected Works* and *Book of the Dead* engage with 'American spaces' through their engagement with national history—with particular historical events, as well as with epic national narratives of settlement such as Turner's frontier myth. In their *mode* of engagement—in which, I argue, time, sequence, teleology and chronology become unfixed and unpredictable elements—the authors of these primary texts remove 'epic distance'—bringing reified stories about the past into what Bakhtin terms 'the zone of contact with an inconclusive present'⁹⁵—and maintain a 'semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality'.⁹⁶ In this way, they work *counter* to epic forms, actively opening up American spaces to contestation and ongoing revision. As dialogic and generically diverse long-form poems temporally oriented toward the present, 'Articulation', *Collected Works* and *Book of the Dead* exhibit the fundamental 'features of prose' as outlined by Bakhtin, and are thus suitable for Bakhtinian chronotopic analysis.

Representational significance of the chronotope

In this thesis, I apply chronotopic theory to the long-form poems under study on two grounds. The first is with regards to the representational significance of the chronotope. Bakhtin's essay on the chronotope is subtitled 'Notes towards a historical poetics',⁹⁷ and

⁹² Bakhtin, 'Epic', 13–14.

⁹³ My emphasis.

⁹⁴ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 218 (original emphasis).

⁹⁵ Bakhtin, 'Epic', 37.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹⁷ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 84.

opens with a reference to '[t]he process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature'.⁹⁸ As Morgan contends, 'The gateway between literature and the world in which it is produced is most thoroughly theorized by Bakhtin in terms of the *chronotope*';⁹⁹ and it is this theme and problematic to which chronotopic theory is primarily addressed. Towards the end of the essay, Bakhtin writes: 'We cannot help but be strongly impressed by the *representational* importance of the chronotope ... It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events'.¹⁰⁰ The chronotope, as conceived by Bakhtin, is a figure that mediates between the world of the literary text and the 'real' world it seeks to represent.

This feature is what distinguishes the chronotope from other, similar literary devices such as the motif: while the latter can exist purely diegetically, the former must function as a link, anchoring the space of the literary text to the space of the 'actual' world. Consequently, as Holquist argues, the chronotope can be used not only to analyse the schematics that operate *within* texts, but also as 'a means for studying the relation *between* any text and its times, and thus as a fundamental tool for broader social and historical analysis ... It is at this level that the chronotope's contribution to a historical poetics may best be seen'.¹⁰¹ Each long-form poem under study in this thesis seeks to engage with American spaces through, as a necessary first condition, *representing* particular places and times in American history: this process is fundamentally chronotopic. The chronotope—which can be seen as the basic unit of all literary representation—therefore provides a useful optic for viewing the manner in which 'actual temporal (including historical) reality' becomes 'incorporated into the artistic space of the [texts]'.¹⁰²

Generic significance of the chronotope

The second grounds on which I apply chronotopic theory to this study is with respect to the chronotope's generic significance. In the opening paragraphs of 'Chronotope', Bakhtin states: 'The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions'.¹⁰³ While Bakhtin does not give a definition of genre in broader terms, it is *by* novelistic genres that he proceeds to explicate his theory. Chronotopes, in both describing and establishing certain conventions within classes of literary texts, enable the formation of novelistic genres, which they then come, by a circuitous and self-reinforcing route, to define. They do this by making the key common features of these texts *visible* as specific and concrete units of time and space. For instance, the chronotope of the castle

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Morgan, 'Wood Mountain', 36 (original emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 250 (original emphasis).

¹⁰¹ Holquist, *Dialogism*, 113 (original emphasis).

¹⁰² Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 252.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 84–5 (original emphasis).

repeated within multiple texts across a period of time gives rise to the genre of the gothic novel; the gothic novel becomes recognisable (or visible *as* a gothic novel) in further iterations through the deployment of chronotope of the castle, which is, now, one of its defining features.

Vice argues that in developing the theory of chronotopes, '[Bakhtin's] interest is in how texts relate to their social and political contexts, rather than in drawing up a typology of how time and space relate to each other within different texts'.¹⁰⁴ This view supposes that the two central functions of the chronotope—representational and generic—are mutually exclusive. In this study, I take both functions to co-exist and have interrelated significance. In their engagement with American spaces, Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser not only seek to represent (that is, incorporate) actual historical reality, but also to *contest* the manner in which that actual reality has been represented in other texts. They do so not only through an engagement with epic national narratives of settlement, in particular Turner's frontier myth, but also through an engagement with certain canonical American genres of literature that feed into the composition of American spaces: namely, the captivity narrative, the Western, and the genre of the road.

Significance and relevance of American history, literary and cultural studies

According to Bakhtin, 'The realm of literature and more broadly of culture (from which literature cannot be separated) constitutes the indispensable context of a literary work and of the author's position within it, outside of which it is impossible to understand either the work or the author's intentions reflected in it'.¹⁰⁵ In this thesis, I use the concept of the chronotope to conduct close readings of my primary texts, informed by a consideration of their relevant social and historical contexts. One of the central questions I seek to address is: what are 'American spaces'? My study begins with Turner's frontier thesis because of its significance in the determination of this question. In 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', Turner famously placed American geography at the heart of national identity:

In these successive frontiers we find natural boundary lines which have served to mark and to effect the characteristics of the frontiers, namely: the 'fall line;' the Alleghany Mountains; the Mississippi; the Missouri where its direction approximates north and south; the line of the arid lands, approximately the ninety-ninth meridian; and the Rocky Mountains.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 201.

¹⁰⁵ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 255–6.

¹⁰⁶ Turner, *Frontier*, 9.

As I show in Chapter Two of this thesis, Turner's thesis was discredited as fact by scholars in the field of New Western History in the latter half of the twentieth century,¹⁰⁷ but while our conception of the West is now more complex and diverse, New Western History's focus on *region* and *geography* evinces a critical thread of continuity with its deposed predecessor. Limerick, for instance, contends that Turner was 'an environmental determinist, famous for his assertion that nature changed Europeans into Americans',¹⁰⁸ but her point is not that Turner was wrong to connect the development of the American nation with American landscapes, but that 'his presentation of nature was abstract, providing little sense of particular places with particular qualities'.¹⁰⁹ Other New Western Historians, such as Donald Worster, explicitly identify themselves as 'environmental historians'.¹¹⁰ As Susan Neel astutely observes: 'new western history, for all its theoretical sophistication and attentiveness to the too-long-neglected issues of cultural diversity, race, class, and gender, continues in significant ways to be configured around ideas about nature and its role in shaping western society'.¹¹¹

In *Landscape and Memory*, historian Simon Schama considers the 'surprising endurance' of 'inherited landscape myths', stating that '[n]ational identity ... would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland'.¹¹² Turner's frontier thesis, which over the course of the twentieth century became a national myth, owes its 'ferocious enchantment' to the significance it gives to American landscapes: it was, and remains, the starting point for any discussion of national history, literature and culture.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Donald Worster locates the origins of field in the 1970s: Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11. Others trace the movement to the 1960s: see, e.g., Michael E. McGerr, 'Is There a Twentieth-century West?', in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, Georges Miles and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 239–56, 242.

¹⁰⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 165.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹¹⁰ Worster, *Western Skies*. Worster writes: 'I study the interactions of people and nature over time' (239). See also William Cronon, 'Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town', in Cronon, Miles and Gitlin, *Open Sky*, 28–51: 'The special task of environmental historians is to tell stories that carry us back and forth across the boundary between people and nature to reveal just how culturally constructed that boundary is' (33).

¹¹¹ Susan Rhoades Neel, 'A Place of Extremes: Nature, History, and the American West', in *New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105–34, 106.

¹¹² Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 15.

¹¹³ See, e.g., Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), 3; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 94; Ian D. Whyte, *Landscape and History Since 1500* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 161.

In 'Chronotope', Bakhtin outlines the nexus of relations between history, geography and myth:

A local myth explains the genesis of a geographical space. Each locality must be explained, beginning with its place-name and ending up with the finer details of its topographical relief ... locality is the trace of an event, a trace of what had shaped it. Such is the logic of all local myths and legends that attempt, through history, to make sense out of space.¹¹⁴

While this study benefits from New Western History's critical attention to the specific and concrete dimensions of American spaces, it also draws on a body of scholarship that focuses on their mythic and literary dimensions; namely, the Myth and Symbol School of American Studies. The founding figures of the school include Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, whose works *Virgin Land*¹¹⁵ and *The Machine in the Garden*,¹¹⁶ respectively, established the field in the mid-twentieth century. More recent scholars, including Annette Kolodny,¹¹⁷ Richard Slotkin,¹¹⁸ and David E. Nye,¹¹⁹ have each extended upon and reoriented the work of this school, most notably around issues of gender and race¹²⁰—Kolodny with respect to the experience of women, Nye with respect to the role of technology in the telling of hegemonic and counter narratives, and Slotkin with respect to the centrality of colonial violence, the displacement of indigenous peoples, and the ideological function of myth. Each of these more recent scholars also views Turner's thesis in a more critical light.¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 189.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Virgin Land*. For Smith's definitions of the terms 'myth' and 'symbol', see vii.

¹¹⁶ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

¹¹⁷ Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

¹¹⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

¹¹⁹ David E. Nye, *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture* (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter Press, 1997); and *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003).

¹²⁰ See Jochen Achilles, 'The Subject-Object Paradigm: Conflict and Convergence in Theories of Landscape, Consciousness, and Technoscape since Emerson and Thoreau', in Benesch and Schmidt, *Space in America*, 53–90. Achilles identifies the emergence of 'New American Studies', which seeks to enable the 'empowerment of women and ethnic minorities' (55).

¹²¹ See, e.g. Nye, *Narratives and Spaces* on the lack of attention given by Turner to non Anglo-American settlement patterns (25). Compare this to Smith, *Virgin Land*, who cites Turnerian ideas approvingly (4).

Slotkin's work, which he situates in the field of 'cultural history',¹²² is of particular importance. In his trilogy of studies—*Regeneration Through Violence*,¹²³ *The Fatal Environment*¹²⁴ and *Gunfighter Nation*¹²⁵—Slotkin charts 'the historical development of the Myth of the Frontier in American literary, popular, and political culture' from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.¹²⁶ Slotkin identifies the importance of literature in the material production and transmission of myths in the American context—where the 'colonial experience' and emergence of uniquely American national mythologies coincided with the emergence of print technologies and culture.¹²⁷ As a result of this historical convergence, he argues, '[p]rinted literature has been from the first the most important vehicle of myth in America'.¹²⁸ Significantly, Slotkin's discussion of American literature centres on popular and canonical American *genres*. Such genres, he argues, are not only the means by which American myths and ideologies become communicable and transmissible on a national scale, but (in a similar manner to the way in which genres and specific instances of genres are mutually constitutive), form the very foundations of such mythologies.¹²⁹

In his discussion of the genre of the Western, Slotkin makes what I see as a crucial conceptual link, one that in turn has significance for the application of chronotopic theory in this study. Slotkin writes:

The history of a movie genre is the story of the conception, elaboration, and acceptance of a special kind of space: an imagined landscape which evokes authentic places and times, but which becomes, in the end, completely identified with the fictions created about it. The 'mean streets' of gangster movies, the horror-movie castle rearing up into a stormy sky ... the western town of false-front saloons and board sidewalks are as instantly familiar to us, as recognizable, and as dense with memory and meaning, as the streets we grew up on. We know that they mean, on some level, to be representative of places that historically existed. Yet genre worlds are also never-never lands whose special rules and meanings have more to do with conventions, myths, and ideologies than with historical representation.¹³⁰

¹²² Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 5. According to Slotkin, cultural history 'is concerned with describing the ways in which human cultures develop over time ... The cultural historian tries to construct a historical account of the development of *meaning* and to show how activities of symbol-making, interpretation, and imagination projection continuously interlock with the political and material processes of social existence' (5; original emphasis).

¹²³ Slotkin, *Regeneration*.

¹²⁴ Slotkin, *Environment*.

¹²⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁷ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 15.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 232–3.

Although Slotkin differentiates between literary and filmic texts, the principle also applies to literature, which relies no less on images (albeit *literary* images) to communicate cues that tap into broader and collective understandings of history and landscape. Slotkin concludes: ‘Genre space is also *mythic space*: a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture’s myth/ideological tradition. It is also a setting in which the concrete work of contemporary myth-making is done.’¹³¹ This equation between mythic space and genre space, I argue, establishes an essential connection between the generic significance of the chronotope and the chronotope’s function in the formation and dissemination of national mythologies (‘the concrete work of contemporary myth-making’).

If genre space is, as Slotkin contends, also mythic space, then not only is the chronotope a basic unit of representation (incorporating ‘actual’ space into artistic space) *and* of genre; it is also a basic unit of *myth*. It is my contention in this thesis that the authors of my primary texts engage with American spaces in part through an engagement with certain canonical American genres: namely, the New England captivity narrative, the Western and the genre of the road. The means by which they engage with these genres is through the use of chronotopes that are constitutive features of such genres, and that connect not only literary space to actual space, but also generic space to mythic space—that is, national canonical literary genres to national mythologies. In doing so, they intervene in the making of myth; they intervene, that is, in the representation and production of American spaces, and open these spaces out to contestation and critique.

Significance and relevance of other theoretical material

Space, place and landscape studies, and ecocriticism

In ‘Chronotope’, Bakhtin writes of the necessary relation between the ‘real, unitary and as yet incomplete historical world’ and ‘the *represented* world in the text’: ‘Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text).’¹³² In examining the relationship between ‘real’ and ‘represented’ American spaces (‘actual’ and ‘created’ chronotopes) in the long-form poems under study, I engage with studies of space, place and landscape. As Ian Davidson notes, the critical literature on the relationship between poetry and space, place and landscape, derives from the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹³³ The ‘spatial turn’ has

¹³¹ Ibid., 234 (original emphasis).

¹³² Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 253.

¹³³ Ian Davidson, introduction to *Placing Poetry*, ed. Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding (New York: Rodopi, 2013), 1–16, 3. See, e.g., Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003); Ian Davidson, *Ideas*

produced intersecting (and in many respects overlapping) subfields—including cultural geography, human geography and historical geography.¹³⁴ Sara Blair, who charts the intersections between American studies and cultural geography (which she takes as an umbrella term for studies of space, place and landscape; less a unified field than ‘a shared rubric and set of concerns’),¹³⁵ provides the following useful definition: ‘cultural geography focuses on the production of spaces, simultaneously material and abstract, that have functioned as arenas for the enactment of *social relations*: the penitentiary and theater, the New England village, the Rover auto plant, the colony and homeland’.¹³⁶ Blair’s examples—each an iteration of a particular American space—highlight the conceptual contiguity between studies of space, place and landscape and chronotopic analysis that is also evident in this thesis.

As two of the chronotopes in this study—the forest and the desert—are features of *natural* landscapes, my thesis also raises the possibility of an engagement with ecocriticism—a field concerned with, to quote Cheryll Glotfelty’s seminal definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader*: ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’.¹³⁷ In *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies*,¹³⁸ Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia

of *Space in Contemporary Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Neal Alexander and David Cooper, eds., *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-war Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013). The range of theorists informing the critical work in the aforementioned books include, among others: Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel de Certeau, Edward Soja, Edward Casey, Pierre Bourdieu and Marc Augé.

¹³⁴ See Phil Hubbard and Ron Kitchin, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London: Sage Publications, 2011); and John Agnew, David N. Livingstone and Alisdair Rogers, eds., *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). Hubbard and Kitchin include no less than 66 key theorists; Agnew, Livingstone and Rogers include 41, and note that the diversity of conceptual approaches ‘has frequently led to bouts of anxiety about the lack of unity to the field’ (2). For the subfield of ‘historical geography’, see, e.g., Robert A. Butlin, *Historical Geography: Through the Gates of Space and Time* (Edward Arnold: London, 1993); and Michael P. Conzen, ed., *The Making of the American Landscape* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). Varying definitions of ‘space’, ‘place’ and ‘landscape’ abound in the literature.

¹³⁵ Sara Blair, ‘Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary’, *American Literary History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 544–67, 544.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 546 (my emphasis).

¹³⁷ Cheryll Glotfelty, ‘Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis’, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xv–xxxvii, xviii. Cited in Erin James and Eric Morel, ‘Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction’, *English Studies* 99, no. 4 (2018): 355–65, 355; Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer, ‘Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Defining the Subject of Ecocriticism; An Introduction’, in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Defining the Subject of Ecocriticism; Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 9–21, 11; and Robert Kern, ‘Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?’ *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment)* 7, no. 1 (2000): 9–32, 11. Though see Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (New

Mayer characterise ecocriticism as: '[a] rather loosely defined and fiercely contested term during its inception in the early 1990s'.¹³⁹ After a survey of key critical texts, Gersdorf and Mayer conclude that '[t]he smallest common denominator among these volumes is a shared interest in bringing nature (and the natural environment) back to public attention through the critical examination of its function in the discourses of literature, popular culture, and philosophy'.¹⁴⁰ While the intersection between ecocriticism and chronotopic theory has received recent attention,¹⁴¹ applications of the theory to literary texts have been less than convincing. In a 2018 issue of *English Studies* dedicated to ecocriticism and narrative theory, for instance, Dana Phillips seeks to use chronotopic theory to explore the relationship between noir narratives and environmental degradation, but her discussion of the chronotope, which only appears in the last pages of her article, reduces the concept to a synonym for 'setting', 'location' and 'environment'.¹⁴²

While I see studies of space, place and landscape, and ecocriticism as essentially coterminous fields—both broadly concerned with relationships between the physical world and human culture—there is a privileging of the natural environment in the latter¹⁴³ that is outside the ambit of this thesis' focus upon material geography in relation to what Blair calls the 'mythologizing rhetorics of space and the nation'.¹⁴⁴ It is this composition of American spaces—as both geography *and* history, space *and* time—to which the authors of my primary texts attend, and to which chronotopic analysis also directs our gaze. As spatial theorist Edward Soja contends, 'the reassertion of space in

York: Routledge, 2010): while Glotfelty's definition 'remains influential, the primary role of literary analysis in ecocriticism is increasingly disputed' (12).

¹³⁸ Gersdorf and Mayer, 'Nature'.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴¹ See, e.g., Timo Müller, 'The Ecology of Literary Chronotopes', in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 590–604. Müller observes that the chronotope's 'potential for the environmental humanities has hardly been noticed so far' (590).

¹⁴² Dana Phillips, 'Nature as *Noir*: Kem Nunn's California, "Where the Sewage Meets the Sea"', *English Studies* 99, no. 4 (2018): 412–25. See also Arnapurna Rath and Milind Malshe, 'Chronotopes of "Places" and "Non-places": Ecopoetics of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*', *Asiatic* 4, no. 2 (2010): 14–33. Rath and Malshe's reading includes an excess of chronotopes (and 'chronotopic motifs'); as a consequence, neither chronotopic theory, nor the specific chronotopes chosen for study are given detailed treatment.

¹⁴³ This is one of the fiercely contested subjects in the field: the degree to which 'environmentalism' (political advocacy for environmental causes) should figure in ecocritical studies. See, e.g., Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007): 'The aim is to strengthen environmentalism' (24). See also Kern: 'ecocriticism [is] ultimately a form of environmental advocacy' ('Ecocriticism', 11); and Huggan and Tiffin: 'postcolonial ecocriticism ... performs an *advocacy* function both in relation to the real world(s) it inhabits and to the imaginary spaces it opens up for contemplation of how the real world might be transformed' (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 13; original emphasis).

¹⁴⁴ Blair, 'Cultural Geography', 551–2.

critical social theory does not demand an antagonistic subordination of time and history ... It is instead a call for an appropriate interpretive balance between space, time, and social being, or what may now more explicitly be termed the creation of human geographies, the making of history, and the constitution of society'.¹⁴⁵ For the reasons outlined I do not engage explicitly with ecocritical scholarship, but refer to the work of a number of scholars across studies of space, place and landscape—including phenomenologists, cultural geographers and historical geographers.

Postcolonial studies

In this thesis, I am concerned with *national* spaces. While I do not engage significantly with scholars of postcolonial studies, I am broadly interested in one of the central concerns of postcolonial critics—the relationship between 'nation' and 'narration'.¹⁴⁶ In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes:

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves *are* narrations.¹⁴⁷

For Slotkin, narrative is what endows myth with ideological content: '[m]yths are *stories* drawn from a society's history that have acquired though persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology'.¹⁴⁸ If myths, as Slotkin contends, are composed of 'three basic structural elements'—'a protagonist or hero ... a universe in which the hero may act ... and a narrative, in which the interaction of the hero and universe is described'¹⁴⁹—the last is what 'establishes the laws of cause and effect, of natural process, and of morality. It is the narrative which gives the images life by giving them a mode of interaction'.¹⁵⁰ The narrative *sets the myth in motion*: that is, gives the myth a *temporal* dimension.

I have thus far identified two significant functions of the chronotope for this study: representational and generic. The third relevant function relates to the chronotope's narrative significance. According to Bakhtin, chronotopes 'are the organizing centers for

¹⁴⁵ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 23.

¹⁴⁶ See, e.g. Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁴⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), xv (original emphasis). Said is referring to Bhabha.

¹⁴⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 5 (my emphasis).

¹⁴⁹ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied'.¹⁵¹ As long-form poems—a genre that occupies a liminal position between poetry and prose—the primary texts in this study engage with narrative in complex ways. When asked in an interview if she would describe *Book of the Dead* as 'a narrative poem', Rukeyser replied: 'it would be misleading to describe my poem as narrative poetry in the ordinary sense. I have tried to write a series of poems which are linked together as a sequence of a movie are linked together'.¹⁵² This method is to be contrasted to 'the method of straight development and unfolding of the story' used in novels and theatre; it is found, instead, in 'movies and some contemporary long poems'.¹⁵³ Of *Collected Works*, Spinks observes that 'Ondaatje's recasting of Billy's story makes little concession to the linear form of historiographical narrative'.¹⁵⁴ Douglas Barbour identifies this as 'the antinarrative stance of the long poem',¹⁵⁵ one that results from the method of collage.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Montgomery contends that 'Howe's poetry works, at various levels, through a questioning of sequence. The multidirectional logic of collage replaces that of narrative'.¹⁵⁷

As noted above, Turner's frontier myth retains its power precisely as a *story* of national origins and development: one with a clear beginning, middle and end. Of the United States, Said writes:

the battle within it is between advocates of a unitary identity and those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one. This opposition implies two different perspectives, two historiographies, one linear and subsuming, the other contrapuntal and often nomadic. ... only the second perspective is fully sensitive to the reality of historical experience.¹⁵⁸

In 'Articulation', *Collected Works* and *Book of the Dead*, narrative is not a given, but a live and contested principle of composition. The authors of these texts seek to destabilise and unsettle 'nation' through an unsettling of 'narration'—questioning the use of sequence and causality in the production of settled accounts of settler histories. In breaking narrative forms, these authors challenge epic stories told about American origins and development, and 'express a more complex, less sequential history'.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵¹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 250.

¹⁵² Muriel Rukeyser, Typescript of script for radio interview, with the author's and Samuel Sillen's ms. corrections, unsigned and undated (Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York), 8–9.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 49.

¹⁵⁵ Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 64.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, xvii.

¹⁵⁸ Said, *Imperialism*, xxxii.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

In ‘Chronotope’ Bakhtin states that ‘any and every literary image is chronotopic. Language, as a treasure-house of images, is fundamentally chronotopic’;¹⁶⁰ his discussion of particular chronotopes, as Vice notes, is ‘descriptive, rather than prescriptive’.¹⁶¹ Moreover, any single work may contain ‘a number of different chronotopes ... specific to the given work’.¹⁶² Within the confines of the present critical study, the scope of which is determined by my primary texts and the national geographical, historical and generic contexts to which they relate, the key chronotopes identified are: the forest, the desert and the road.

In an article titled ‘The City, the Desert and the Road: American Chronotopes in DeLillo’s *Underworld*’,¹⁶³ published when the present study was at an advanced stage, PhD candidate Slađana S. Stamenković also characterises the desert and the road (along with the city) as ‘inherently American spaces’.¹⁶⁴ While such characterisations are derived from similar bases to my own in this thesis—for instance, the constitutive role that the chronotope of the desert plays in the myth of the American West and the myth of the frontier¹⁶⁵—Stamenković’s argument can be distinguished on several crucial points. These are: that the analysis centres on a discussion of the three central chronotopes within a single text; that the text in question is unproblematically classed as a novel; that the events represented in the novel, and therefore its social and historical contexts, differ from those considered in this thesis; and that the discussion revolves around the dimension of space, at the expense of the dimension of time. Stamenković, moreover, concludes that the chronotopes of the city, the desert and the road all ‘prove to be but different incarnations of the ultimate nowhere’,¹⁶⁶ and function in DeLillo’s novel to ‘bring about the so-called postmodern condition—a society that is alienated’.¹⁶⁷ In the

¹⁶⁰ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 251.

¹⁶¹ Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 209.

¹⁶² Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 252.

¹⁶³ Slađana S. Stamenković, ‘The City, the Desert and the Road: American Chronotopes in DeLillo’s *Underworld*’, *The Journal for Languages and Literatures of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad* 8, no. 1 (2018): 97–108.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 102. See my discussion in Chapter Two of this thesis. With regards to the chronotope of the road, Stamenković argues that ‘[t]he road in American literature implies not only a plain journey, but a quest, usually undertaken by a hero’ (98). See my discussion in Chapter Three of this thesis.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

process, the desert and the road lose their distinctiveness as specific chronotopes,¹⁶⁸ as well as their distinctiveness as ‘American’ spaces.¹⁶⁹

What Stamenković’s analyses and conclusions illustrate is Holquist’s observation that ‘literary chronotopes are highly sensitive to historical change: different societies and periods result in different chronotopes both inside and outside literary texts’.¹⁷⁰ This is because ‘[a]t different times and places authors and readers will be working with different sets of time/space co-ordinates, and thus the *relationship* between time and space ... will vary’.¹⁷¹ This thesis works against chronotopes as ‘incarnations of the ultimate nowhere’. In this study I argue that the chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road are each highly specific concretisations of the relationships between time and space corresponding to the following critical places and times in American history: New England in the seventeenth century, late-nineteenth-century New Mexico and Arizona, and 1930s America. In these places and times—which themselves correspond to significant places and times in epic national narratives of settlement, in particular Turner’s frontier myth—the chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road are dominant features of both actual historical landscapes as well as certain canonical genres of American literature—the captivity narrative, the Western and the genre of the road. They are thus crucial to the constitution of the American spaces with which this thesis is concerned.

While a wealth of critical material exists in relation to each of the long-form poems in this study, no chronotopic readings of these works have been undertaken. Nor have there been any literary studies that take the chronotope of the forest as their subject.¹⁷² In these respects, this thesis breaks new ground. With regards to the chronotope of the desert, besides Stamenković’s study, mentioned above, there are none in the critical literature.¹⁷³ As the forest and the desert are not among the chronotopes identified by

¹⁶⁸ Stamenković states: ‘The city might also operate as the chronotope of the desert’ (ibid., 104); and ‘the chronotopes of the city and the road seem to overlap’ (106).

¹⁶⁹ Stamenković states: ‘On their own or when intertwining, these chronotopes are perhaps the crucial points at which the story of not only postmodern America, but also the postmodern world is unraveled’ (ibid., 107).

¹⁷⁰ Holquist, *Dialogism*, 112.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 120 (original emphasis).

¹⁷² For a discussion of the ‘actual’ chronotope of the forest in the field of anthropology, see Christophe Baticle and Philippe Hanus, ‘The Dissenting Nights of the Neo-Wood Colliers of the Vercors: A Forest Chronotope for a Heterotopia’, *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* 106–1 (2018): 1–23. The article discusses the chronotope of the forest with regard to the Vercors region in France. References to the substance and details of Bakhtin’s chronotopic theory are scant.

¹⁷³ Though see Kathryn Lehman, ‘Geography and Gender in the Narrative of Argentinian National Origin: The “Pampa” as Chronotope’, *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 32 (1997): 3–28. Lehman considers the chronotope of the ‘pampa’ (plains) in the context of Argentinian literature and national narratives of origin, but does not refer directly to Bakhtin’s writing on the chronotope (rather, she relies on historian Hayden White’s *interpretation* of the concept).

Bakhtin, my discussions of these chronotopes proceeds on the basis of general chronotopic theory, with recourse to secondary material on forests and deserts as relevant. With respect to the road, this chronotope is not only specifically discussed by Bakhtin, but also singled out for its significance. ‘The importance of the chronotope of the road in literature,’ he states, ‘is immense: it is a rare work that does not contain a variation of this motif’.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, the chronotopic significance of the road, as Timo Müller observes, ‘extends onto the generic level, where it has come to define the road novel and the road movie as distinct text types’.¹⁷⁵ The chronotope of the road has accordingly been discussed and employed in the analyses of a range of literary and filmic texts,¹⁷⁶ though these analyses draw heavily on Bakhtin’s own discussion of the road in ‘Chronotope’. In this thesis I, too, draw primarily on Bakhtin’s essay with regard to general principles, and turn to secondary material where relevant.

In selecting the chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road for this study, I am placing emphasis on the spatial dimension of the chronotope. I do this in the first instance to align my conceptual tools with my objects of study: American spaces. In the second instance, I seek to develop chronotopic theory along the lines Bakhtin himself foresaw. Though a single essay, ‘Chronotope’ is composed of two parts: the first nine sections, which constitute the bulk,¹⁷⁷ completed in 1938;¹⁷⁸ and the tenth section, titled ‘Concluding Remarks’,¹⁷⁹ added 35 years later in 1973.¹⁸⁰ In the first part Bakhtin’s focus is on the dimension of time (he asserts at the outset that ‘in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time’);¹⁸¹ in the ‘Concluding Remarks’ Bakhtin turns his attention to space. The chronotopes discussed in this section—including the road,¹⁸² the castle,¹⁸³ the parlor or salon,¹⁸⁴ the town,¹⁸⁵ the threshold,¹⁸⁶ *mystery*- and carnival-time,¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁴ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 98.

¹⁷⁵ Müller, ‘Literary Chronotopes’, 596–7.

¹⁷⁶ See, e.g. Alexandra Ganser, Julia Pühringer and Markus Rheindorf, ‘Bakhtin’s Chronotope on the Road: Space, Time, and Place in Road Movies Since the 1970s’, *Linguistics and Literature* 4, no. 1 (2006): 1–17; Barbara L. Pittman, ‘Cross-Cultural Reading and Generic Transformations: The Chronotope of the Road in Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*’, *American Literature* 67, no. 4 (1995): 777–92; and Julie Hansen, ‘Space, Time, and Plane Travel in Walter Kirn’s Novel *Up in the Air*’, *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 11, no. 3 (2012): 18–35.

¹⁷⁷ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 84–242.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 243–58.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 243–5. Also discussed in the first part of the essay (98 and 120).

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 245–6.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 246–7.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 247–8.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 249 (original emphasis).

and biographical time¹⁸⁸—are predominantly spatial;¹⁸⁹ and the final paragraph, moreover, concludes: ‘it has been temporal relationships by and large that have been studied—and these in isolation from the spatial relationships indissolubly tied up with them. Whether the approach taken in this present work will prove fundamental and productive, only the further development of literary research can determine’.¹⁹⁰

As with the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities, this ‘turn’ towards the spatial dimension of the chronotope is not a turn away from the temporal. We recall Bakhtin’s initial definition of the chronotope: ‘In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, *concrete* whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes *artistically visible*’.¹⁹¹ To place an emphasis on space, therefore, is not to dispose with, or devalue, time, but to recognise that only through the former can ‘time-space’ be made ‘concrete’ or ‘artistically visible’ in literary texts. As Holquist notes, the chronotope is a ‘useful term’, not only because it brings together time and space, but also ‘because it insists on their simultaneity and inseparability’;¹⁹² as ‘a unit of analysis for studying texts’,¹⁹³ its ‘distinctiveness ... lies in the fact that neither category is privileged; they are utterly interdependent’.¹⁹⁴ In this study into the nature of American spaces and their representation, production and contestation in three long-form poems, the chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road provide a means by which to read not only American geography *or* history, but their necessary relation.

Outline of critical chapters

The object of my study is the nature of American spaces, as represented in and produced by literary texts. In their engagement with such spaces, the authors of my primary texts evince a concern with epic national narratives of settlement, in particular Turner’s frontier myth. For Turner, the narrative of the frontier progresses through successive geographical and temporal markers:

The fall line marked the frontier of the seventeenth century; the Alleghanies that of the eighteenth; the Mississippi that of the first quarter of the nineteenth; the Missouri that of the middle of this century (omitting the California movement); and the belt of the Rockies Mountains and the arid tract, the present frontier.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 249.

¹⁸⁹ Also noted by Müller, ‘Literary Chronotopes’, 595.

¹⁹⁰ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 258.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 84 (my emphasis).

¹⁹² Holquist, *Dialogism*, 155.

¹⁹³ Michael Holquist, glossary to Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 423–34, 425.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Turner, *Frontier*, 9.

In tracing the ‘story’ of nation, and the manner in which this story is unsettled by the authors of my primary texts, I order my analytical chapters chronologically by the time-spaces of the central events *represented* in each text. I therefore begin with the chronotope of the forest in ‘Articulation’, in seventeenth-century New England; then move to the chronotope of the desert in *Collected Works*, in late-nineteenth-century New Mexico and Arizona; and conclude with the chronotope of the road in *Book of the Dead*, in 1930s America. The significance I give to both the representational and generic functions of the chronotope is reflected in the methodology I employ for this study, which consists of close textual analysis of my primary texts informed by relevant historical, including generic, contexts. Holquist has made note of the manner in which an application of chronotopic theory serves to focus attention on particular features of literary texts: these being ‘simultaneity ... no single time/space can be definitive’;¹⁹⁶ and ‘spatial and temporal markers in the text such as “before” and “after” or “here” and “there”’.¹⁹⁷ Throughout my analyses, I maintain an awareness of the manner in which multiple time-spaces intersect in each text, and give due weight to spatial and temporal markers—in particular beginnings and endings, places of arrival and departure.

In Chapter One I undertake an analysis of Susan Howe’s ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’ using the chronotope of the forest. ‘Articulation’ is set in the thickly wooded surrounds of New England in the seventeenth century—a place and time that constituted the beginning of the frontier period in American history, as defined by Turner. In this chapter, I argue that Howe uses the chronotope of the forest to engage with this prototypical American space in part through an engagement with the genre of the captivity narrative, a prototypical American literary genre in which the forest features. Howe draws upon the idea of the forest as a place of origin to complicate the very notion of origins—a valorised epic temporal category—and reorient our gaze towards inexplicable change, thereby unsettling justificatory colonial narratives of settlement. The forest—through its inverse, the clearing—is also the means by which Howe explores the ethical problems inherent in ‘attempts to write the land as home’, which has implications not only for the nation, but for Howe herself. Howe also uses the chronotope of the forest, in which spatio-temporal boundaries collapse and splinter, to expose the temporal paradox in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, the epic prophecy at the heart of Turner’s frontier thesis. In doing so, she also sets in perpetual motion and thereby ‘unhomes’ European settlement.

In Chapter Two, I undertake an analysis of Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* using the chronotope of the desert. Set in the arid regions of New Mexico and Arizona at the end of the nineteenth century, a place and time that constituted, for Turner, the end of the frontier period in American history, *Collected Works* takes as its

¹⁹⁶ Holquist, *Dialogism*, 121. All present time-spaces, for instance, necessarily include past time-spaces; moreover, the time-space of the reading ‘present’ and the writing ‘present’, as well as the writing ‘present’ and the ‘real present’, are never coterminous.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

subject the final year in the life of outlaw Billy the Kid. In this chapter, I argue that Ondaatje uses the chronotope of the desert in *Collected Works* to engage with this late frontier space, in part through an engagement with the genre of the Western, for which the desert provides the classic *mis en scene*. By presenting the desert as an extreme environment that actively does violence to, and produces violence in, all living organisms Ondaatje undermines ideas of American exceptionalism in Turner's frontier thesis. The chronotope of the desert fuses together absence and presence, and functions in Ondaatje's revisionist Western not only as a site of resistance to representation (and its production as a mythic image), but also a means by which those excluded from and made invisible by the processes of colonisation can be acknowledged. Ondaatje also uses the desert, a space that unites 'inside' and 'outside', to unsettle the borders on which the traditional Western and epic founding narratives are built.

In Chapter Three, I undertake an analysis of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* using the chronotope of the road. First published in the collection *U.S. 1*, the poem winds its way through the physical and cultural landscape of America in the 1930s, a time of national crisis. In this chapter, I argue that Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road in *Book of the Dead* to engage with the 'post-frontier' space of 1930s America, in which the frontier still looms large, in part by engaging with particular iteration of the genre of road: the American road guide. In *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road to produce an alternative guidebook to the nation, one in which poems function as meeting places where diverse voices and disparate time-spaces collide—destabilising the notion of a unified homogenous nation. The road is also the means by which Rukeyser takes us down into the extratemporal world of the epic, descending into the underworld in order to encounter the dead. Finally, Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road to generate circular motion, which, in historical time, is characterised by constant change. She repurposes the energy and hope in Turner's account of the frontier, dismantling the bounds of 'nation' in favour of a common global community, and sends her readers beyond the edges of the poem, to journey on a revolutionary road into the future.

In the Conclusion to the critical component of this thesis, I summarise my findings, and discuss the broader implications of such findings with regard to chronotopic theory and the study of long-form poetry and American spaces.

Chapter One: 'These are the old home trees': Susan Howe's 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time' and the American Ancestral Forest

But who knows the temporal dimensions of the forest? History is not enough. We should have to know how the forest experiences its great age; why, in the reign of the imagination, there are no young forests
Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*¹⁹⁸

First published as a chapbook in 1987,¹⁹⁹ 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time'²⁰⁰ is a long-form poem divided into three parts. Part 1 includes a brief outline, in prose, of the historical events on which the poem is based.²⁰¹ The 'Falls Fight' of 1676, according to the text, was a violent skirmish between a group of New England colonists and Native Americans near the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts.²⁰² During the fight, the small band of settlers massacre 300 Native Americans, most of whom, we are told, are women and children. One of the colonists, Reverend Hope Atherton, a minister from Deerfield, survives the fight only to become lost in the woods. While other survivors are captured and burned alive, Atherton escapes. After some days, he reappears in the town of Hadley, on the other side of the Connecticut River. His story is received with suspicion—he becomes 'a stranger to his community and die[s] soon after'.²⁰³ What follows, it is implied, is Atherton's attempt to set down for the record his own account.

Susan Howe's work has received considerable critical attention since it first appeared in journals and small-press publications in the 1970s.²⁰⁴ In her monograph on Howe, Rachel Tzvia Back locates within the poet's oeuvre works that can be characterised as 'American'²⁰⁵—an appellation Howe uses herself.²⁰⁶ These poems and essays, of which 'Articulation' is one, take as their subjects American historical figures and events.²⁰⁷

¹⁹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 188.

¹⁹⁹ *Articulation* (Awede).

²⁰⁰ 'Articulation'.

²⁰¹ This two-page section in *Singularities* does not appear in the Awede Press edition.

²⁰² 'Articulation', 3–4.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰⁴ The monographs include: Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002); Elisabeth Joyce, *The Small Space of a Pause: Susan Howe's Poetry and the Spaces Between* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2010); Collis, *Anarcho-scholasticism*; and Montgomery, *Susan Howe*.

²⁰⁵ Back, *Led by Language*, 16. Back reads 'Secret History of the Dividing Line', 'Articulation', and 'Thorow' as 'American works'. See also Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 86.

²⁰⁶ Howe, for instance, refers to 'Secret History of the Dividing Line' as an 'American' poem. Susan Howe, cited in Janet Ruth Fallon, 'Speaking with Susan Howe', *The Difficulties* 3, no. 2 (1989): 28–42, 40.

²⁰⁷ See, e.g., Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 1985); *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University

History has always held a prominent place in Howe's writing and in the scholarship pertaining to it.²⁰⁸ What has received growing attention is the role that space, place and landscape play in her work. In a more recent monograph on Howe's poetry, *The Small Space of a Pause*, Elisabeth Joyce reads a number of Howe's long-form poems using three key spatial devices: framing, mapping and, following the work of theorists such as Edward Soja and Pierre Bourdieu, 'third spaces'.²⁰⁹ While recognising the significance of American landscapes,²¹⁰ her reading of Howe's American poems proceeds by way of space as a largely abstract, and often geometric, concept.

As Back observes, Howe's American poems 'situate themselves in ... specifically New England—landscapes'.²¹¹ In interviews and essays, Howe, who has deep familial and cultural roots in the region,²¹² speaks of the importance of this specific geography in her work: as she states in the essay 'Incloser': 'New England is the place I am'.²¹³ Critics such as Nick Selby²¹⁴ and Jenny L. White,²¹⁵ have discussed 'Secret History of the Dividing Line'²¹⁶ and 'Thorow'²¹⁷—two other American poems—with reference to New England landscapes, but their discussions have tended to focus on abstract tropes of 'nature' and 'wilderness'. Moreover, the central events of these poems are situated at a temporal remove from those of 'Articulation'—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. In response to the question 'Is time just chronology?' Howe has replied: 'No ... I would say space-time'.²¹⁸ Given that correlations between time and space, history and geography, are central to Howe's work, I propose to read 'Articulation' using the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope. While 'Articulation' has perhaps attracted the

Press, 1993); *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974–1979* (New York: New Directions, 1996); and *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New York: New Directions, 2007).

²⁰⁸ See, e.g., Wilkinson, 'Poet-historian'; and Susan M. Schultz, 'The Stutter in the Text: Editing and Historical Authority in the Work of Susan Howe', *How2 Journal* 1, no. 6 (2001), http://www.asu.edu/piperwcwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_6_2001/current/readings/encounters/schultz.html (unpaginated). Both Wilkinson and Schultz refer to Howe as a 'poet-historian'. See also Naylor, *Poetic Investigations*; and Paul Quintermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁰⁹ Joyce, *Small Space*, 18.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹¹ Back, *Led by Language*, 17–18.

²¹² See Susan Howe, 'About the Author', in *Singularities*, where Howe acknowledges a number of New England writers as sources of inspiration (72).

²¹³ Susan Howe, 'Incloser', in *Birth-mark*, 43–86, 47.

²¹⁴ Selby, 'Created Space'.

²¹⁵ Jenny L. White, 'The Landscapes of Susan Howe's "Thorow"', *Contemporary Literature* 47, no. 2 (2006): 236–60.

²¹⁶ Susan Howe, 'Secret History of the Dividing Line,' in *Frame Structures*.

²¹⁷ Susan Howe, 'Thorow', in *Singularities*.

²¹⁸ Susan Howe, 'Talisman Interview, with Edward Foster', in *Birth-mark*, 155–81, 173.

greatest number of critical readings of all of Howe's poems,²¹⁹ there have been no chronotopic analyses to date.²²⁰

In 'Articulation' Howe is concerned with a crucial place and time in the colonial settlement of America: New England in the seventeenth century. This foundational American space, situated at the beginning of what Frederick Jackson Turner termed the frontier period in American history, is concretised in a dominant topographical landscape feature: the forest. In the following chapter, I undertake an analysis of 'Articulation' using the chronotope of the forest. I argue that Howe draws upon the chronotope of the forest as a constitutive feature of seventeenth-century New England—a prototypical American space—as well as of the genre of the captivity narrative—the first genre of American literature—in order to unsettle national mythologies that justify colonisation. Through the chronotope of the forest, Howe frustrates the search for epic origins by undoing sequence and language, undermining the very notion of 'originals', and reorienting our gaze towards inexplicable change. Howe also explores the ethical consequences of the 'homing' and 'unhoming' that occur in the process of colonisation, and exposes the temporal paradox in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, at the heart of Turner's frontier thesis.

The significance of the forest in American history and literature

'Out of the actual chronotopes of our world,' Bakhtin states, 'emerge the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work'.²²¹ our path into 'Articulation' therefore begins with a step outside the text. In this, we follow Howe, who steps out of her writing present in the twentieth century and into a landscape of the past, one necessarily mediated by texts. In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama speaks of the 'long, rich, and pagan tradition that imagined forests as the primal birth-place of nations'.²²² While this tradition has its roots in Old-World Europe, it has particular resonance for America, where 'the interplay of men and habitat has long been at the heart of national history'.²²³ In Turner's account of the frontier, it is the forest from which the nation's specific character and institutions emerge: 'This new democracy,' he writes, 'came from no theorist's dreams of the German forest. It came, stark and strong and full of life, from the American forest.'²²⁴ While Turner's thesis is now viewed as a

²¹⁹ See Joyce, *Small Space*, 166; and Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 80.

²²⁰ For a chronotopic analysis of Howe's essay collection *Birth-mark*, see Andrew Christopher West, "'Candles lighting the dark": *The Birth-mark's* Antinomian Method', *Textual Practice* 27, no. 4 (2013): 617–49.

²²¹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 253 (original emphasis).

²²² Schama, *Landscape*, 6.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²²⁴ Turner, *Frontier*, 216.

deeply biased and inaccurate account of the colonisation of America,²²⁵ the prominence given to the forest as an originary and original American space has persisted. As historians such as Perry Miller have noted, although ‘we are no longer obliged to believe [Turner’s thesis] we are ready to recognize ... that unless we acknowledge the existence of the forest the character of American history is obscure’.²²⁶ Similarly, in his study of the material evolution of American forests, historical geographer Michael Williams expresses a critical view of Turner’s thesis, but maintains that ‘[t]he existence of the forest and the effort either to use or subdue it have been a constant theme in American geography, economy, and history’.²²⁷

As Henry Nash Smith observes, in Turner’s early-twentieth-century account, ‘the American forest has become almost an enchanted wood’.²²⁸ But for Puritan settlers in seventeenth-century New England—the colonists with whom Howe is concerned in ‘Articulation’—the forest presented a darker, more threatening aspect. Annette Kolodny, in her study of the experiences of women on the American frontier, writes that for the Puritans, American forests became a substitute for biblical deserts:

what appeared to many as the untamed savagery of the New England landscape—an image comprising both the terrain and its native inhabitants—suggested that perhaps one Babylon had simply been abandoned for another. The dark forest recessed, controlled by those who were thought to be the very ‘bond-slaves of Satan,’ thus easily suggested themselves as yet another type through which to signify the notion of spiritual wilderness. As a result, Babylon, a favored Puritan signifier for human corruption and spiritual wasteland, was symbolically transposed from a desert cityscape to a forested landscape.²²⁹

Newly transplanted from Europe, the Puritans overlaid the contours of their European traditions and folklore onto the forests of the new world with such conviction that, even before New England was the epicenter of the witchcraft trials, the forest was in popular parlance the place where the devil held sway: perennially dark, irredeemably haunted. Characterised from the beginning as ‘the abode of the supernatural and the fantastic’,²³⁰ the forest was a figure readily coopted into the medium of literature, and is a fixture in many of America’s foundational literary texts: James Fenimore Cooper’s popular

²²⁵ See the Introduction and Chapter Two of this thesis.

²²⁶ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), 1.

²²⁷ Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvii.

²²⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 253.

²²⁹ Kolodny, *Land Before Her*, 20.

²³⁰ Michael Williams, *Americans*, 10.

Leatherstocking Tales,²³¹ which abound in descriptions of lush forested landscapes; Washington Irving's gothic short story 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', in which a headless horseman rides through a haunted forest;²³² and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*, in which spiritual lessons are derived from a life of economy in the woods.²³³ Before appearing in these classic American texts, however, the 'actual' chronotope of the forest found a correlate in the nation's earliest genre of literature: the captivity narrative. Deriving from stories told by Puritans, mostly women, captured and held by Native Americans in the seventeenth century, these narratives are characterised by certain generic conventions, including a forest setting. As Kolodny writes, 'in the earliest captivity narratives, Indian and forest alike functioned as symbolic props in a preconceived cultural script';²³⁴ the drama of spiritual redemption was 'linked in the popular imagination not with a symbolic Babylon but with the forested landscapes of the New World'.²³⁵

The influence of the genre of the captivity narrative on Howe's writing, particularly in 'Articulation', has been noted by various scholars.²³⁶ Richard Slotkin, whose history of the frontier myth Howe identifies as an important source,²³⁷ contends that captivity narratives 'constitute the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American audiences';²³⁸ printed and distributed widely throughout the seventeenth century, and maintaining their popularity well into the nineteenth,²³⁹ they became 'the first significant genre of New World writing and formed the literary basis of the first American mythology'.²⁴⁰ In her essay 'The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson',²⁴¹ Howe echoes Slotkin's assessment, stating: 'Avatar of the only literary-

²³¹ A series of five novels featuring a character nicknamed 'Leatherstocking': James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823); *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826); *The Prairie* (1827); *The Pathfinder* (1840); and *The Deerslayer* (1841).

²³² Washington Irving, 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819).

²³³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (1854).

²³⁴ Kolodny, *Land Before Her*, 28.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²³⁶ See, e.g., Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 301; Reinfeld, *Language Poetry*, 136; and Back, *Led by Language*, 39.

²³⁷ Of Slotkin's *Regeneration*, Howe states: 'It's a crucial book for anyone interested in American literature. He's very good on Mary Rowlandson and wonderful on other early American frontier literature' ('*Talisman*', 167).

²³⁸ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 95.

²³⁹ Slotkin notes: 'Of the four narrative works which attained the status of best seller between 1680 and 1720, three were captivity narratives ... Not until the nineteenth century did a novel gain similar popularity' (*ibid.*, 96).

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁴¹ Susan Howe, 'The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson', in *Birth-mark*, 89–130.

mythological form indigenous to North America, this captivity narrative is both a microcosm of colonial imperialist history and a prophecy of our contemporary repudiation of alterity, anonymity and darkness'.²⁴² The chronotope of the forest is not only essential to the story of the origins of the nation, but also to the story of the origins of American literature; it constitutes, moreover, the essential link between the two. In 'Articulation' Howe places us at the very genesis of these historical and literary origins.

Into the woods: 'a myth of a beginning'

In *The Frontier in American History*, Turner defines the coordinates of what he considers a foundational American space:

a western area intermediate between the coastal colonial settlements of the seventeenth century and the trans-Alleghany settlements of the latter portion of the eighteenth century. This section I propose to isolate and discuss under the name of the Old West, and in the period from about 1676 to 1763.²⁴³

If the frontier myth is a story about the origins of the nation, then this is its grand opening chapter: 'In this region, and in these years,' Turner writes, 'are to be found the beginnings of much that is characteristic in Western society'.²⁴⁴ In 'Articulation', Howe's choice of setting and subject matter places us firmly within the time-space of Turner's Old West. Part 1 of the poem informs us we are in 'Deerfield ... the northernmost colonial settlement in the Connecticut River Valley'.²⁴⁵ The Falls Fight, the event with which Howe is concerned, is also known as the Turner Falls Fight; Turner Falls, and the Connecticut River into which it feeds, lie on the 'fall line',²⁴⁶ a 1.4km escarpment where the Piedmont and Atlantic Plain meet. This geographic division of land is where Turner situates the first inland frontier,²⁴⁷ and the date of the skirmish, 1676, marks the beginning of the period of Turner's Old West. It is clear, then, from the outset, that in 'Articulation' Howe seeks to engage with what could be termed the ground zero of the European colonisation of America: the beginning of the beginning.

The landscape in which we find ourselves is forestial: after the Falls Fight, the majority of colonists manage to make their way back to safety, '[e]xcept for Hope Atherton and seven or eight others' who find themselves lost and '*hiding in the woods* for several days'.²⁴⁸

²⁴² Ibid., 89.

²⁴³ Turner, *Frontier*, 68.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ 'Articulation', 1.

²⁴⁶ A 'fall line' is a boundary between an upland region and a coastal plain, usually made visible by rapids or waterfalls when crossed by a river.

²⁴⁷ Turner, *Frontier*, 68.

²⁴⁸ 'Articulation', 4 (my emphasis).

In the section of prose that ends Part 1, ‘EXTRACT *from a LETTER (dated June 8, 1781) of Stephen Williams to President Styles*’,²⁴⁹ these details are reiterated: ‘Mr. Atherton was unhorsed and separated from the company, *wandered in the woods* some days’.²⁵⁰ In Part 2 of ‘Articulation’, titled ‘Hope Atherton’s Wanderings’, Howe takes us into these woods. The first seven sections²⁵¹ are a syntactical maze, dense with verbs and nouns. The two opening sections read:

Prest try to set after grandmother
 revived by and laid down left ly
 little distant each other and fro
 Saw digression hobbling driftwood
 forage two rotted beans & etc.
 Redy to faint slaughter story so
 Gone and signal through deep water
 Mr. Atherton’s story Hope Atherton

Clog nutmeg abt noon
 scraping cano muzzell
 foot path sand and so
 gravel rubbish vandal
 horse flesh ryal tabl
 sand enemys flood sun
 Danielle Warnare Servt
 Turner Falls Fight us
 Next wearer April One

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In the first section, we have a sense of where and when we might be: there are enough conjunctions and prepositions—‘and’, ‘after’, ‘so’, ‘through’—to enable us to derive some kind of sense, though connections exist only, if they do at all, between words in the same line. In the second section, the removal of almost all conjunctions and prepositions (except ‘and so’) dissolves even the connections within lines. The relationship, for instance, between the words ‘Turner Falls Fight’ is destabilised: the use of initial capitals (as well as the prose introduction in Part 1) encourages us to read ‘Turner Falls Fight’ as

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 5 (original emphasis).

²⁵⁰ Ibid. (my emphasis).

²⁵¹ Montgomery calls these ‘page-poems’ (*Susan Howe*, 86). In the Awede Press edition, each was set on a separate page. In the *Singularities* edition, these have been set two to a page, separated by a solid horizontal bar; I refer to them as ‘sections’, as the word ‘poems’ implies a greater degree of thematic and stylistic separation. I have reproduced the setting as accurately as possible.

²⁵² ‘Articulation’, 6.

a portmanteau proper noun. The inclusion of ‘us’ at the end of the line, however, throws this simple reading off balance. For the line to make sense syntactically (in the absence of, say, a comma before ‘us’), do we uncouple the first two words from the third, and read ‘Fight’ as a verb? Does ‘Falls’ act as a noun or verb? Here, as elsewhere, Howe draws attention to the multiple duties words can perform, and the manner in which meaning is determined by contests between contexts and conventions.

Every step takes us only further into the tangle of landscape and language. The third and fourth sections read:

Soe young mayde in March or April laught
 who was lapd M as big as any kerchief
 as like tow and beg grew bone and bullet
 Stopt when asleep so Steven boy companion
 Or errant Socoquis if you love your lives
 War closed after Clay Gully hobbling boy
 laid no whining trace no footstep clue
 “Deep water” he *must* have crossed over

Who was lapt R & soe grew bone & bullet
 as like tow and as another scittuation
 Stopt when Worshp Steven boy companion
 Abt noon and abt sun come Country Farm
 Follow me save me thither this winter
 Capt. Turner little horn of powder
 Medfield Clay Gully hobbling boy
 Sixteen trace no wanton footstep rest
 Soe struck fire set the woods on fire

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As Back observes, the language in these sections conveys a sense of immediacy: ‘[t]he poems rush forth with the urgency and breathlessness of a person in flight’.²⁵⁴ This intense movement appears to be linear, but what becomes apparent is that progress is illusory. Many of the lines in the third section are repeated in the fourth, with only minor variations. For instance, ‘who was lapd M as big as any kerchief/as like tow and beg grew bone and bullet’ becomes ‘Who was lapt R & soe grew bone & bullet/as like tow and as another scittuation’; and ‘Stopt when asleep so Steven boy companion’ becomes ‘Stopt when Worshp Steven boy companion’. When we read the third and fourth sections alongside the first and second sections, we see that the same marker of time (‘Abt noon’)

²⁵³ Ibid., 7 (original emphasis).

²⁵⁴ Back, *Led by Language*, 41.

in the fourth section has appeared previously in the second ('Clog nutmeg abt noon'). A marker of place ('Clay Gully') in the third and fourth sections then reappears in the fifth ('abt again Clay Gully').²⁵⁵ Peter Nicholls contends that in 'Articulation' Howe 'is concerned to reduce all narrative elements to residual traces':²⁵⁶ in the first five sections of 'Hope Atherton's Wandering', Howe renders the landscape that is constituted by Hope's narrative, and in which his narrative takes place, not in clear, straight lines, but confused circles. Just as the features of the forest repeat and double back over themselves, so, too, does Atherton's account: in the forest, his story refuses to cohere, and as readers we, too, lose our anchors in time and space and become 'lost in the woods'.

The phrase 'lost in the woods' reminds us of the function the chronotope of the forest often serves in the European genre of the fairy tale. It is in the woods where Hansel and Gretel lose their way and stumble into the witch's cottage, where Little Red Riding Hood strays from the path and encounters the wolf. The chronotope of the forest in such tales is often possessed of the peculiar characteristic of seeming to exist outside ordinary space and time. In *The Poetics of Space*, phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard writes of the 'immensity of the forest',²⁵⁷ which:

originates in the body of impressions which, in reality, have little connection with geographical information. We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper' into a limitless world ... this limitless world, which is a primary attribute of the forest.²⁵⁸

This attribute of the forest, a defining feature of the European fairy tale, when transposed into the American context becomes a defining feature of the American genre of the captivity narrative. One of the foundational instances of the latter is the narrative of Mary Rowlandson, published as *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* in 1682,²⁵⁹ and based on events in 1675.²⁶⁰ According to Slotkin, Rowlandson's is 'the first and by far the most widely distributed book devoted to a single captivity'.²⁶¹ Of the narrative's time-space, he observes:

for Mrs. Rowlandson and her reader, time is marked not in temporal days but in 'Removes,' spatial and spiritual movements away from civilized light into Indian darkness ... Her choice of the word *removes* and her use of this method of marking the passage of time reinforce the impression of captivity as an all-

²⁵⁵ 'Articulation', 8.

²⁵⁶ Nicholls, 'Unsettling the Wilderness', 595.

²⁵⁷ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 185 (original emphasis).

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ See Kolodny, *Land Before Her*, 17.

²⁶⁰ See Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 103–10.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 95.

environing experience, a world in microcosm, complete even to having its own peculiar time-space relationships.²⁶²

Howe, who paraphrases this quote in her essay on Mary Rowlandson ('Now the narrative is divided into chapters called Removes. Each Remove is a forced march away from Western rationalism, deep and deeper into Limitlessness'),²⁶³ appropriates the structure of Rowlandson's captivity narrative for 'Hope Atherton's Wandering'. As with Rowlandson's story, Hope's path through the immense American woods is presented to us in a series of 'removes'. As we progress 'deeper and deeper into a limitless world', it is the gaps between removes, heightened by the breakdown of syntax and the loss of spatio-temporal markers, that assume increasing prominence. In the eighth and ninth sections of Part 2, we read:

rest chondriacal lunacy

velc cello viable toil

quench conch uncannunc

drum amonoosuck ythian

scrow aback din

flicker skaeg ne

barge quagg peat

~~sieve catacomb~~

stint chisel sect

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In the eighth section, recognisable English words such as 'rest' and 'viable' are placed together with Native American words, 'uncannunc' and 'amonoosuck', as well as with words that do not appear to be from any known language: 'velc' and 'ythian'. In the ninth section, we encounter what appear to be archaic European words: 'skaeg' is from the Old Norse for 'beard'; 'scrow' an obsolete term meaning 'scroll'; 'quagg' could be a deliberate misspelling of 'quag', which is an alternative to 'quagmire'. Two of the modern English words ('sieve catacomb') have been struck through. Though we may speculate on how to

²⁶² Ibid., 109 (original emphasis).

²⁶³ Howe, 'Rowlandson', 96.

²⁶⁴ 'Articulation', 10.

read this assemblage as a meaningful unit, words have been decontextualised and reduced to their elemental forms. These collections of vowels and consonants find communion only in sonic consonance: the alliteration of ‘ch’ in ‘cello’, ‘quench’ and ‘conch’; the assonance of ‘uh’ in ‘uncannunc’ ‘drumm’ ‘amonoosuck’. If there is any connective tissue here it is neither a common language or culture, nor a historically situated speaking subject, but pure articulation. What we witness, as Atherton becomes lost in the woods, is devolution or unravelling: not only of space and time, but also language.

Uta Gosmann has observed that in these sections of ‘Articulation’, ‘Howe poetically inverts the formative processes of language by dissolving sentences into fragments, words into letters and smallest sound units, and typography into the blank of the page ... [she] seeks to approximate language’s “place of origin”’.²⁶⁵ That this return to linguistic origins occurs in the space of the forest is significant: in his study of the forest in the Western imagination, Robert Pogue Harrison writes:

Intuition conspires with the forest to produce in the mind an image of origins ... in the forest’s recesses the solitary wanderer wanders through the recesses of time itself. The forest ... becomes, quite literally the *phenomenon* of origins.²⁶⁶

Critics such as Back and Michael Davidson have contended that ‘Articulation’ is ‘a journey back to origins, to first places—linguistic, geographic, historical, and psychological’;²⁶⁷ that, ‘[b]uilding upon American literary historians such as Perry Miller ... Howe retells the story of Puritan origins’.²⁶⁸ And yet, as Howe is well aware, there is a fundamental problem with origins. In his discussion of the genre of the epic, Bakhtin writes that ‘[i]n the epic world view, “beginning,” “first,” “founder,” “ancestor,” “that which occurred earlier” and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree’.²⁶⁹ That Howe views such valorised temporal categories with suspicion can be seen in the manner in which she uses ‘original’ historical source texts in ‘Articulation’. One such text is George Sheldon’s *History of Massachusetts*,²⁷⁰ published in 1972. It is from Sheldon’s *History* that Howe derives her subtitle for Part 2, ‘Hope Atherton’s Wanderings’, as well as the major plot points of Atherton’s story. In his analysis of the first two sections of ‘Hope Atherton’s

²⁶⁵ Uta Gosmann, *Poetic Memory: The Forgotten Self in Plath, Howe, Hinsey, and Glück* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 105.

²⁶⁶ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 130 (original emphasis).

²⁶⁷ Back, *Led by Language*, 41.

²⁶⁸ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 81.

²⁶⁹ Bakhtin, ‘Epic’, 15 (original emphasis).

²⁷⁰ George Sheldon, *A History of Deerfield Massachusetts 1895–96* (Somersworth: New Hampshire Publishing, 1972).

Wanderings', Nicholls quotes the fragment in Sheldon's *History* from which Howe has gleaned certain words:

J.W. was glad to leave him, least he shd be a *clog* or hindreance to him. Mr. W. grew faint, & once when ye indians *prest* him, he was near fainting away, but by eating a *nutmeg*, (which his *grandmother* gave him as he was going out) he was *revived*.²⁷¹

The re-placement of the gleaned words back into a coherent narrative (that is, back into an ordered temporal sequence) gives us some sense of the meaning the text might convey. But Howe's 'Articulation' is not Sheldon's *History*. Even with the source text as a guide, as Nicholls observes, '[e]lements remain opaque'.²⁷² A reliance on Howe's historical sources as a key to interpretation, moreover, is frustrated by the fact that Howe herself eschews fidelity to these sources, often combining accounts from several authors into one, omitting significant details or misattributing quotes. The quote above, for instance, as Nicholls has shown, although present in parts under the title 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings' in Sheldon's *History*, is actually substantially derived from the account of another colonist Jonathan Wells, which appears on the facing page.²⁷³

Wells is a figure who has already been introduced to us in Part 1, through the section titled 'EXTRACT from a LETTER (dated June 8, 1791)',²⁷⁴ a framing device that directly precedes our entry into Atherton's woods. Howe's use of framing devices in 'Articulation' mimics the structure of New England captivity narratives, in which dangerous content (for the most part the trials of women subject to the 'profane' influence of their Indian captors) is framed by sermons or forewords by ministers (or husbands), which help shape the interpretation of such content.²⁷⁵ The framing letter in 'Articulation', authored by 'Stephen Williams', reads:

This occasioned [Atherton] to publish to his congregation and leave in writing the account I enclose to you. I had the paper from which this is copied, from Jonathan Wells, Esq., who was in the fight and lived afterward at Deerfield and was immediately acquainted with the *Indians* after the war. *He* did himself inform *me* that the *Indians* told *him* that after the fall fight, a little man with a black coat and without any hat, came toward them²⁷⁶

²⁷¹ Sheldon, *History*, cited in Nicholls, 'Unsettling the Wilderness', 596 (Nicholls' emphasis).

²⁷² Nicholls, 'Unsettling the Wilderness', 596.

²⁷³ Ibid., 595. Also noted by Wilkinson, 'Poet-historian', 91.

²⁷⁴ 'Articulation', 5 (original emphasis).

²⁷⁵ See Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 114. On the effect of the interpretive frames imposed by Howe's introductions to her own work, see, e.g., Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 753.

²⁷⁶ 'Articulation', 5 (original emphasis).

The spectre of Jonathan Wells, whose voice reaches us by way of hearsay in Williams' letter, and who, hidden in plain sight, speaks to us directly in 'Atherton's' account, not only introduces a split in what appears to be a unitary speaking voice (the voice we have taken to be 'Hope Atherton' through at least the first seven sections of Part 2), but also further complicates the notion of originals and copies. If we turn again to Sheldon's *History*, we see that Atherton's account, although written in first person, is in fact a *copy* of the original (it is purported to be a '*verbatim* copy').²⁷⁷ Sheldon claims that the document can 'now be traced directly back to the hands of the author',²⁷⁸ but this tracing occurs via a pathway littered with conjecture and hypothesis—the original has been lost, or is in the possession of the Athertons, who will not give it up. 'Who among the Athertons,' Sheldon asks, with frustration, 'has the *original*?'²⁷⁹

Paul Naylor has observed that Howe 'unsettles history by disrupting the sequential narrative style of traditional historiography with a highly paratactic and elliptical form of writing that frustrates the desire to uncover the "original" version of the story'.²⁸⁰ While Nicholls argues that Howe 'has no desire to send us back to her sources',²⁸¹ following the paper trail through a labyrinthine path of documents reveals what Howe sees as 'the impossibility of finding the original'.²⁸² This impossibility arises from the passage of time itself: Sheldon's account of an account, published in 1972, is separated from the events of 'Articulation', in 1676, by a gap of almost two hundred years; and the 'EXTRACT *from* a LETTER', dated 1781,²⁸³ by more than one hundred years. Of Mary Rowlandson's story, Howe notes: 'No copy of the first edition of Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* is known to exist. All the editions we have now depend on the text of a "Second Addition Corrected and Amended" printed during the same year as the first'.²⁸⁴

To seek originals, as to seek origins, is to fall into a mire of false beginnings: as Howe writes, '[i]n the flow of time original versions are modernized and again modernized/ in the flow of time these copies are copies of copies'.²⁸⁵ Howe has led us, by way of her twentieth-century captivity narrative, into the originary colonial space of the seventeenth-century New England forest, only to *de-valorise* the notion of mythic beginnings through a decomposition of the central elements of narrative: language and sequence. As we have seen, by the ninth section of 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings', 'Mr. Atherton's story',²⁸⁶ composed of borrowed words sutured together from at least two historical voices, has dissolved into babel. The dissolution, however, is temporary. As critics such as Wilkinson

²⁷⁷ Sheldon, *History*, 168 (original emphasis).

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid. (original emphasis).

²⁸⁰ Naylor, *Poetic Investigations*, 12.

²⁸¹ Nicholls, 'Unsettling the Wilderness', 596.

²⁸² Howe, '*Talisman*', 175.

²⁸³ 'Articulation', 5.

²⁸⁴ Howe, 'Rowlandson', 97.

²⁸⁵ Howe, 'Submarginalia', in *Birth-mark*, 26–42, 39.

²⁸⁶ 'Articulation', 6.

have noted, 'Howe's simultaneous affinity with and suspicion of words structures the paradox of her work'.²⁸⁷ To save the page from lapsing into silence, language must be reconstituted; a process that begins in the tenth and eleventh sections:

Otherworld light into fable
Best plays are secret plays

Mylord have maize meadow
have Capes Mylord to dim
barley Sion beaver Totem
W'ld bivouac by vineyard
Eagle aureole elses thend

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There is a sense of resurrection, of the presence of at least two speaking voices (one per section), though the syntax and vocabulary indicates they are situated at different spatio-temporal locations: we are still travelling at 'removes' through Howe's captivity narrative. The twelfth section takes us, via what appears to be another voice, to another place and time:

Impulsion of a myth of beginning
The figure of a far-off Wanderer

Grail face of bronze or brass
Grass and weeds cover the face

Colonnades of rigorous Americanism
Portents of lonely destructivism

Knowledge narrowly fixed knowledge
Whose bounds in theories slay

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...

As we progress from section to section, the syntax moves closer to that of contemporary English, even if meaning remains opaque. The thirteenth section, on the next page, takes this movement towards order to a higher plane, evoking the field of geometry by presenting words in a grid formation.²⁹⁰ This grid is replicated visually in the fourteenth

²⁸⁷ Wilkinson, 'Poet-historian', 6.

²⁸⁸ 'Articulation', 11. In the original setting the lines 'Otherworld light into fable/ Best plays are secret plays' almost overlap.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 13.

section, which I read as a spread (see Figure 1.1)—continuing, at first glance, the passage from chaos to increasingly higher forms of order:

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 1.1: 'Articulation', 14–15.

If we read this spread closely, we see that a complex set of inversions occur around the axis of the gutter. The top line on both pages is exactly the same; by its placement at the beginning of the block of text, Howe sets up an expectation of similitude. Proceeding further down the page, the middle grid of words is, line by line, reversed and placed diagonal to itself on the recto (spaces between words have also been removed and first letters capitalised). For instance: 'possess remote so abstract life are lost spatio-temporal hum' becomes 'HumTemporal-spatioLostAreLifeAbstractSoRemotePossess'. The bottom two lines on each page, typeset so that they are visually similar to the top lines, are exactly replicated on both verso and recto, setting up an expectation of similitude that is subverted in the final vertical pair of words: 'upside/sideup' on the verso is inverted to become 'sideup/upside' on the recto.²⁹¹ Reading the spread left to right, that

²⁹¹ There are various interpretations of these 'word grids', which also appear in other Howe poems. See, e.g., Wilkinson, 'Poet-historian'; and Schultz, 'Stutter'.

is verso first and recto second, there is a sense in which the crossing of the boundary between—the material fact of the gutter—forces a sudden change. We are, like Alice in Wonderland, passing through the looking glass, though in the passage signals have been scrambled and reset: at every point in the exchange Howe sets up and then undermines expectations of sequence and system.

This spread is a crucial moment in the poem. In an interview with *Talisman* magazine, Howe speaks of her fascination with ‘a mystery of change and assimilation in time ... Where and how the English seventeenth-century voice becomes the seventeenth-century, the nineteenth-century and even the twentieth-century American voice’.²⁹² Later in the same interview, Howe returns to the subject, by way of her understanding of the concept of ‘singularity’ (a mathematical term that gives her collection *Singularities* its title):

The singularity ... is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It’s a chaotic point. It’s the point chaos enters the cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else ... I thought this was ... a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen²⁹³

The mathematical concept of a singularity, with its focus on sudden and unprecedented change, made visible by ‘instant articulation’, can be likened to the concept of metamorphosis, discussed by Bakhtin in ‘Chronotope’. Metamorphosis, Bakhtin argues, is tied to a particular species of development, one that ‘unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with “knots” in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of *temporal sequence*’.²⁹⁴ If we compare the manner in which Bakhtin characterises the chronotope itself—as ‘the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied’²⁹⁵—we see that metamorphoses and chronotopes share a similar function; as sites where change is made *visible*. Metamorphoses, Bakhtin writes, serves to portray ‘moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was* ... there is no evolution in the strict sense of the word; what we get, rather, is crisis and rebirth’.²⁹⁶ What ‘Articulation’ reveals is precisely a kind of crisis and rebirth. A loss of temporal and spatial bearings in the forest culminates in the appearance of a singularity, a point of chaos, in the ninth section of the poem. Language is then reconstituted, or ‘reborn’, until we reach the spread on pages 14 and 15. While words appear to be strictly ordered here, another singularity has in fact appeared, though it does so in a space we cannot access—the gutter. Another rebirth occurs, although this time the change is internal: the outer shell, the visual structure of the grid, remains the same.

²⁹² Howe, ‘*Talisman*’, 156.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁹⁴ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 113 (original emphasis).

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115 (original emphasis).

Rebirth and regeneration, Smith reminds us, ‘are categories of myth’,²⁹⁷ and they have particular resonance in the context of American national mythologies. Turner’s frontier myth is predicated on ‘perennial rebirth’,²⁹⁸ and as Leo Marx observes, ‘affirms that Europeans experience a regeneration in the New World’. Importantly, ‘the regenerative power is located in the natural terrain’.²⁹⁹ In ‘Articulation’, Howe uses the chronotope of the forest, with its associations with origins and beginnings, to stage at least two scenes of rebirth, presenting us with visions of metamorphoses in the woods. These metamorphoses are enacted not through nature, however, but through language, its dissolution and reformation, and are characterised by the representation of pure change *without* narrative. In both instances, therefore, we are made fully aware of change itself, but neither of its origin nor its process. Through the chronotope of the forest, the ‘myth of a beginning’ is exposed precisely as a myth—it is not the epic beginning Howe seeks, but the point of change.

‘The old home trees’: an ending in the clearing

Immediately following the spread on pages 14 and 15 of ‘Articulation’ is the final section of Part 2. Here, at the bridge that joins Part 2 to Part 3, language resolves into relative clarity, and the pace slows. We enter, as it were, a clearing:

Loving Friends and Kindred:—
 When I look back
 So short in charity and good works
 We are a small remnant
 of signal escapes wonderful in themselves
 We march from our camp a little
 and come home
 Lost the beaten track and so
 River section dark all this time
 We must not worry
 how few we are and fall from each other
 More than language can express
 Hope for the artist in America & etc
 This is my birthday
 These are the old home trees

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²⁹⁷ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 253.

²⁹⁸ Turner, *Frontier*, 2.

²⁹⁹ Marx, *Machine*, 228.

³⁰⁰ ‘Articulation’, 16.

Marjorie Perloff, who also sees the spread on pages 14 and 15 as a ‘breaking point’,³⁰¹ remarks on the manner in which, ‘the sequence suddenly shifts’,³⁰² and we seem to emerge into a space of coherence: ‘Having wandered with great difficulty through the forest of the preceding lyrics, one is, of course, relieved to come into this clearing, to hear the sermonlike address’.³⁰³

In the colonial settlement of America, the clearing is a significant material and symbolic space: for Turner, ‘[t]he forest clearings have been the seed plots of American character’.³⁰⁴ As Michael Williams notes, ‘the forest presented an obstacle that had to be cleared in order to make a landscape. Clearing was a crucial experience that ... helped the transplanted European become an American’.³⁰⁵ David E. Nye also identifies the centrality of the clearing in national foundation narratives:

The story is paradigmatic: A settler enters the vast primeval woods ... Elimination of the forest is equated with progress ... Using an axe, the pioneer creates a new landscape—a landscape inscribed within a technological narrative that moves from desolate forest to clearing, from trees to logs, from wilderness to home, from empty space to civilization.³⁰⁶

The primary function of the clearing was, as both Williams and Nye suggest, to make a landscape *habitable* for European colonists. In the last section of ‘Hope Atherton’s Wandering’, with its seemingly stable and consistent syntax, Howe shows how language can function as a clearing, making space legible and, hence, habitable. Who is it that speaks? Perloff reads this section as ‘the formal and coherent monologue ... of Hope Atherton himself’.³⁰⁷ As noted by Wilkinson, some of these lines are indeed taken from Hope’s account in George Sheldon’s *History of Massachusetts*.³⁰⁸ Another intertext, though very much paraphrased, may be the following sermon given by another seventeenth-century New England minister, Thomas Shepherd:

When wee looke back and consider what a strange poise of spirit the Lord hath laid upon many of our hearts, wee cannot but wonder at ourselves, that so many, and some so weak and tender, with such cheerfulness and constant resolutions against so many perswasions of friends, discouragements from the ill report of this Countrey ... yet should leave our accomodations and comforts, should

³⁰¹ Perloff, *Poetic License*, 308.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid., 308–9.

³⁰⁴ Turner, *Frontier*, 206.

³⁰⁵ Michael Williams, *Americans*, 55.

³⁰⁶ Nye, *Second Creation*, 43. See also Michael Williams, *Americans*, 12; and Schama, *Landscape*, 191 and 193.

³⁰⁷ Perloff, *Poetic License*, 308.

³⁰⁸ Wilkinson, ‘Poet-historian’, 96.

foresake our dearest relations, Parents, brethren, Sisters, Christian friends ... and all this to go to a wilderness.³⁰⁹

This fragment is cited by Slotkin in *Regeneration*, which, we have seen, was a crucial source for 'Articulation'. Phrases from this sermon echo, though refracted, distorted and at times inverted, in Howe's poem: 'When wee looke back' becomes 'When I look back'; 'so many, and some so weak and tender' becomes 'how few we are and fall from each other'; 'leave our accomodations and comforts' becomes 'march from our camp a little'; and 'our dearest relations' becomes 'Loving Friends and Kindred'. What appears as a singular, monologic voice fractures into at least two historical voices, intertwined so thoroughly that the cracks between them become invisible. A close inspection reveals, in addition, a third possible speaker. In the line 'Hope for the artist in America & etc' we find, both in perspective and subject matter, the interpolation of a voice that does not appear to belong to either Hope Atherton or Thomas Shepherd. In a section where the scene has hitherto focused narrowly on the inhabitants of a seventeenth-century New England, the line 'Hope for the artist in America & etc' suddenly widens the view to encompass the whole of America and the universal figure of 'the artist'.

It is not inconceivable that the voice that speaks here is Atherton's, but it is more likely that this is an intruder in the clearing, one located at a significant spatial and temporal remove: that is, Howe herself. To locate the voice of the poet within the poem is to recognise the personal significance of this foundational colonial space for Howe. Critics such as Perloff have remarked upon the dynamic between the personal and historical in Howe's work:

Howe has been called impersonal, but one could argue that ... her poetry, is everywhere charged with her presence. She is not, after all, a chronicler, telling us some Indian story from the New England past, but a poet trying to come to terms with *her* New England past³¹⁰

The highly autobiographical nature of Howe's work has also been noted by Back, who writes that '[t]he charting of her own childhood and ancestral geographies, the uncovering of points of convergence between biography and history, and the frank foregrounding of the intensely personal are foundational to Howe's poetry and poetics'.³¹¹ Wilkinson, too, agrees that 'Howe's poetry carries with it a strong sense of her ancestral roots'.³¹² The word 'ancestral' in these appraisals deserves attention. In his discussion of the forest, Bachelard echoes Bakhtin's caution against words like 'beginning', 'first' and 'origin', writing: 'there is one adjective of which a metaphysician of the imagination must beware, and that is, the adjective *ancestral*. For there is a

³⁰⁹ Thomas Shepherd, cited in Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 107.

³¹⁰ Perloff, *Poetic License*, 310.

³¹¹ Back, *Led by Language*, 12.

³¹² Wilkinson, 'Poet-historian', 5. See also Reinfeld, *Language Poetry*, 145.

corresponding valorization to this adjective which is too rapid, often entirely verbal, and never well supervised'.³¹³ He continues:

I myself can only meditate upon things in my own country ... forests reign in the past. I know, for instance, that my grandfather got lost in a certain wood. I was told this, and I have not forgotten it. It happened in a past before I was born. My oldest memories, therefore, are a hundred years old, or perhaps a bit more.

This, then, is my ancestral forest. And all the rest is fiction.³¹⁴

This sense of the ancestral (a personal relation borne out of direct experience with 'things in my own country', and through familial bonds) is crucial to an understanding of another manner in which the chronotope of the forest functions in 'Articulation'. In the final section of Part 2, which opens with an address to 'Loving Friends and Kindred', the word 'home' appears twice—in 'come home', at the centre of the section, and 'These are the old home trees', at the end. Part 2, 'Hope Atherton's Wanderings', ends, therefore, not only in a clearing in the forest, but at a place marked by familial and other bonds, designated as 'home'. That this home is not only Atherton's, but also Howe's, ancestral home, is strongly suggested by the simultaneous presence of the voices of both. Selby has observed that 'the idea of America ... is dominated by attempts to write the land as home, to create a cultural space from that land'.³¹⁵ Howe's relationship to 'home', *her* American ancestral forest, is complex, and mediated both by longing and an awareness of the manner in which 'attempts to write the land as home' involve displacement and dispossession of those to whom the land was 'home' before colonisation.³¹⁶ As Nye remarks, 'few Native Americans could regard the clear cutting of forests as "improving" the land. Their forest was not wilderness; it was home'.³¹⁷

Yet, conceiving of a dense and tangled forest as the 'natural home' of Native Americans also perpetuates another historical fiction. Michael Williams notes that '[t]he European did not find an America that was all trees ... the Indians had been there in large numbers for millennia before them, and the Indians had been burning, clearing and collecting, and otherwise changing the forest'.³¹⁸ As a result, 'the open forest situation was more characteristic of the forest in general than the picture of the dense, dark woods of the romantic imagination'.³¹⁹ Clearing the land—for cultivation and habitation—was therefore not an exclusively European activity. Moreover, evidence exists to suggest that,

³¹³ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 188.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 188–9.

³¹⁵ Selby, 'Created Space', 55.

³¹⁶ Howe writes: 'most books about the period and the place must hesitate over the word *wilderness*. Because it wasn't a wilderness to Native Americans' (*Talisman*, 161; original emphasis).

³¹⁷ Nye, *Second Creation*, 87.

³¹⁸ Michael Williams, *Americans*, 32–3. See also Karl W. Butzer, 'The Indian Legacy in the American Landscape', in Conzen, *American Landscape*, 27–50, 27.

³¹⁹ Michael Williams, *Americans*, 45.

in many instances, ‘the pioneer chose the existing clearing, particularly the old fields of the Indians, as a place to start’.³²⁰ It is not so much the act of clearing, then, but *displacement from* the clearing, that is at issue. If the clearing is a space characterised by absence, it is the absence not only of trees, but also of prior inhabitants. In this manner, the chronotope of the forest—through its inverted counterpart, the clearing—is figured in ‘Articulation’ as a space for both establishing a ‘home’ and also ‘unhoming’.

What does it mean, in these circumstances, to ‘come home’? Theorist of place Edward Casey has written of the manner in which returning home consists of a re-placement within a network of relationships: ‘By coming home, I effect a series of special alliances: with those who still remain there; with those who were once there but are now dead or departed; with my own memories; with my own current self ... and above all with the home-place I once left.’³²¹ For Howe, as for Atherton, such alliances do not hold. We have already been told, in the prose introduction in Part 1, that soon after his return, Atherton ‘became a stranger to his community and died soon after’;³²² that his homecoming was in fact the beginning of a life of exile. This fate echoes the experience of Mary Rowlandson, which, as Slotkin observes, ‘marked her and left her spiritually alienated from her family’.³²³ In ‘Articulation’, as Linda Reinfeld contends, ‘[w]hatever prospect the local poet may have entertained for a more homely and articular vision—and Howe is after all writing herself home too—survives only through the exploration of a damaged past’.³²⁴ Montgomery has viewed ‘Articulation’ as one of Howe’s ‘most sustained poetic attempts at addressing the colonization of America’;³²⁵ in journeying back into the past Howe is attempting to account for present circumstances. In her *Talisman* interview, Howe asks:

Why are we such a violent nation? Why do we have such contempt for powerlessness? I feel compelled in my work to go back ... to the invasion or settling, or whatever current practice calls it, of *this* place. I am trying to understand what went wrong when the first Europeans stepped on shore here.³²⁶

The ‘old home trees’, wrested from the original inhabitants of the nation by violent means, are not Atherton’s, or Howe’s, to claim; they cannot be a final resting place. We have come to a clearing, the end of ‘Hope Atherton’s Wandering’, but it is not *the* end. Part 3 sets us in motion again.

³²⁰ Ibid., 57. See also Butzer, ‘Indian Legacy’, 49.

³²¹ Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 291.

³²² ‘Articulation’, 4.

³²³ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 112.

³²⁴ Reinfeld, *Language Poetry*, 139.

³²⁵ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 86.

³²⁶ Howe, ‘*Talisman*’, 164 (original emphasis).

'Taking The Forest': destiny (un)manifest

Reinfeld has described Part 3 of 'Articulation', titled 'Taking The Forest', as 'literally linked, not logically sequential, meditations, arranged mostly in couplets interspersed with single lines'.³²⁷ Visually, this part of the poem presents us with the most uniform organisation of text. The syntax, moreover, in comparison to Part 2, is reasonably regular. There is an apparent consistency to the speaking voice, though its source in any one definable speaker is uncertain—as with much of Howe's work, the question is: *who* speaks? Despite the apparent uniformity of structure, style and voice, however, this part of 'Articulation' has proved remarkably resistant to close reading.³²⁸ It begins:

Corruptible first figure
Bright armies wolves warriors steers

scorned warning captive compulsion

Love leads to edge
Progress of self into illusion

Same and not the same
Cherubim intone their own litany

Universal separation
—Distant coherent rational system

Vault lies divergence
Atom keystone

Parmenides prohibition
End of passageway perceive surrounding

Consciousness grasps its subject
Stumbling phenomenology

infinite miscalculation of history

Great men thicker than their stories
sitting and standing

³²⁷ Reinfeld, *Language Poetry*, 145. There are twenty-six sections in the Awede Press edition (one of these was excised in the *Singularities* version; see the Appendix of this thesis). In *Singularities*, some sections have been placed on the same page, separated by a horizontal bar.

³²⁸ Montgomery notes that most critical interpretations are limited to Part 2 of the poem (*Susan Howe*, xv).

to mark suns rising and setting
Ridges of sand rising on one another

Mathematics of continua

fathomless infinitesimal fraction
sabbatical safety beyond seven

Empty arms cloud counterfeit

antecedent terror stretched to a whisper

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By Reinfeld's measure, the page of text above would constitute a single 'meditation'. The question is: how to read this as a *meaningful* unit. We could start with these two couplets:

Great men thicker than their stories
sitting and standing

to mark suns rising and setting
Ridges of sand rising on one another

Reading the couplets together certainly produces coherent sense, but the caesura between encourages us to read each pair of lines separately; alternatively, the capitalisation of 'Ridges' suggests a reading of the first three lines together and the fourth line as a separate clause. Attempting to find sense in not just individual couplets or lines, but the entire page, however, without trying to fill in the yawning gaps both within and between lines, is arguably impossible. Thematically and syntactically, almost all 'units', no matter how you divide the text, resist cohesion. Montgomery, who finds in this third part of the poem 'no obvious—or indeed apparent—relation to the previous sections',³³⁰ initially argues that '[w]ithin lines, although syntactical relations are often absent, associations of sound or sense bind words to one another'.³³¹ While Howe certainly employs a great deal of alliteration and assonance—for instance in the lines 'fathomless infinitesimal fraction/ sabbatical safety beyond seven'—these prosodic associations do not necessarily aid interpretation. After a discussion centering on '[t]he idea of a transplanted intellectual heritage that only partially takes to the new soil',³³² Montgomery

³²⁹ 'Articulation', 17.

³³⁰ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 94.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

concedes that ‘the poem sequence is highly volatile, and any integrative impulse suggested by such connections is stretched to breaking point’.³³³

Of the other readings of Part 3 in the critical literature,³³⁴ Susan Schultz’s offers an interesting view via the interpolation of an inter-text. Howe has cited William Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain*³³⁵ as a key influence on her American works.³³⁶ *In the American Grain* consists of a series of short chapters of poetic prose, centering on seminal figures in American history such as Christopher Columbus, Walter Raleigh, Edgar Allan Poe and Abraham Lincoln. These figures are treated in chronological order, beginning with the Viking Leif Erikson (or ‘Red Eric’), the first European to set foot on American shores. Despite the title of the collection, Williams works in many ways *against* the grain of received myth, reworking the legacies of these founding figures. He does, however, move *with* the flow of historical time. Schultz, using Williams’ text, argues that Howe reverses this chronology, and that in Part 3 of ‘Articulation’, ‘Howe writes an American epic in reverse, in which she endeavors to undo the story told to us by the Puritans’.³³⁷ By ‘telling the story backwards, so that we end with Lif [Erikson] rather than beginning with him, as Williams does’, Howe ‘desystematize[s] history’ and ‘render[s] it as myth, fiction, story’.³³⁸

While I agree that Howe seeks to desystematise and deconstruct received history and myth, the difficulties of reading Part 3 of the poem as a meaningful sequence mean that it is hard to completely agree with Schultz’s assertion. Though references to storytelling, legend and myth recur throughout—‘sequel’;³³⁹ ‘fictitious narrative’;³⁴⁰ ‘legend’;³⁴¹ ‘parable’;³⁴² ‘Lore’;³⁴³ ‘Legend’;³⁴⁴ ‘chronicles’;³⁴⁵ ‘fable’³⁴⁶—what we are presented with in Part 3 in no way conforms to any of these narrative-driven forms. As Montgomery asserts, ‘[t]he poem appears to identify itself with a logic of disintegration’,³⁴⁷ and what is

³³³ Ibid., 95.

³³⁴ See, e.g., Wilkinson, whose reading centres on the ‘strong “feminine” spirit’ in the poem (‘Poet-historian’, 99); and Back, who reads Anne Hutchinson as ‘the single constant figure’ of Part 3 (*Led by Language*, 48).

³³⁵ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 2009). First published in 1925 by A. & C. Boni.

³³⁶ Howe, ‘*Talisman*’, 174.

³³⁷ Schultz, ‘Stutter’.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ ‘Articulation’, 19.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid., 21 and 27.

³⁴³ Ibid., 22.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 29.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 21 and 35.

³⁴⁷ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 96.

enacted is not the creation of a new myth or story, but a considered and sustained act of disorientation, a refusal to cohere to the very notion of story itself. This disavowal of sequence is the stylistic bridge between Part 3 and Part 2, although the level of distortion has been turned up. If, in ‘Hope Atherton’s Wanderings’, Howe takes us into the woods, in ‘Taking The Forest’, we have not left, but moved deeper still. The title ‘Taking The Forest’, alluding as it does to control, capture and captivity, reminds us, too, that what we read is still being placed in relation not only to colonial history, but also to the genre of the captivity narrative (though who, or what, is doing the ‘taking’ remains unclear).

Our sense of the woods here, however, is markedly different; in our transition from Part 2 to Part 3, the woods have lost their immersive aspect. References to ‘woods’ and ‘forests’ are scattered throughout—most notably in the title, but also in phrases such as ‘Threadbare evergreen season’,³⁴⁸ ‘In forest splinter companion’,³⁴⁹ ‘Girl with forest shoulder’,³⁵⁰ ‘Green tree of severance/ Green tree girdled against splitting’,³⁵¹ ‘Foresters move before error’,³⁵² ‘Oak and old hovel grow gossamer’,³⁵³ ‘Bats glance through a wood’,³⁵⁴ ‘Cries hurled through the Woods’,³⁵⁵ and ‘To Kin I call in the Iron-Woods’.³⁵⁶ Howe has said of her poems that they ‘fracture language’;³⁵⁷ here, they also fracture time and space. Ranged across the fragmented, discontinuous landscape of Part 3, the forest has splintered into shards. This aesthetic of splintering, which as Nicholls observes, offers the ability ‘to jettison historical narrative at the same time that it is somehow a refusal to let go of the past’,³⁵⁸ also offers a key to reading Part 3.

Montgomery argues that the third part of ‘Articulation’ is ‘subject to a perplexing temporality that crushes past and present together’³⁵⁹—in lines such as ‘Present past of immanent future’,³⁶⁰ for instance, Howe situates us not in any one particular time-space, but in many at once. This ‘perplexing temporality’ draws our attention to a particular ‘relationship between history and prophecy’³⁶¹ raised at the beginning of the poem. Part 1 of ‘Articulation’ ends with the following sentence: ‘I assume Hope Atherton’s excursion for an emblem foreshadowing a Poet’s abolished limitations in our demythologized

³⁴⁸ ‘Articulation’, 24.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 31.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁵⁷ Howe, ‘*Talisman*’, 173.

³⁵⁸ Nicholls, ‘Unsettling the Wilderness’, 597.

³⁵⁹ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 86.

³⁶⁰ ‘Articulation’, 33.

³⁶¹ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 86.

fantasy of Manifest Destiny.³⁶² Manifest Destiny, ‘the nineteenth-century doctrine that justified the continuing expansion of America into Mexican and Native American territory’,³⁶³ is a prophecy of American exceptionalism that lies at the heart of Turner’s frontier thesis.³⁶⁴ A spatial fiction presenting a vision of America as an ‘empty expanse ... predicated on an erasure of its Native American inhabitants’,³⁶⁵ the doctrine is also possessed of a suspect temporality. Part 1 of ‘Articulation’ also includes the following quote, attributed by Howe to John Cotton, a seventeenth-century minister of the Massachusetts Bay Colony:

*Prophesie is Historie antedated;
and History is Postdated Prophesie.
John Cotton*³⁶⁶

The temporal paradox in this statement, in which history and prophecy become mutually constitutive, is a feature of epic narratives of national origins and development. Such narratives, according to Bakhtin, centre on ‘a world projected ... into a valorized past of beginnings and peak times. This past is distanced, finished and closed like a circle ... it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time’.³⁶⁷ Prophecy, in the epic, partakes of this principle of circularity: ‘[e]pic prophecy is realized wholly within the limits of the absolute past’.³⁶⁸ ‘Articulation’ places us, through an evocation of an epic temporal paradox, in which history (the past) is disguised as destiny (the future), into the space of the epic, in order to unsettle this space through the instantiation of multiple loops and intersecting trajectories across time and space. As Montgomery contends, ‘Howe’s rhetorical feat is to reach into the past to meddle with destiny and unsettle the teleology of predestination’.³⁶⁹ This unsettling occurs in ‘Articulation’ on both thematic and structural levels. We have already seen the manner in which Howe undermines the very notion of beginnings. What of their counterparts—endings? The final page of ‘Articulation’ reads:

To kin I call in the Iron-Woods
Turn I to dark Fells last away

Theirs was an archheathen theme
Soon seen stumbling in lag Clock

³⁶² ‘Articulation’, 4.

³⁶³ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 88.

³⁶⁴ See, e.g., Turner, *Frontier*: ‘The Western man believed in the manifest destiny of his country’ (213); ‘The West caught the vision of the nation’s continental destiny’ (213); and ‘this early Western man ... had faith in man, hope for democracy, belief in America’s destiny’ (214).

³⁶⁵ Jenny White, ‘Landscapes’, 239.

³⁶⁶ ‘Articulation’, 4 (original emphasis).

³⁶⁷ Bakhtin, ‘Epic’, 19.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁶⁹ Montgomery, *Susan Howe*, 89.

Still we call bitterly bitterly
Stern nurse terse ethical pathos

Archaic presentiment of rupture
Voicing desire no more from here

Far flung North Atlantic littorals

Lif sails off longing for life
Baldr soars on Alfather's path

Rubble couple on pedestal
Ruble couple Rhythm and Pedestal

Room of dim portraits here and there
Wade waist deep maidsworn men

Crumbled masonry windswept hickory

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Looking back to the clearing in Part 2, we see certain similarities. Both sections open with an appeal to kin: 'Loving Friends and Kindred' (Part 2); 'To kin I call' (Part 3). In both, we are situated in a space characterised by a forested landscape, though composed of different materials: 'the old home trees' (Part 2); 'Iron-Woods' (Part 3). In this last section in Part 3, we seem to find ourselves on the shores of a Nordic empire, where 'Lif sails off longing for life/ Baldr soars on Alfather's path'. Howe appears to close the poem, that is, at what appears to be the time and home place of the Vikings. Two details, however, indicate that this is not our final resting place. Firstly, we are arriving at the precise moment 'Lif sails off longing for life'—sailing, that is, in the opposite direction, away from the historical 'beginning' of the story. Secondly, if we read beyond Lif, we see that the final words are 'windswept hickory'. Hickory is a tree native not to Scandinavia, but to North America. Just as Hope Atherton's wanderings end in the American forest—'the old home trees'—so, too, the oscillating path we take in Part 3 of 'Articulation' finds us once again in a wooded landscape. But while we may be in North America, *precisely* where and, more importantly, *when*, is left obscure. What the final images—'Rubble couple on pedestal/ Ruble couple Rhythm and Pedestal/ Room of dim portraits here and there/ Wade waist deep maidsworn men/ Crumbled masonry windswept hickory'—evoke is a scene of ruin, and a sense that we have travelled beyond the present, to a time either in the distant future or the distant past. 'Articulation' thus ends by leaving us hanging in the air, unable to set down with any certainty on firm ground.

³⁷⁰ 'Articulation', 38.

According to Casey, ‘homecoming’ involves ‘*re-implacement*. An initial implacement is succeeded by a displacement elsewhere as a journey is undertaken; the displacement ... gives way to a last implacement at the end of the journey that is comparatively conclusive and stable’.³⁷¹ For Howe, as we have seen, ‘the end of the journey’ is anything but ‘conclusive and stable’. In ‘Taking The Forest’ the only discernible principle is that of constant movement, which is to say constant change. Though we have ‘Left home to seek Lost/ Pitchfork origin’,³⁷² our journey back—‘Coming home through past ages’³⁷³—is revealed to be a ‘never ending sequence of/ Becoming’,³⁷⁴ a process opening endlessly into the future. Slotkin writes of the temporal and spatial dislocations experienced by the Puritans in their passage from Europe to America: ‘the sense of exile—the psychological anxieties attendant on the tearing up of home roots for wide wandering outward in space and, apparently, backward in time’.³⁷⁵ In Part 3 of ‘Articulation’, Howe ‘unhomes’ her Puritan settlers and places them in a state of perpetual exile, shuttling back and forth *between* multiple time-spaces in the immensity of her ancestral American forest.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Susan Howe uses the chronotope of the forest in ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’ to engage with the early frontier space of seventeenth-century New England—a prototypical American space as defined by Turner—in part through an engagement with the genre of the captivity narrative, a prototypical American literary genre in which the forest features. Howe draws upon the idea of the forest as a place of origin to complicate the very notion of origins—a valorised epic temporal category—and reorient our gaze towards inexplicable change, thereby unsettling explanatory and justificatory colonial narratives of settlement. The forest—through its inverse, the clearing—is also the means by which Howe explores the ethical problems inherent in ‘attempts to write the land as home’, which has implications not only for the nation, but for Howe herself. Howe also uses the chronotope of the forest, in which spatio-temporal boundaries collapse and splinter, to expose the temporal paradox in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, the epic prophecy at the heart of Turner’s frontier thesis. In doing so, she also sets in perpetual motion and thereby ‘unhomes’ European settlement. In the next chapter, I turn to the ‘closing’ of the frontier in the late nineteenth century, the chronotope of the desert, and Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

³⁷¹ Casey, *Getting Back*, 291.

³⁷² ‘Articulation’, 25.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 18.

Chapter Two: 'The white landscape in its frame': Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and the Great American Desert

Not the sylvan, vegetal forest, but the petrified, mineralized forest.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*³⁷⁶

In the first chapter of this thesis, I undertook an analysis of the chronotope of the forest in Susan Howe's 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time'. I began, in Chapter One, with the Puritan settlements in seventeenth-century New England, at the place and time that marked, for Frederick Jackson Turner, the beginning of the frontier period in American history—with Hope Atherton wandering lost in the immensity of Howe's colonial ancestral forest. We now move, temporally and geographically, to the end of the nineteenth century and the terrain of the West—the place and time that constituted, for Turner, the 'closing' of the frontier—and the infamous outlaw Billy the Kid. In the long, cinematic narrative of the American West, few protagonists command the same fascination as Billy the Kid. A prototypical gunslinger, the Kid is an enduring national figure, reproduced in countless books and films since his death in 1881.³⁷⁷

Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,³⁷⁸ first published in 1970,³⁷⁹ is a long-form poem that takes as its subject the final year in the life of its eponymous anti-hero. From a cast of principle players—Billy's associates and fellow outlaws Charlie Bowdre and Tom O'Folliard, ranchers John and Sallie Chisum, and Sheriff Pat Garrett—as well as certain known events on which Billy's story hinges—his arrest at Tivan Arroyo, his subsequent imprisonment and escape from jail in Lincoln, and his death at the hands of Garrett—Ondaatje constructs what Stephen Tatum has called 'the most significant publication in the Kid's bibliography'.³⁸⁰ Described variously as a 'scrapbook',³⁸¹ an 'album',³⁸² a 'long poem',³⁸³ a 'serial poem',³⁸⁴ a 'poetic song-cycle',³⁸⁵ and a 'documentary-collage',³⁸⁶ the poem remains, as critic Aarthi Vadde observes, 'remarkably unclassifiable'.³⁸⁷ An assemblage of verse, prose, illustrations and photographs, *Collected*

³⁷⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), 8.

³⁷⁷ See Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881–1981* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982). Tatum notes that by 1965, Billy's bibliography had increased to 'well over 800 items' (4).

³⁷⁸ *CW*.

³⁷⁹ *CW* (House of Anansi).

³⁸⁰ Tatum, *Inventing Billy*, 149.

³⁸¹ Bethell, 'Reading Billy', 71.

³⁸² Nodelman, 'Collected Photographs', 68.

³⁸³ Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 3.

³⁸⁴ Rae, *Poet's Novel*, 111.

³⁸⁵ Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern*, 84. See also Rae, *Poet's Novel*, 119.

³⁸⁶ Jones, *That Art*, 28.

³⁸⁷ Vadde, 'National Myth', 261.

Works willfully blurs the boundaries between genres, and can be read in almost any order. This collagist aesthetic and the subversion of sequence—allowing for carefully crafted gaps in which speculation and conjecture proliferate—are what make the text so richly evocative for readers and critics.

Given its principle subject, many interpretations of *Collected Works* have centred on Ondaatje's treatment of history; the significance of the myth of the American frontier, in particular, has been identified by scholars such as Lucia Boldrini, who observes that: '[i]n choosing Billy the Kid ... Ondaatje puts at the center of his decentered and decentering book the myth of the frontier itself'.³⁸⁸ Richard Slotkin reminds us that myths are composed of three basic elements: a hero, the environment in which they are placed, and a narrative that animates them both.³⁸⁹ In light of the larger-than-life dimensions of the hero of *Collected Works*, it is unsurprising that his environment has remained a relatively unexplored feature of the poem. This environment is crucial not only to the myth of Billy the Kid, but also the myths of the American West and the frontier, in which he plays a starring role. To explore the significance of the nexus between history and space, place and landscape in the poem, I propose to read *Collected Works* using the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope. While there have been many critical appraisals of *Collected Works*,³⁹⁰ there have been no chronotopic analyses to date.

The era of the frontier, Turner declared, ended in 1880.³⁹¹ If in Chapter One we were concerned with the 'beginning' of the frontier period, here we turn our attention to its 'close'. In *Collected Works*, which in its opening pages declares we are in 'Fort Sumner, 1880',³⁹² Ondaatje situates us firmly in a significant place and time in American history: New Mexico and Arizona at the end of the nineteenth century. This particular American space is concretised in a dominant topographical landscape feature: the desert. In the following chapter, I undertake an analysis of *Collected Works* using the chronotope of the desert. I argue that Ondaatje uses the chronotope of the desert, as a constitutive feature the 'West' and of the genre of the Western, to undermine ideas of American exceptionalism in Turner's account of the frontier; to expose how characterisations of the landscape as 'empty' support the colonial impulse to overwrite, control and contain space; and to unsettle the borders upon which epic founding narratives are built.

True West, Wild West: the desert in American history and culture

As with the forest in 'Articulation', discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, the landscape that forms the substrate for Ondaatje's book—late-nineteenth-century New Mexico and

³⁸⁸ Boldrini, *Autobiographies*, 76. See also Vadde, 'National Myth', 260.

³⁸⁹ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 8. See also the Introduction of this thesis.

³⁹⁰ This is noted by, e.g., Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 36; and Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 50.

³⁹¹ Turner, *Frontier*, 1.

³⁹² *CW*, 7.

Arizona—is one situated in the past. For Ondaatje, writing not only in the twentieth century, but also at a geographical remove in Canada, it is a place and time mediated by and accessible only through texts. It is also a place and time intimately tied to the concept of the ‘West’, both a real and imagined landscape that is in turn central to the myth of the frontier in American history. In his seminal address on the subject, Turner reified this perceived relation, stating: ‘Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.’³⁹³ Turner’s thesis remained authoritative in the field of Western History for the first half of the twentieth century, but has since been criticised for its European bias, oversimplifications and generalisations, and for the exclusions upon which it is predicated.³⁹⁴

For Turner, the ‘West’ was an abstract entity, ‘a form of society, rather than an area’.³⁹⁵ New Western Historians such as Patricia Limerick³⁹⁶ and Donald Worster³⁹⁷ have advocated a move away from this abstract West towards a grounded, regional conception of the West—as Worster puts it, the ‘True West’.³⁹⁸ The difference, they contend, lies in viewing the West as a *place* rather than a *process*.³⁹⁹ The result of this turn in Western historical studies, as Michael McGerr observes, is that ‘we now have a more pluralistic West, fascinating in its variety’.⁴⁰⁰ Yet, efforts to uncouple the West from the frontier myth, to ground it firmly in place rather than process, have not been entirely successful. To begin with, the ‘True West’ has proved troublesome to pin down as a material entity: its location and terrain, as defined by geographers and historians over the years, varies tremendously.⁴⁰¹ Efforts to define the physical coordinates of the True West are also hampered by the fact that for over a century it has had to contend with its imagined mythic counterpart: the Wild West.

The term ‘Wild West’, according to Richard Slotkin, originated in ‘Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’, a show that began its decades-long production run in 1883, shortly after the official ‘close’ of the frontier. From 1883 to 1916, it was ‘one of the largest, most

³⁹³ Turner, *Frontier*, 1.

³⁹⁴ See, e.g., Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 8–16; and Limerick, *Conquest*.

³⁹⁵ Turner, *Frontier*, 205.

³⁹⁶ Limerick, *Conquest, Legacies, Passages*.

³⁹⁷ Worster, *Western Skies*.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁹⁹ See Limerick, *Conquest*, 26; Worster, *Western Skies*, 22.

⁴⁰⁰ McGerr, ‘Twentieth-century West’, 242.

⁴⁰¹ See, e.g., Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 10; William Cronon, George Miles and Jay Gitlin, ‘Becoming West: Toward a New Meaning for Western History’, in Cronon, Miles and Gitlin, *Open Sky*, 3–27, 26; Limerick, *Conquest*, 26; and Nye, *Narratives and Spaces*, 26. Turner himself notes: ‘American sectional nomenclature is still confused. Once “the West” described the whole region beyond the Alleghanies; but the term has hopelessly lost its definiteness’ (*Frontier*, 126).

popular, and most successful businesses in the field of commercial entertainment'.⁴⁰² The Wild West was presented not as an adjunct to the 'True West, but its doppelganger: management 'declared it improper to speak of it as a "Wild West show"',⁴⁰³ preferring "The Wild West" ... a name that identified it as a "place" rather than a mere display or entertainment'.⁴⁰⁴ Predating Turner's thesis by a decade—and also predicated on a narrative of settlement emphasising man's mastery over nature, and the westward advance of civilisation across empty tracts of space—the show consisted of re-enactments of 'scenes exemplifying different "Epochs" of American history: "Beginning with the Primeval Forest"'.⁴⁰⁵ As Slotkin notes, by the time Turner delivered his historic address on the frontier in 1893, '[i]ts significance as a *mythic space* began to outweigh its importance as a real place'.⁴⁰⁶

The Wild West, a theatrical and mythic American space in which a glorified narrative of American history played to packed audiences,⁴⁰⁷ also produced, and was in turn produced by, a distinctly American genre: the Western. With regard to the dominance of the genre in twentieth-century American popular culture, historian Richard White notes that by 1958 Westerns 'comprised about 11 percent of all works of fiction published in the United States, and Hollywood turned out a Western movie every week'.⁴⁰⁸ The significance of the genre of the Western to the composition of *Collected Works* has been acknowledged by Ondaatje, who, in his afterword to the 2008 Vintage edition, wrote: 'I'd had an obsession with westerns since I was eight or nine—for even in Sri Lanka the myth of the American West had filtered down'.⁴⁰⁹ *Collected Works* references or is materially composed of various fragments from Western novels and films, including: John Woodruff Lewis' dime novel *The True Life of Billy the Kid* (1881);⁴¹⁰ a comic titled 'Billy the Kid and the Princess' (1969);⁴¹¹ Walter Noble Burns' *Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926);⁴¹² and a number of Western films, including Arthur Penn's *The Left Handed Gun* (1958).⁴¹³

⁴⁰² Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 66.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 61 (original emphasis).

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁰⁸ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 613.

⁴⁰⁹ *CW* (Vintage Canada), 113.

⁴¹⁰ Published the year of Billy's death. Lewis wrote the novel under the pseudonym 'Don Jenardo'. See Tatum, *Inventing Billy*, 80. The front cover is reproduced in *CW* on page 98.

⁴¹¹ Extracts are reproduced in *CW* on pages 99–102. The copyright page of the Bloomsbury edition cites the source as 'pages 1–10 of *Billy the Kid*, Vo.1, No. 72, May 1969'.

⁴¹² Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (New York: Doubleday, 1926). Burns' text is cited by Ondaatje in the 'Credits' section of *CW* (House of Anansi and Vintage Canada). Ondaatje paraphrases or reproduces entire paragraphs from the *Saga*. On the inconsistencies and

Tatum has observed that '[d]iscovering the Kid ... has usually meant discovering the appeals of the West and the Western, the historical landscape and the aesthetic context within which the Kid both resides and rides'.⁴¹⁴ What joins the historical landscape to the aesthetic context—the True West to the Wild West—is the terrain in which they overlap: the chronotope of the desert. The 'actual' chronotope of the desert derives from another colonial myth: the Great American Desert. Historians and historical geographers such as Henry Nash Smith,⁴¹⁵ Robin A. Butlin⁴¹⁶ and W. Eugene Hollon,⁴¹⁷ trace the origins of the myth—the notion that parts of the High Plains of the Great Plains region of the United States was a desert or series of deserts⁴¹⁸—to accounts of early-nineteenth-century explorers and surveyors. In 1810, Zebulon M. Pike, leader of a government expedition into the area, asserted that 'the vast treeless plains were a sterile waste like the sandy deserts of Africa'.⁴¹⁹ The name itself, 'Great American Desert', was fixed to 'that part of the West between the 98th meridian and the Rocky Mountains' by government surveyor Stephen H. Long in 1821,⁴²⁰ and 'the settled conviction that an uninhabitable desert stretched for hundreds of miles east of the Rockies was a matter of course in official circles until the eve of the Civil War'.⁴²¹

While the actual existence and boundaries of the Great American Desert are subject to contention,⁴²² and its nomenclature varies (the area is also referred to as the Great Plains⁴²³ and the Great Basin),⁴²⁴ its spectre continued to shape representations of the West well into the twentieth century, to a large degree through the defining characteristic of 'aridity'. In 1878, John Wesley Powell defined the West as the 'arid region' of the United States;⁴²⁵ in 1893 Turner located the close of the frontier at 'the belt of the Rockies Mountains and the *arid tract*';⁴²⁶ and in 1931 Walter Prescott Webb advanced his

inaccuracies in Ondaatje's purported list of sources in the 'Credits', see, e.g., Boldrini, *Autobiographies*, and Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*.

⁴¹³ The reference to Penn's film is also noted by, e.g., Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 38; and Boldrini, *Autobiographies*, 82. In the House of Anansi edition, *CW* was subtitled 'Left Handed Poems'.

⁴¹⁴ Tatum, *Inventing Billy*, 13.

⁴¹⁵ Smith, *Virgin Land*.

⁴¹⁶ Butlin, *Historical Geography*.

⁴¹⁷ W. Eugene Hollon, *The Great American Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁴¹⁸ Butlin, *Historical Geography*, 142.

⁴¹⁹ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 175. See also Butlin, *Historical Geography*, 142.

⁴²⁰ Hollon, *American Desert*, 7.

⁴²¹ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 178. See also Butlin, *Historical Geography*, 144.

⁴²² See, e.g., Hollon: 'No two books agree upon the boundaries of the modern Great American Desert' (*American Desert*, 12).

⁴²³ See, e.g., Limerick, *Passages*, 16.

⁴²⁴ See, e.g., William L. Fox, *The Void, the Grid & the Sign: Traversing the Great Basin* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000).

⁴²⁵ John Wesley Powell, cited in Worster, *Western Skies*, 23.

⁴²⁶ Turner, *Frontier*, 9 (my emphasis).

‘dry land’ thesis (an alternative to Turner’s frontier thesis) based on the identification of a twenty-inch rainfall line, dividing the United States into a ‘humid East’ and dry West.⁴²⁷ New Western Historians such as Worster and Limerick have cited Webb’s thesis approvingly,⁴²⁸ as have influential landscape writer John Brinkerhoff Jackson, a long-time resident of New Mexico,⁴²⁹ and novelist and historian Wallace Stegner, who has famously stated: ‘Aridity and aridity alone makes the various Wests one’.⁴³⁰

This arid desert landscape is a constitutive feature of the genre of the Western. In the popular dime novels of the nineteenth century, and the early-twentieth-century works of writers such as Zane Grey (‘perhaps the most popular Western writer of all time’, according to Slotkin),⁴³¹ deserts comprise the classic *mis en scene*, and feature in titles such as *Heritage of the Desert* (1911), and *The Desert of Wheat* (1919). So too, Hollywood’s West, as historians William Cronon, George Miles and Jay Gitlin observe, ‘is almost always a dry sagebrush landscape, fixed at a timeless moment distantly resembling the 1870s or 1880s’.⁴³² In the story of the American frontier at the end of the nineteenth century, the chronotope of the desert dominates the frame. It is in this desert landscape—part geographical fact, part cultural artifact—that Ondaatje, who ‘pored over topographical maps of Western deserts’⁴³³ while composing *Collected Works*, places and sets in motion his own subversive Western, a revisionist history of Billy the Kid.

Fatal environment: the desert and the production of violence

In *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts*,⁴³⁴ Limerick writes that ‘the desert represents nature at its extreme’.⁴³⁵ The extremity of the desert environment in *Collected Works* is most vividly illustrated in three extended prose accounts of desert encounters. The first is that of Pat Garrett, who travels across ‘Mescalero territory’, New Mexico, to reach the homestead of ranchers John and Sallie Chisum:

⁴²⁷ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931). See the section, ‘The Climate of the Plains’ (17–26). Webb mentions the myth of the Great American Desert (152–9).

⁴²⁸ Worster, *Western Skies*, 24 and 250; and Limerick, *Conquest*, 135.

⁴²⁹ John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 24.

⁴³⁰ Wallace Stegner, cited in Page Stegner, introduction to *Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan*, by Toby Jurovics, Carol M. Johnson, Glenn Willumson and William F. Stapp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1–8, 3.

⁴³¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 211. Slotkin notes that: ‘His most popular novel, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), sold over a million copies in its hardcover edition’ (211).

⁴³² Cronon, Miles and Gitlin, ‘Becoming West’, 25.

⁴³³ *CW* (Vintage Canada), 115.

⁴³⁴ Limerick, *Passages*.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6. But see Neel, who argues that rather than ‘aridity’, the West should be defined by ‘extremity’ (‘Place of Extremes’).

Mescalero territory is a flat region, no rivers, no trees, no grass. In August the winds begin ... Dust and sand stick to anything wet as your eyeball, or a small dribble from your nostril, a flesh wound, even sweat on your shirt ... Your ears are so blocked that you cannot hear for a good while afterwards, which is just as well for all there is is the long constant screech and scream of wind carrying anything it can lift.

I had been caught in the Mescalero that August for two days ... Tumbleweed wont survive in the Mescalero for it is blasted to pieces in minutes ... In another half day I got to the Chisum ranch ... I arrived at their house mind blasted⁴³⁶

In this account, the howling desert wind assaults Garrett's senses, blowing dust and sand into his eyes and ears, so furious that it turns the air itself into a deadly weapon, blasting tumbleweed to pieces. The inhospitable nature of the desert environment is also evidenced in the story of Tom O'Folliard, an associate of Billy's:

At fifteen he took a job with an outfit shooting wild horses ... The desert then had no towns every 50 miles. He sucked the clear milk out of a chopped cactus, drank piss at times. Once, blind thirsty, O'Folliard ... killed the horse he sat on and covered himself in the only liquid he could find. Blood caked on his hair, arms, shoulders, everywhere.⁴³⁷

Here, extreme aridity drives O'Folliard to extreme and violent acts. Elsewhere, the deadly effects of aridity are given graphic expression in the account of Billy's desert passage to the town of Mesilla, where he is to be tried for murder:

On the fifth day the sun turned into a pair of hands and began to pull out the hairs on my head. Twist pluck twist pluck. In two hours I was bald, my head like a lemon. It used a fingernail and scratched a knife line from front to back on the skin ... Then with very thin careful fingers it began to unfold my head drawing back each layer of skin and letting it flap over my ears.

The brain juice began to swell up ... The sun sat back and watched while the juice evaporated. By now the bone was dull white, all dry. When he touched the bone with his fingers it was like brushing raw nerves.⁴³⁸

In this prose account, three pages in length, the violence done to Billy increases in magnitude until it reaches excruciating proportions:

⁴³⁶ *CW*, 42. There appears to be a misspelling of 'Mescalero' (as 'Mescalero') in the first paragraph.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50–1.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

Down the long cool hand went ... breaking through veins like pieces of long glass tubing ... down he went the liquid yellow from my busted brain finally vanished as it passed through soft warm stomach like a luscious blood wet oasis, weaving in and out of the red yellow blue green nerves ... through pyramids of bone ... through my sacs of sperm got my cock in the cool fingers ... brought it up fast half tearing the roots off up the coloured bridges of fibres again ... his fingers up the now bleeding throat up squeezed it through the skull bones, so there I was, my cock standing out of my head.⁴³⁹

The central antagonism in the myth of Billy the Kid is classically figured as between Billy, the outlaw, and Pat Garrett, the lawman. Yet, in the above passage, which in its length and detail constitutes the most extensive and graphic depiction of violence in *Collected Works*, the violence is perpetrated not by Garrett (who, in the crossing to Mesilla, shows concern for Billy's welfare, asking 'whats wrong billy whats wrong'),⁴⁴⁰ but the desert sun. As Dennis Cooley has noted of Billy, 'it is the sun, not his enemies, that would push him over the edge'.⁴⁴¹ After a night's heavy drinking at the Chisum ranch, for instance, Billy wakes to a shocking hangover, exacerbated by the sun's invasion of his room: 'About 9 o'clock and the room looks huge like the sun came in and pushed out the walls, now the sun ... hitting and swirling on the white walls and the white sheets on the bed';⁴⁴² and when Billy is fatally shot by Garrett, what occupies his vision is not his killer, but 'suns coming up everywhere out of the walls and floors/ ... thousands/ of lovely perfect sun balls'.⁴⁴³

Several critics have remarked upon the excessive violence in *Collected Works*.⁴⁴⁴ The body count mounts steadily and early. On the second page is a list of the dead, preceded by the line: 'These are the killed'.⁴⁴⁵ On the next page is a visceral description of the death of Tom O'Folliard—'no shoulder left, his jaws tilting up and down like mad bladders going'⁴⁴⁶—followed by a laconic overview of all the deaths in the frontier town of Boot Hill: '300 of the dead in Boot Hill died violently/ 200 by guns, over 50 by knives/ some were pushed under trains—a popular/ and overlooked form of murder in the west'.⁴⁴⁷

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 76–7.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁴¹ Dennis Cooley, "'I am here on the edge': Modern Hero/ Postmodern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*", in *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1985), 211–39, 213.

⁴⁴² *CW*, 69.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁴⁴ See, e.g., Stephen Scobie, 'Two Authors in Search of a Character: bp Nichol and Michael Ondaatje', in Solecki, *Spider Blues*, 185–210; Spinks, *Ondaatje*; Bethell, 'Reading Billy'; and Jones, *That Art*.

⁴⁴⁵ *CW*, 6.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

Lee Spinks argues that, '[v]iewed in the context of the three hundred violent deaths recorded in Boot Hill cemetery, Billy's orgy of killing becomes part of the texture of common experience'.⁴⁴⁸ Violence in the poem is at once a horrific and mundane fact of frontier life, a product of the historical process of colonisation: as Cronon, Miles and Gitlin observe, "[s]ettlement" meant land taking, and land taking meant violence'.⁴⁴⁹ Violence was also central to the development of an American national mythology. In his seminal study *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin writes:

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.⁴⁵⁰

In the production and dissemination of this myth, the nation's popular literature served a crucial function. Smith notes that the authors of Western dime novels, which proliferated in the West during the second half of the nineteenth century, 'exaggerat[ed] violence and bloodshed ... to the point of an overt sadism' in attempts to outdo (and outsell) each other.⁴⁵¹ In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje gives his poem the violent texture of a traditional Western, but subverts its role as a means of mythic regeneration by divesting it of purpose. The lack of a moral dimension to the violence depicted in the poem is evidenced, most notably, by Ondaatje's brief and non-committal probe into Billy's motivations for his killings. Halfway through the book, we have the following question and response: 'A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup—'.⁴⁵² What follows is a passage more or less transcribed from Walter Noble Burns' *Saga of Billy the Kid*,⁴⁵³ Ondaatje's key textual source, which recounts an incident from the Lincoln County War. In Burns' *Saga*, the killing of a 'defenceless man' named Tunstall during the War provides the motivation for the murders Billy commits,⁴⁵⁴ and is central to the construction of Billy as an avenging (and therefore justified) killer. But this incident, set in italics in *Collected Works* to indicate the presence of an outside source, carries little affective weight: Tunstall's death is dismissed as 'ghastly, meaningless',⁴⁵⁵ the Lincoln County War is not mentioned again, and hapless Tunstall does not even appear in the list of the dead at the opening of the book.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁴⁸ Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 60.

⁴⁴⁹ Cronon, Miles and Gitlin, 'Becoming West', 15.

⁴⁵⁰ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 5.

⁴⁵¹ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 92.

⁴⁵² *CW*, 54.

⁴⁵³ Burns, *Saga*.

⁴⁵⁴ Burns, *Saga*, 48.

⁴⁵⁵ *CW*, 54.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Stephen Scobie observes that Ondaatje's use of Burns' source material in his presentation of Billy evinces 'great selectivity';⁴⁵⁷ the decision to quote Burns' text without further explication, as Spinks argues, 'render[s] the violence it relates both atavistic and inexplicable'.⁴⁵⁸ The uncoupling of violence from any ethical framework is evident in other events in the poem. During his escape from prison, for instance, Billy is observed by a witness to have 'hit a man named Ellery Fleck in the face, with his rifle, for no reason at all'.⁴⁵⁹ And at the Chisum ranch one evening, Garrett relates an incident involving Sallie Chisum's cat, which crawls under the house after being bitten by a snake. The passage towards death is slow and torturous—'from the odd thrashing, we knew the cat was still alive and in pain'⁴⁶⁰—and it is Billy who offers to, and does, end its suffering, killing the animal with two quick, well-placed shots into the floor.⁴⁶¹ Garrett is impressed by this apparent act of mercy, but the passage ends with the reaction of Billy's paramour, Angela D, who Garrett observes is 'terrified. Simply terrified'.⁴⁶² What appeared to be a humane gesture is cast in a more sinister and obscure light, alerting us to something less laudible in Billy's motives.

Scobie contends that, '[a]lthough Ondaatje's Billy is far from a blameless character, there is a definite implication that the violence exists around him rather than in him'.⁴⁶³ He concludes that 'the violence results from the conflict between [Billy] and his society' and is 'a product of his symbiotic relationship with Pat Garrett'.⁴⁶⁴ While I agree that violence exists 'around ... rather than in' Billy, I locate this violence in a different source: the landscape itself. As my above analysis shows, the desert in *Collected Works* is represented as an extreme environment that is not only inhospitable to life, but also actively seeks the death of all living things. During a night of heavy drinking at the Chisum ranch, Billy stands in the desert and feels the 'wind picking up sand and dust and the smell off dead animals a hundred miles away and aiming it at [him] and [his] body'.⁴⁶⁵ Of Sallie Chisum's caged menagerie of 'wild and broken animals',⁴⁶⁶ we are told: 'Their roof would have collapsed from the number of birds who might have lived there if the desert hadn't killed three quarters of those that tried to cross it'.⁴⁶⁷ The ones that survive are rendered as:

stunning things in the dark. Just shapes that shifted. You could peer into a cage and see nothing till a rattle of claws hit the grid an inch from your face and their

⁴⁵⁷ Scobie, 'Two Authors', 194.

⁴⁵⁸ Spinks, *Ondaatje*, 60.

⁴⁵⁹ *CW*, 86.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ Scobie, 'Two Authors', 203.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁶⁵ *CW*, 70.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.* (original spelling).

churning feathers seemed to hiss, and a yellow pearl of an eye cracked with veins
glowed through the criss crossed fence.⁴⁶⁸

Seen only in synecdochic flashes—‘a rattle of claws’, ‘the churning of feathers’—animals here become expressions of barely contained fury; as if, in the act of crossing, they have absorbed the malevolence of the desert itself. Elsewhere, this malevolence is unleashed against humans. In the account of the death of Gregory (a name that exists in the book as a floating signifier, not attached to anyone of significance), an unnamed speaker tells us: ‘I’d shot him well and careful/ made it explode under his heart/ so it wouldn’t last long’;⁴⁶⁹ but this careful act is undone by a chicken that ‘paddles out to him/ ... hops on his neck/ digs the beak into his throat/ ... and heaves/ a red and blue vein out/ .../ and the chicken walked away/ still tugging at the vein/ till it was 12 yards long’.⁴⁷⁰ Like the violence done to Billy by the desert sun, this is one of the most graphic depictions of violence in the book.

The suggestion that in the desert humans and animals occupy concomitant and subordinate positions is strongly suggested in *Collected Works*. In Billy’s tormented desert crossing, he is: ‘drowned, locked inside [his] skin sensitive as an hour old animal’;⁴⁷¹ and in the following scene, Charlie and Billy are described in a manner that could easily apply to a pair of excited dogs:

One morning woke up
Charlie was cooking
and we ate not talking
but sniffing wind
wind so fine
it was like drinking ether

we sat hands round knees
heads leaned back taking lover wind
in us sniffing and sniffing
getting high on the way
it crashed into our nostrils⁴⁷²

The desert, an extreme environment that has, as Limerick notes, ‘great power to change the behavior of organisms’;⁴⁷³ exerts its power not only on the body, but also the mind. Architectural critic Reyner Banham, who has journeyed through the deserts of southwest

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 49.

⁴⁷³ Limerick, *Passages*, 5.

America, writes of the manner in which the desert can ‘threaten our established psychologies’:⁴⁷⁴ ‘Such an omnipresence of colored light, brilliant, raw, subtle or hallucinatory, may be almost too much for our sensibilities to bear ... the light is so extreme, and the independence of color and form so unsettling’.⁴⁷⁵ In the desert, Billy is beset by hallucinatory visions of ‘wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses’.⁴⁷⁶ And when, after a violent skirmish, he retreats to the shelter of a barn to recover, the reprieve he finds is only temporary: in the granary next door, rats soon ‘abandoned the sanity of eating the food before them and turned on each other ... they went for each other’s eyes and ribs so the yellow stomachs slid out’.⁴⁷⁷

In its frequency and repetition, madness and violence in the desert assume the appearance not of aberrations, but of states of nature, expressed through both animals and humans alike. To figure the landscape itself, rather than a human agent, as the source of violence is to reverse the power dynamic between man and nature in American frontier mythology. In Turner’s thesis, emphasis is placed on the strength and resourcefulness of the American national character, formed from frontier experience:

to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom⁴⁷⁸

What is suppressed in this account, which places American exceptionalism at its core, is not only, as Worster notes, ‘a frank, hard look at the violent, imperialistic process by which the West was wrested from its original owners’,⁴⁷⁹ but also the material conditions of landscape. In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje uses the chronotope of the desert—which constitutes the essential link between the Wild West and the True West—to undermine Turner’s national narrative of conquest, in which American man masters American nature by ‘civilising’ the ‘wilderness’. In the desert, a fatal environment that actively does violence to and produces violence in all living organisms, men do not become *more* civilised, but regress to an animal-like state; they are not masters of their environment, but subject to its will.

⁴⁷⁴ Peter Rayner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 224.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 223–4.

⁴⁷⁶ *CW*, 10.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁷⁸ Turner, *Frontier*, 37.

⁴⁷⁹ Worster, *Western Skies*, 11–12.

Jorge Luis Borges' short fictional biography of Billy the Kid, 'The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan', opens with this vivid establishing shot:

An image of the desert wilds of Arizona, first and foremost, an image of the desert wilds of Arizona and New Mexico ... a country of breathtaking open spaces, a country of monumental mesas and soft colours, a country of bleached skeletons picked clean by buzzards. Over this whole country, another image—that of Billy the Kid⁴⁸⁰

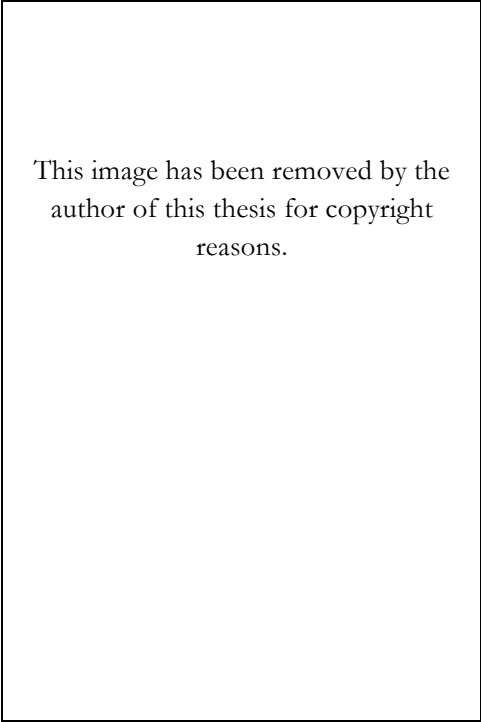
Like Borges' story, *Collected Works* also opens with an image, but one that subverts the generic conventions of the Western, with its panoramic shots of desert landscapes. On the first page is what appears to be an empty frame—a large, black square with a blank white centre (see Figure 2.1).⁴⁸¹ Underneath this frame, set in italics to suggest its function as a caption, is a paragraph that begins: '*I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked*'.⁴⁸² The subject of the frame, accordingly, is most commonly interpreted as a missing image of the outlaw himself.⁴⁸³ If we examine the frame, however, we see that the orientation—square—gives no information as to the kind of image it may contain. Photographic convention dictates that a portrait will be oriented with the long edge on the vertical axis, and a landscape with the long edge on the horizontal. While most critics have read this frame as a portrait, I would like to read it as a landscape.

⁴⁸⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan', in *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 61.

⁴⁸¹ *CW*, 5.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

⁴⁸³ See, e.g., Tatum, *Inventing Billy*, 145; and Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 40. This interpretation is encouraged by Ondaatje, who credits the decision to leave the frame blank to his publisher: "I send you a picture of Billy...", which begins the book, in fact had an image of The Kid within the rectangle above the text until Barrie suggested I simply (or perversely) remove the image within it, and suddenly the footholds of the story became mysterious. It was the reader who would now need to provide the picture of Billy' (*CW*; Vintage Canada, 118).



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author of this thesis for copyright
reasons.

Figure 2.1: *Collected Works*, 5.

The frame, as Boldrini has argued, ‘signals the centrality of photography to the book as a concept, as a theme, as a structure and a mode of representation’.⁴⁸⁴ If Ondaatje employs photography, both as material and as trope, in his revisionist Western,⁴⁸⁵ it may be due to the manner in which the medium has served in colonial discourse as a means to represent—and, in representing, capture and control—space. In the American context, the advent of photography in the late nineteenth century coincided with expeditions into the western parts of the country, often recorded by government survey photographers. In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje identifies the writing and photographs of ‘the great Western photographer L.A. Huffman’ as source texts,⁴⁸⁶ but Boldrini has pointed out that Huffman was not a photographer of the southwest region in which the Billy the Kid

⁴⁸⁴ Boldrini, *Autobiographies*, 86.

⁴⁸⁵ Ondaatje’s use of photographs and photography in *CW* has been extensively canvassed in the critical literature. See, e.g., T.D. MacLulich, ‘Ondaatje’s Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer’, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 14, no. 2 (1981): 107–119; W.F. Garrett-Petts, ‘Garry Disher, Michael Ondaatje, and the Haptic Eye: Taking a Second Look at Print Literacy’, *Children’s Literature in Education* 31, no. 1 (2000): 39–52; Milena Marinkova, *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Nodelman, ‘Collected Photographs’; Boldrini, *Autobiographies*; and Jones, *That Art*. Most critics also include the medium of film in their discussions.

⁴⁸⁶ *CW* (Vintage Canada). Though note the errors and inconsistencies in Ondaatje’s crediting of sources, including in relation to Huffman. See, e.g., Boldrini, *Autobiographies*, 79.

story is set.⁴⁸⁷ A more accurate historical benchmark would be Timothy O'Sullivan, whose iconic images, art historian Toby Jurovics contends, 'are the foundation of our understanding of the landscapes of the West'.⁴⁸⁸ Though as 'geophysical fact' the West includes 'high plains, high mountains, stair-step plateaus, basin and range, three kinds of desert, a long littoral zone, and a Pacific rainforest',⁴⁸⁹ O'Sullivan was famed for his representations of 'apparently negative landscapes',⁴⁹⁰ 'the emptiness that characterized most of the West'.⁴⁹¹

Collected Works contains two photographs that include desert landscapes. In the first of these⁴⁹² (see Figure 2.2), three men, in what appears to be military dress, stand or sit in varying postures, all facing to the left—the man in the middle distance is seated on the ground and is painting what looks like a tombstone. Near the bottom edge of the photograph is a pile of bleached bones. In the second photograph⁴⁹³ (see Figure 2.3), the frame is largely taken up by a simple log cabin, with three people arranged around the doorway—one of these is a seated woman.⁴⁹⁴ In both photographs, the landscapes we view are barren and featureless, with barely more than horizon lines to distinguish earth from sky: without human forms or man-made structures, there would be little with which to discern scale or distance, or orient the eye in time and space. The pictorial representation of the desert in these photographs is mirrored by its textual representation in the poem: in Garrett's description, for instance, of Mescalero territory as 'a flat region, no rivers, no trees, no grass';⁴⁹⁵ and in Billy's characterisation of the area surrounding the Chisum Ranch as 'empty desert',⁴⁹⁶ 'a fucking big desert where nothing is'.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁸⁷ According to Boldrini, Huffman worked in Montana, Wyoming and Dakota, so his photographs 'come from (approximately) the right time and from the American frontier—but they are from the "wrong" places' (*Autobiographies*, 86).

⁴⁸⁸ Toby Jurovics, 'Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan', in *Framing the West*, by Jurovics et. al., 9–43, 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Page Stegner, *Framing the West*, 3.

⁴⁹⁰ Robert Adams, cited in Jurovics, 'Survey Photographs', 26.

⁴⁹¹ Edward Ranney, cited in Jurovics, 'Survey Photographs', 26.

⁴⁹² *CW*, 13.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁹⁴ This can be seen clearly in the House of Anansi edition; in later editions the images are reproduced at a lower quality.

⁴⁹⁵ *CW*, 42.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

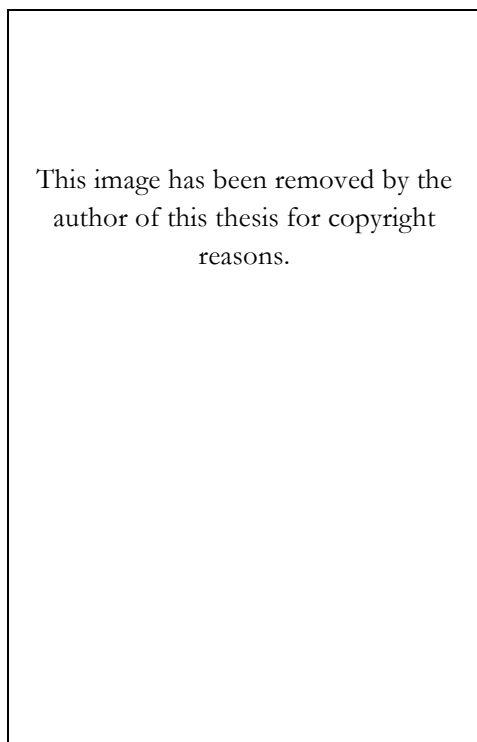


Figure 2.2: *Collected Works*, 13.

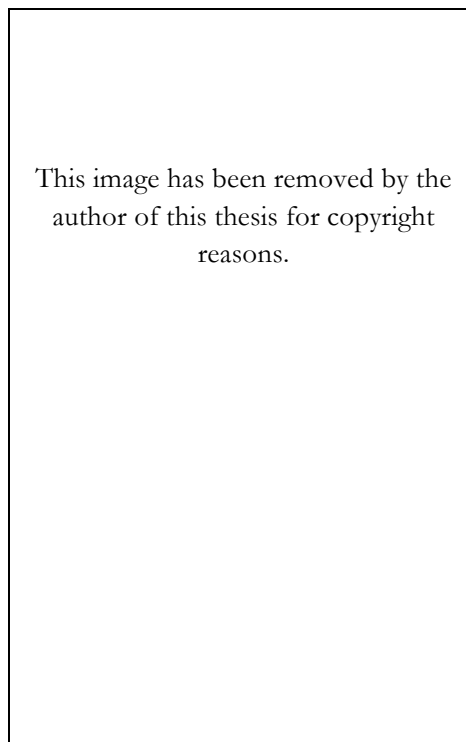


Figure 2.3: *Collected Works*, 23.

Representations of the desert as empty, flat and expansive derive from particular landscape traditions. John Beck, in his discussion of the trope of the desert in American culture and politics,⁴⁹⁸ writes that, '[t]he *idea* of a desert ... in cultures that draw upon Hebrew and Christian traditions, involves a cluster of notions including vacancy, expansiveness, and fearful potentiality',⁴⁹⁹ and that such 'metaphorical construction of landscape is nowhere more pronounced than in the deserts of the southwestern United States'.⁵⁰⁰ This construction of the desert as a 'without form and void' has particular ideological implications, 'function[ing] ... as a form of selective blindness that eliminates consideration of native inhabitants, indigenous traditions, and other, alterative spiritual and utilitarian values that may have prior claim to the land'.⁵⁰¹ As we have seen in Chapter One of this thesis, such representations of landscape are central to the colonial doctrine of Manifest Destiny, used to justify appropriation of land—despite the reality that, as Limerick notes, 'no region on the North American continent was literally empty at the time of white arrival. Even the most arid deserts had at least seasonal Indian presence'.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁸ John Beck, 'Without Form and Void: The American Desert as Trope and Terrain', *Nepantla: Views from the South* 2, no.1 (2001): 63–83, 64.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁰² Limerick, *Passages*, 5.

In the context of the Australian desert and the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which fulfills a similar ideological function in the history of nation-building and conquest, Roslynn Haynes notes the particularly *literary* manner in which desert spaces are coopted into national narratives: for the colonial imagination the desert ‘is the ultimate example of ... uninscribed space’.⁵⁰³ The ‘writing over’ of the desert as material fact, however, has proven a harder task to accomplish. Unlike forests, which could be made ‘habitable’ by clearing, the climactic extremity of deserts has historically acted as a barrier to colonial expansion. According to Slotkin, for a period in the nineteenth century, colonisation of the continent was ‘checked by the forbidding character of the “Great American Desert”’.⁵⁰⁴ He cites writer Washington Irving, who characterised the desert in this period as ‘an irreclaimable wilderness, intervening between the abodes of civilisation’.⁵⁰⁵ As ‘a space that refuses settlement’,⁵⁰⁶ Beck argues, the desert performs the function of *unsettling* space,⁵⁰⁷ becoming a manifestation of Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny:⁵⁰⁸ ‘that which will not, cannot, be mastered, brought into focus, held to account, controlled, settled’.⁵⁰⁹ Though often associated with ghosts, the uncanny is more properly an attribute of *space*, one that denotes ‘an uncomfortable sense of haunting rather than a present apparition’.⁵¹⁰

In her study of ghosts and haunting in the literature of the Americas, María del Pilar Blanco writes, ‘[h]aunting can take many forms: Alongside apparitions of supernatural shapes or beings that would otherwise be imperceptible, it can also mean the disquieting experience of sensing a collision of temporalities or spaces’.⁵¹¹ Haunting, Blanco explains ‘depends on that crisis of perception expressed in questions surrounding landscape (“what is there that I cannot see, but I nevertheless sense is there?”)’.⁵¹² This crisis of perception in *Collected Works* is raised via the confrontation of the reader with an ‘empty’ frame at the beginning of the book—a frame that I contend can be read as a landscape as well as a portrait. Ondaatje amplifies the uncanny effect of photography—an already

⁵⁰³ Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Burwood: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53.

⁵⁰⁴ Slotkin, *Environment*, 161.

⁵⁰⁵ Washington Irving, cited in *ibid.*, 122. See also Limerick, *Passages*, 166.

⁵⁰⁶ Beck, ‘Without Form’, 70.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁰⁸ See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁵⁰⁹ Beck, ‘Without Form’, 74.

⁵¹⁰ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 23.

⁵¹¹ María del Pilar Blanco, *Ghost-watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

spectral practice⁵¹³—by the use of a *missing* photograph. Once raised, the spectre of the missing photograph becomes an instance of uncanny return throughout the poem. On page 19, for instance, the top two thirds of the page are left blank. Below this space is a paragraph of text, with the subtitle ‘PAULITA MAXWELL: THE PHOTOGRAPH’, which, like the ‘caption’ on the first page of the book, is set in italics.⁵¹⁴ This format is replicated on pages 52 and 63; in each case, the missing photograph (or photographs)—in which an absent figure is suggested—is given visual expression as ‘blank’ space.

Elsewhere, an absent image in which a landscape is clearly the subject, is represented in textual form. The following fragment depicts a pivotal moment in the shootout at Tivan Arroyo between Billy and Garrett:

I am 4 feet inside the room
in the brown cold dark
the doorway’s slide of sun
three inches from my shoes
I am on the edge of the cold dark
watching the white landscape in its frame
...
I am here on the edge of sun
that would ignite me
looking out into pitch white
sky and grass overdeveloped to meaninglessness⁵¹⁵

Note the prevalence of ‘white’ in this scene. Throughout *Collected Works*, whiteness is strongly associated with the sun, which comes to stand metonymically for the desert. The phrase ‘pitch white’ evokes the more commonly used compound noun ‘pitch black’, creating a double vision of both positive (present) and negative (absent) versions of the same image. This image—‘the white landscape in its frame’—is a *re*-visioning of the missing image in the ‘empty’ frame at the beginning of the book, one that, significantly, centres on *loss*—of an ‘original’ image, now ‘overdeveloped to meaninglessness’.

Of Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs of southwestern American deserts, Thomas Joshua Cooper has noted that, ‘[f]or most people, space is not something to look at, it is something to pass through. O’Sullivan understood that there was something there even if

⁵¹³ See, e.g., Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000). Barthes has remarked ‘that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead’ (9).

⁵¹⁴ *CW*, 19. It is highly likely that the text refers to the only authenticated photograph of Billy the Kid that exists (used on the cover of the Bloomsbury edition). This photograph is also referred to on pages 50 and 68.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

it was not an “object””.⁵¹⁶ The chronotope of the desert unites, in one concrete image, both absence and presence. To *read* such sites of absent presence in literary texts, as Johnny Lorenz observes, is to engage in ‘a different kind of “close-reading”—the close reading of silences’.⁵¹⁷ Silences are central to Ondaatje’s overall methodology in *Collected Works*: in the afterword to the 2008 Vintage Canada edition, Ondaatje writes of the ‘needed “white spaces” for the pauses in the story’.⁵¹⁸ In the context of American history, gaps, absences and silences also have particular charge. Limerick has characterised American landscapes as ‘haunted locations’ that ‘[bear] witness to the violent subordination of Indian people’.⁵¹⁹ Buried in Turner’s account of the frontier, the effects of this violence do not disappear, but return, in *Collected Works*, through landscape. To unsettle and open up the grounds on which national mythologies are built through the material and spiritual medium of landscape is to provide sites of resistance and remembrance. As Lorenz argues, writers who ‘commit to paper the experience of being haunted—work against those national narratives that play down or apologize for atrocities’;⁵²⁰ they ‘create a textual space where the haunting itself—the return of the national repressed—can be acknowledged’.⁵²¹

In the frame with which *Collected Works* opens, then, which evokes the ghost of the historical Billy the Kid, we can also read a second subject, one that is inseparable from the representation of the first, and which functions to draw our attention to the broader material, historical and ideological landscapes in which any portrait of the Kid develops: the desert. Beck’s characterisation of this American space is attuned to its double nature:

As a physical space the desert can be read as, in its indeterminacy, climatic extremity and geographical peculiarity, highly resistant to assimilation into narratives of historical progression and imperial domination ... The desert as terrain ... unsettles, in its vacant presence.⁵²²

Ondaatje uses the chronotope of the desert, in which absence is fiercely ghosted by presence, to create sites of resistance to representation itself, and thereby subvert the colonial impulse to represent, contain and control space. Both Billy the Kid and the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona have been, and continue to be, contested discursive territories. Through the chronotope of the desert, Ondaatje unsettles our visions not

⁵¹⁶ Thomas Joshua Cooper, cited in Jurovics, ‘Survey Photographs’, 26–7.

⁵¹⁷ Johnny Lorenz, ‘The Sign of the Ghost: Haunted Papers and the Chronotope of Haunting in the Americas’, *West Coast Line* 36, no. 1 (2002): 6–20, <http://search.proquest.com.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/docview/214496349?accountid=12372> (unpaginated).

⁵¹⁸ *CW* (Vintage Canada), 118. Ondaatje acknowledges ‘the poet bpNichol who helped me pace the book with its silences and what was unsaid’ (118).

⁵¹⁹ Limerick, *Legacies*, 33.

⁵²⁰ Lorenz, ‘Haunted Papers’.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*

⁵²² Beck, ‘Without Form’, 75.

only of the myth of Billy the Kid, but also those of the frontier and the West. Beneath the 'dry sagebrush' *trompe l'oeil* of the Wild West, the True West troubles and persists.

The desert unbound: unsettling Western borders

In Turner's conception of the founding of America, the frontier is figured as a line that, in its progression through time and space, demarcates an 'inside' from an 'outside'. The definition of 'America' as a nation is derived from this dialectic—the British colonist against the Indian, man against nature, civilisation against the wilderness—with all that is undesirable, unlawful and uncultivated placed 'outside'. The desert in American history has occupied the latter position: in the settlement of the nation 'the myth of the garden had to confront and overcome ... the myth of the Great American Desert'.⁵²³ On the other hand, 'the geographical fact of the desert is integral to the nation ... The desert space is within, not outside, national boundaries'.⁵²⁴ As a landscape of the colonial imaginary, the desert represents an externality; as a physical fact, the desert constitutes an interior: the chronotope of the desert, then, which joins the 'imagined' landscape to the 'real', is the locus of yet another paradoxical relation—the fusion of 'inside' and 'outside'. In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje uses this feature of the chronotope of the desert to unsettle the borders on which epic narratives of settlement are built. He does so, in part, through an unsettling of the narrative conventions of the Western.

Ondaatje has stated that in *Collected Works* '[he] was trying to make the film [he] couldn't afford to shoot, in the form of a book'.⁵²⁵ Critics such as Barbour have noted that one of the many intertexts in the poem is 'the camera-eye point of view of any number of westerns'.⁵²⁶ Despite his fascination with Westerns, however, Ondaatje was well aware of their generic limitations. In the afterword to the 2008 Vintage Canada edition, Ondaatje writes: 'By the time I was in my teens I ... had seen more westerns, but somehow the movies all seemed too *safe*. The plots followed the well-rutted paths to obvious conclusions'.⁵²⁷ Ondaatje's assessment of the Western genre recalls Bakhtin's conception of epic time, which we encountered in Chapter One of this thesis—as a closed loop in which past, present and future lose their meaningful distinctions—and reminds us that in America the Western, ideologically aligned with the heroic narrative of the frontier, is a genre that occupies the position of the epic. In the epic, sequence is presented as if events could change, while in fact the story is fixed at all of its pivotal moments. The reified narrative of Billy the Kid exhibits precisely this characteristic. As Barbour

⁵²³ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 175.

⁵²⁴ Beck, 'Without Form', 75.

⁵²⁵ Michael Ondaatje, cited in Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 39.

⁵²⁶ Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 64.

⁵²⁷ *CW* (Vintage Canada), 113.

observes, 'the Kid moves through an already given series of events to the moment when he will be killed'.⁵²⁸ Yet this feature of epic time can be hijacked.

Manina Jones has argued that readers of *Collected Works* should seek 'entrance not into a teleological narrative structure that terminates in a single exit, but through and into textual/narrative uncertainties'.⁵²⁹ In the simultaneously bound and unbound space of the desert, the paths by which plots proceed to their conclusions are made unstable propositions. On page 20, for instance, Ondaatje portrays the famous shootout at Tivan Arroyo:

January at Tivan Arroyo, called Stinking Springs more often. With me, Charlie, Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh. Snow. Charlie took my hat and went out to get wood and feed the horses. The shot burnt the clothes on his stomach off and lifted him right back into the room.⁵³⁰

The fragment ends:

Snow outside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. No windows, the door open so we could see. Four horses outside.

The next page reads:

Jim Payne's grandfather told him that he met Frank James of the James Brothers once.

It was in a Los Angeles movie theatre. After the amnesty he was given, Frank had many jobs. When Jim's grandfather met him, he was the doorman at the Fresco Theatre.⁵³¹

Ondaatje propels us from Tivan Arroyo, New Mexico, at the end of the nineteenth century to a movie theatre in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. We move from a scene of death to a palace of entertainment, where a former outlaw⁵³² stands at the threshold between 'inside' and 'outside', the 'real' and imagined West. Twenty-four pages after this anecdote (a story about a story about a story), is another fragment that begins:

Snow outside. Wilson, Dave Rudabaugh and me. No windows, the door open so we could see. Four horses outside. Garrett aimed and shot to sever the horse reigns.⁵³³

⁵²⁸ Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, 39.

⁵²⁹ Jones, *That Art*, 72.

⁵³⁰ *CW*, 22.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵³² Frank James was the older brother of outlaw Jesse James and part of the James Gang until his 'retirement' in 1882.

⁵³³ *CW*, 48 (original spelling).

This fragment picks up the action at Tivan Arroyo where we left it, twenty-six pages earlier: in the interim we have not only travelled to a Los Angeles movie theatre, but also, among other locations, the Chisum Ranch, Charlie Bowdre's house, and Angela Dickson's residence in Tuscon; moving now backwards and now forwards in time. Within the diegetic space of the book, the borders of any one particular narrative thread are never sacrosanct: stories are disrupted and displaced by other stories, and it becomes impossible to determine which properly contains another.

The troubling of narrative borders occurs not only within the spaces of the text, but also at its ostensible beginning and end. We have already discussed the 'empty' frame that opens the book. Sixteen pages later, however, is the following fragment:

Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to give it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in.

Two years ago, Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning.⁵³⁴

Jones has observed that "Be in" is "begin" with a gap, the letter left out'.⁵³⁵ Through the removal of a single letter Ondaatje takes us from 'begin'—the beginning, a border or boundary of the text—into 'be in', that is, to the inside or the centre. Once inside, we find that our position immediately shifts again: the next sentence temporally removes us by 'two years', to a position in the past, in relation to the central events of the book; spatially, we find ourselves at the edges of the nation—moving from the verdant landscape of 'low rivers' and 'different colours of tree green' at and beyond its northern boundary with Canada, to its southern extreme: 'Mexico and old heat'.

Vadde has read this passage as evidence of Ondaatje 'reimagining frontier mythology as transnational movement',⁵³⁶ expanding the northern and southern geographical limits of America. The voice he hears speaking is that of Billy's alone. But the historical Billy, born in New York,⁵³⁷ journeys *west* to reach New Mexico; there is no evidence he ever went as far north as the Canadian border. The authorial sleight of hand here augurs a change in

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁵³⁵ Manina Jones, 'The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Scripting the Docudrama', *Canadian Literature* 122–23 (1989): 26–38, 29.

⁵³⁶ Vadde, 'National Myth', 262.

⁵³⁷ Tatum, *Inventing Billy*, 16.

perspective, the subtle crossing of another kind of border. Matthew Dale Herman has argued that in *Collected Works*, ‘author and hero frequently shift roles; both are alternately narrator, character, and author. It becomes unclear whose story is told, whose experience is narrated, whose voice is heard, and whose perspective is seen’.⁵³⁸ On this view, the passage cited above could consist of the voices of *both* Billy and Ondaatje: this beginning—Billy’s ‘criss-cross’ from north to south—could also be Ondaatje’s, as a Canadian author telling his version of a southwestern US legend. The crossing of the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic spaces through a dialogic double-voicedness occurs not only here, at one of the possible beginnings of *Collected Works*, but also at its apparent end. The final numbered page of the book reads:

It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt.⁵³⁹

Critics have attributed these lines to a range of speakers, including Billy, Garrett, and even the photographer L.A. Huffman.⁵⁴⁰ While Ondaatje leaves the question of identity ambiguous, the more sophisticated use of language here suggests a close kinship to the voice we hear riding shotgun alongside Billy’s on his journey to the limits of nation; that is, the voice of the author. As the last numbered page of *Collected Works*, this would by convention constitute the end. Yet, on the next page Ondaatje presents us with a quandary: another frame,⁵⁴¹ which recalls the first ‘empty’ frame at one of the poem’s numerous possible beginnings. Within the frame is a photograph of Ondaatje as a boy in a cowboy suit (see Figure 2.4).⁵⁴² Appearing between the last numbered page and the endmatter (which includes an author biography), the framed image asks us to consider where the line between ‘text’ and ‘world’ should be drawn.⁵⁴³ If considered to be *within* the diegetic space of the poem, it lends support to the argument for the presence of Ondaatje’s voice in both prose passages cited above. It would also provide a neat visual and thematic symmetry: *Collected Works*, in this view, would be contained between two frames. The answer to what constitutes the ‘end’ of the narrative, in other words, has consequences for the meanings we derive from it.

⁵³⁸ Matthew Dale Herman, “‘Ignis fatuus’ of authenticity: Stephen Crane, Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of Capturing the West” (MA Thesis, The University of Montana, 1993), 79.

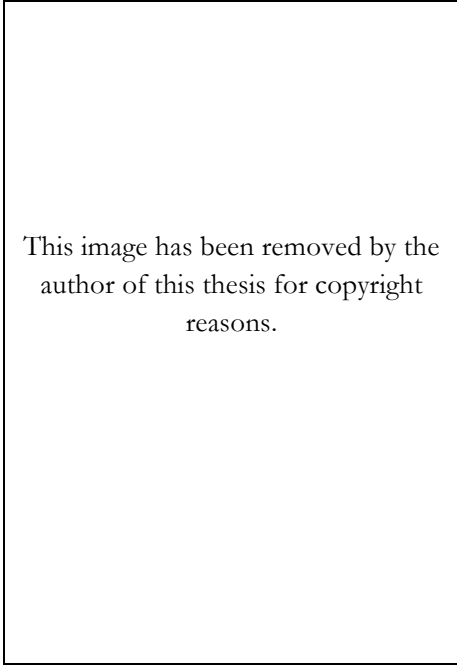
⁵³⁹ *CW*, 105.

⁵⁴⁰ See the range of responses noted by Bethell, ‘Reading Billy’, 78. Rae reads this voice as Billy’s, Ondaatje’s or Garrett’s (*Poet’s Novel*, 121).

⁵⁴¹ This frame is in the House of Anansi and Bloomsbury editions, but missing from the 2008 Vintage Canada edition.

⁵⁴² Ondaatje identifies the boy in the photograph as: ‘me in Ceylon in a cowboy outfit ... about the age of seven’ (Michael Ondaatje, cited in Solecki, *Spider Blues*, 363).

⁵⁴³ Vadde includes the afterword in the Vintage Canada edition as part of the work (‘National Myth’, 264).



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reasons.

Figure 2.4: *Collected Works*, unnumbered page.

In the context of epic founding narratives, endings are also significant. Turner's frontier thesis opens with the following statement:

In a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: 'Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line ... it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.' This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement.⁵⁴⁴

Historian Hayden White has argued that '[p]rior historical periods ... [appear] as completed series or cycles of events, which, because they have been effectively closed, can yield up their meaning, rather in the manner of the classical novel when the last events ... permit us, finally, to grasp its "plot"'.⁵⁴⁵ The frontier, whether it did in fact close in 1880,⁵⁴⁶ needed to be *declared* closed in order that its 'plot' could be 'grasped'; just as the 'real' Billy had to die so that his mythic counterpart could be born. Of the epic Bakhtin writes, '[a]bsolute conclusiveness and closedness is the outstanding feature of the temporally valorized epic past'.⁵⁴⁷ In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje uses this feature of epic

⁵⁴⁴ Turner, *Frontier*, 1.

⁵⁴⁵ Hayden White, 'Nineteenth-century', 128.

⁵⁴⁶ See, e.g., Limerick: 'There is simply no definition of "the closing of the frontier" that is anything but arbitrary' (*Conquest*, 23); and Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 30.

⁵⁴⁷ Bakhtin, 'Epic', 16.

time to write a Western that not only avoids ‘follow[ing] the well-rutted paths to obvious conclusions’,⁵⁴⁸ but also, as Jones puts it, ‘resists endings, violently’.⁵⁴⁹

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Ondaatje uses the chronotope of the desert in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* to engage with the late frontier space of nineteenth-century New Mexico and Arizona, in part through an engagement with the genre of the Western, for which the desert provides the classic *mis en scene*. By presenting the desert as an extreme environment that actively does violence to, and produces violence in, all living organisms Ondaatje undermines ideas of American exceptionalism in Turner’s frontier thesis. The chronotope of the desert fuses together absence and presence, and functions in Ondaatje’s revisionist Western not only as a site of resistance to representation (and its production as a mythic image), but also a means by which those excluded from and made invisible by the processes of colonisation can be acknowledged. Ondaatje also uses the desert, a space that unites ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, to unsettle the borders on which the traditional Western and epic founding narratives are built. In the next chapter, I turn to the ‘post-frontier’ space of twentieth-century America, the chronotope of the road, and Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*.

⁵⁴⁸ *CW* (Vintage Canada), 113.

⁵⁴⁹ Jones, *That Art*, 83.

Chapter Three: ‘These are the roads to take when you think of your country’: Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* and America’s Revolutionary Road

*I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.*
Walt Whitman, ‘Song of the Open Road’⁵⁵⁰

In the first and second chapters of this thesis, I discussed the ways in which Susan Howe and Michael Ondaatje use the chronotopes of the forest and the desert in ‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’ and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, respectively, to contest national mythologies and narratives of settlement—in particular Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier myth. In these chapters, I turned my attention to places and times situated at the beginning and end of Turner’s frontier period: the forests of New England in the seventeenth century, and the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona at the close of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I survey the lay of the land beyond the ‘close of the frontier’: the twentieth century and the chronotope of the road.

In 1938, Muriel Rukeyser published her second collection of poetry, *U.S. 1*.⁵⁵¹ The collection is divided into three sections, the first of which is a long-form poem titled *The Book of the Dead*.⁵⁵² This sequence of 20 shorter poems, which Shoshana Wechsler has characterised as ‘a hybrid work ... that erases the boundaries between art and document, lyric and epic, pen and camera’,⁵⁵³ takes as its subject matter the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy, also known as the Hawk’s Nest Disaster, which has been called ‘the greatest industrial disaster in the history of the United States’.⁵⁵⁴ In his 2003 monograph on *Book of the Dead*, Timothy Dayton notes that ‘[f]ollowing many years of relative neglect and obscurity, Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* has recently been returned to print and become the subject of critical attention’.⁵⁵⁵ In the intervening years, such attention has increased, with the publication of a monograph on Rukeyser’s poetry by Catherine Gander in

⁵⁵⁰ Walt Whitman, ‘Song of the Open Road’, in *Leaves of Grass* (1856), bk. 7, section 5, lines 6–7.

⁵⁵¹ Rukeyser, *U.S. 1*.

⁵⁵² *BOD*.

⁵⁵³ Wechsler, ‘Fact and Vision’, 121.

⁵⁵⁴ Timothy Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead’* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 17. Dayton draws from the account in Martin Cherniak, *The Hawk’s Nest Incident: America’s Worst Industrial Accident* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Cherniak is also cited as an authority by Catherine Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 177; and Lowney, *Literary Left*, 46.

⁵⁵⁵ Dayton, *Muriel*, 1. See also Gerd Hurm, ‘Water and “the land’s disease”’: Poetics and Politics of Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”’, in Benesch and Schmidt, *Space in America*, 193–208, 194. For an overview of the contemporary critical reception of the poem see Dayton (118–23).

2013,⁵⁵⁶ as well as a standalone volume of the poem, published with a long introductory essay by Catherine Venable Moore, in 2018.⁵⁵⁷

The facts on which *Book of the Dead* are based are presented in the poem ‘Statement: Philippa Allen’,⁵⁵⁸ and have been recounted in most critical interpretations.⁵⁵⁹ I give a brief summary here. In 1930, construction began on a three-mile-long tunnel beneath Gauley Mountain, in West Virginia, to divert part of the nearby New River to a hydroelectric power station. The rock excavated from the tunnel, rich in silica, was also used in the production of steel alloys, and the tunnel performed double duty as a mine. The power station and steel production plant were both owned by a conglomerate, Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation. To save time and money, the tunnel was drilled dry rather than wet, which resulted in the inhalation of large amounts of silica dust by workers. Other factors exacerbated the situation, including inadequate ventilation and protective equipment, and poor living conditions. Many workers developed acute silicosis, a disease that starves the lungs of oxygen. Conservative estimates set the resulting number of deaths at close to 800;⁵⁶⁰ in *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser cites the upper limit of 2000.⁵⁶¹ Though the effects of short, intense periods of exposure to silica were not known, the long-term lethal effects were. In the aftermath, Union Carbide tried to conceal its negligent practices and minimise compensation payouts to affected families. The issue received nation-wide attention only after a few stories had run in leftist newspapers. A hearing to determine whether a federal investigation should be undertaken wasn’t conducted until early 1936—some six years after construction on the tunnel had begun. The investigation never took place.

As Adrienne Rich notes in her introduction to *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, Rukeyser was actively engaged in progressive politics from a young age:⁵⁶² barely out of college, she was arrested while reporting on the Scottboro case in Alabama in 1933, in which nine African-American young men were falsely accused of raping a white woman; she also travelled as a journalist to Spain on the eve of the civil war (evacuated by boat just before hostilities broke out), as well as to North Vietnam to protest the Vietnam War.⁵⁶³ For Rukeyser, politics and art were fused, and protest was as much a lifelong vocation as poetry: in an interview with *New York Quarterly* in 1972, Rukeyser stated: ‘I will protest all

⁵⁵⁶ Gander, *Connection*.

⁵⁵⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018). This publication also includes a hand-drawn map of Gauley Bridge and surrounds by Rukeyser, photographs by Nancy Naumburg, and a list of the victims of the tragedy.

⁵⁵⁸ *BOD*, 73.

⁵⁵⁹ See, e.g., Dayton, *Muriel*, 16–20; Lowney, *Literary Left*, 44; Gander, *Connection*, 177. I draw on these accounts in my summary.

⁵⁶⁰ Cherniak, cited in Gander, *Connection*, 177.

⁵⁶¹ *BOD*, 73.

⁵⁶² Rich, *Rukeyser Reader*, xii.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, xii. See also Gander, *Connection*, 174.

my life. I am willing to'.⁵⁶⁴ Rukeyser's interest in the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy was no doubt fueled by the injustices it perpetrated, along the lines of both class and race. A large proportion of the victims were 'anonymous workers, many of them migrants, many black',⁵⁶⁵ and with respect to compensation payouts, 'black workers received substantially less than their white counterparts'.⁵⁶⁶ In response to the inadequate official response to the tragedy, Rukeyser and her friend Nancy Naumburg, a photographer, drove to Gauley Bridge from New York in March 1936 to conduct their own investigation.⁵⁶⁷ Rukeyser began work on her poetic sequence in early 1937, and published *Book of the Dead* a year later.⁵⁶⁸

The sequence opens with a poem titled 'THE ROAD', which begins with the line: 'These are the roads to take when you think of your country'.⁵⁶⁹ While several critical interpretations of the poem have focused on the ways in which the tropes of photography and glass have featured in *Book of the Dead*,⁵⁷⁰ there has been little extended scholarly attention given to the figure of the road: as Gander notes, 'the structuring motif of the road has been largely overlooked'.⁵⁷¹ Gander seeks to address this lack, employing Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizomes.⁵⁷² She argues that '[t]he motif of the road enables Rukeyser to navigate through shifting dynamics of power and control between the American landscape and American citizens',⁵⁷³ and that 'by initially structuring the road as a dynamic medium—continually changing in shape and direction—she formulates a network of meanings and relations that may be returned to and built upon throughout the course of the poem series'.⁵⁷⁴ After this convincing beginning, however, Gander diverts her attention to a discussion of rivers, arguing that '[t]hroughout the poem series, roads and rivers perform the same function, leading the reader 'back' to the landscape'.⁵⁷⁵ This conflation of roads and rivers—the differences between which are, in

⁵⁶⁴ Muriel Rukeyser, 'Craft Interview with Muriel Rukeyser', *New York Quarterly* 11 (Summer 1972): 15–39, 34. See also Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 149.

⁵⁶⁵ Dayton, *Muriel*, 17.

⁵⁶⁶ Catherine Venable Moore, introduction to *BOD* (West Virginia University Press), 1–51, 7.

⁵⁶⁷ Moore, *BOD* (West Virginia University Press), 9; Dayton, *Muriel*, 15.

⁵⁶⁸ Dayton, *Muriel*, 15.

⁵⁶⁹ *BOD*, 71.

⁵⁷⁰ See, e.g., Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*; Dayton, *Muriel*; Lowney, *Literary Left*; and Wechsler, 'Fact and Vision'.

⁵⁷¹ Gander, *Connection*, 178.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 180–92.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

my view, significant⁵⁷⁶—elides the crucial importance of the road as a specific topographical feature in Rukeyser's poetic sequence.

I propose to read *Book of the Dead* using the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope. Though there has been growing critical interest in the sequence, there have been no chronotopic analyses to date. The chronotope serves 'for the assimilation of actual temporal (including historical) reality' into the artistic space of the literary text,⁵⁷⁷ and is a particularly apt conceptual tool when considering the work of a poet who stressed the importance of the bond between poetry and the material (that is, social, political and historical, as well as physical) world. In a radio interview, not long after the publication of *U.S. 1*, Rukeyser stated: 'The actual world, not some fantastic structure that has nothing to do with reality, must provide the material for modern poetry.'⁵⁷⁸ In *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser seeks to engage with the 'actual world' of her time and place: 1930s America. This twentieth-century post-frontier American space is concretised in a dominant topographical landscape feature: the road.

In the following chapter, I undertake an analysis of *Book of the Dead* using the chronotope of the road. My discussions of the chronotopes of the forest and the desert in Chapters One and Two proceeded on the basis of Bakhtin's general theory of chronotopes. The present chapter benefits from the fact that the chronotope of the road is not only specifically discussed by Bakhtin, but also singled out for its significance: in the chronotope of the road, 'the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity. The importance of the chronotope of the road in literature is immense: it is a rare work that does not contain a variation of this motif'.⁵⁷⁹ I argue that in *Book of the Dead* Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road—a constituent feature of both the landscape of 1930s America, as well as of a particular iteration of the genre of the road, the American road guide—to produce an alternative 'guidebook' to the nation, to send us into epic time to encounter the dead, and to set her compatriots on a revolutionary road into the future.

On the road in 1930s America

In the long-form poems discussed in Chapters One and Two of this thesis, Howe and Ondaatje wrote onto landscapes situated at significant temporal removes—the seventeenth century and late nineteenth century, respectively—to their time of writing in the late twentieth century. In Ondaatje's case, this remove was also geographic.

⁵⁷⁶ On the significance of water, for instance, see Hurm, 'Water'.

⁵⁷⁷ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 252.

⁵⁷⁸ Rukeyser, Typescript of script for radio interview. The interview is reproduced in full in Dayton, *Muriel*, 143–8. Dayton dates the interview to early 1938, shortly after publication of *U.S. 1* (143).

⁵⁷⁹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 98.

Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, by contrast, engages with the contemporary landscape of its time and place of production: 1930s America. In an essay accompanying a recent exhibition at the Detroit Museum of Art, titled 'The Open Road', curator David Campany asks: 'Is America imaginable without the road trip?'⁵⁸⁰ While the title of the exhibition refers to Walt Whitman's 'Song of the Open Road'—originally published in *Leaves of Grass* in 1856—the primacy of the road, and its companion the automobile, in American culture is a particularly twentieth-century phenomenon. According to Campany, by 1930, around the time construction was beginning on the Gauley Tunnel, there were 26.7 million automobiles in America, one for every 4.5 people.⁵⁸¹ Five years later, when a pair of satirists from the Soviet Union crossed the country by car, they wrote: 'Before we say that the American West is a mountainous country, or a desert country, or a forested country, we want to say the most central, important thing about it: it is an automotive and electrical country.'⁵⁸²

Such depictions of the expanding roadscape must be seen against the prevailing historical conditions. The America of the 1930s is the America of the Depression, bracketed between the stock market crash and WWII. Historian Robert Goldston notes that by the beginning of 1932, almost one third of the American labour force was unemployed.⁵⁸³ Under these conditions, forced migration became a reality for many working-class Americans, who 'hit the road. Accompanied by families, in broken-down cars or, increasingly, alone, jobless workers roamed from town to town, city to city, state to state, seeking work that was unavailable'.⁵⁸⁴ As David Peeler observes, in this period 'the nation's roadways were virtually teeming with dispossessed people'.⁵⁸⁵ Adding to this volume of human traffic, many of the nation's writers also 'took to the road ... executing immense looping circuits around the country'.⁵⁸⁶ Their travels were 'designed ... not as escapes from Depression America but as encounters with it'.⁵⁸⁷ The stark reality of the road traces itself into the literature of the period: in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a classic novel of the Depression, Route 66 is characterised as the 'migrant road ... the mother road, the road of flight'.⁵⁸⁸ The problem faced by the writers of the 1930s is what

⁵⁸⁰ David Campany, 'A Short History of the Long Road', in *The Open Road: Photography and the American Road Trip* (New York: Aperture, 2014), 8.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Ilya and Evgeny Petrov, cited in *ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁸³ Robert Goldston, *The Great Depression: The United States in the Thirties* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1968), 52.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ David P. Peeler, 'Unlonesome Highways: The Quest for Fact and Fellowship in Depression America', *Journal of American Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 185–206, 185.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 186. Peeler counts authors such as Sherwood Anderson, Nathan Asch, James Agee and Erskine Caldwell among their number (187).

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁸⁸ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 123. First published in 1939 by Viking Books.

Bakhtin identifies in his discussion of the chronotope as '[t]he problem of assimilating real time, that is, the problem of assimilating historical reality into the poetic image'.⁵⁸⁹

In Chapters One and Two of this thesis, we saw how the chronotopes of the forest and the desert were constitutive features of two canonical American genres—the captivity narrative and the Western. In this chapter, we find that, as Timo Müller has noted, the road's 'chronotopic significance extends onto the generic level, where it has come to define the road novel and the road movie as distinct text types'.⁵⁹⁰ While variants of these genres are often typified in the American canon by novels and films from the 1950s and 1960s, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*⁵⁹¹ and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*,⁵⁹² a particular iteration was produced in the 1930s—the American road guide. In 1938, the same year that Rukeyser published *U.S. 1*, the Works Progress Administration, an agency established under the aegis of President Roosevelt's New Deal, published *U.S. One: Maine to Florida*.⁵⁹³ Compiled and written by the Federal Writers' Project of the WPA, *U.S. One* was part of what was known as the 'American Guide Series'. The series, which would amount, at the project's close in 1943, to some 378 books and pamphlets,⁵⁹⁴ covered each of the states, major cities and many minor ones, scenic waterways and other places of interest.⁵⁹⁵ *U.S. One* was the one of three highway route guides, and purported to give a 'mile-by-mile description' of the road.⁵⁹⁶

Rukeyser's intention to engage with the American Guide Series in *Book of the Dead* is indicated by a number of factors. *U.S. One* and *U.S. 1* were published in the same year, a mere month apart. Shortly afterwards, Rukeyser stated in an interview: 'The title stands, quite simply, for the federal highway—U.S. 1—which runs along the Atlantic coast, from Maine to Florida';⁵⁹⁷ clearly referencing the subtitle of *U.S. One*—'Maine to Florida'. While Rukeyser's engagement with the American Guide Series has been discussed in the critical literature,⁵⁹⁸ the extent of this engagement has not been fully explored. The cover images, for instance, show striking similarities: *U.S. One* (see Figure 3.1) features an image of a map of the east coast of the US, printed in shades of blue, with the route of U.S. 1 plotted on it. *U.S. 1* (see Figure 3.2) appropriates such road guide iconography by setting the title in a white shield on a navy-blue background, mimicking the appearance of a road

⁵⁸⁹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 251.

⁵⁹⁰ Müller, 'Literary Chronotopes', 596–7.

⁵⁹¹ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). First published in 1957 by Viking Books.

⁵⁹² *Easy Rider*, directed by Dennis Hopper (1969).

⁵⁹³ Federal Writers' Project, *U.S. One: Maine to Florida* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1938).

⁵⁹⁴ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 111.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶ 'Notes on Use of Book', in Federal Writers' Project, *U.S. One*, ix.

⁵⁹⁷ Rukeyser, Typescript of script for radio interview, 2.

⁵⁹⁸ See, e.g., Gander, *Connection*, 170–6; Lowney, *Literary Left*, 49–50; Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 149.

sign. The title font for both texts is similar enough to be identical at a glance. This stylistic congruity is not accidental: cover and book design for both texts is credited to the same designer, Robert Josephy. Though there is no record of correspondence between Rukeyser and her publisher, Covici Friede, or Josephy, on this matter, it can be inferred that the likeness is intentional.

In her study of the Guides, cultural historian Christine Bold identifies their ideological function, arguing that the series ‘uses travel to produce a landscape that reverses images of nomadism’.⁵⁹⁹ Of the highway guides in particular, John Lowney notes that they:

sought to reclaim an optimistic image of the road from the more distressing images of social suffering associated with the Depression. The national symbol of the road as a medium for democratic opportunity and westward expansion had been displaced by the stories of dislocation, destitution, and homelessness documented by Depression-era reporters. The American Guide Series—and the highway route series in particular—redefined the road as a site of a progressive national history through its emphasis on purposeful movement.⁶⁰⁰

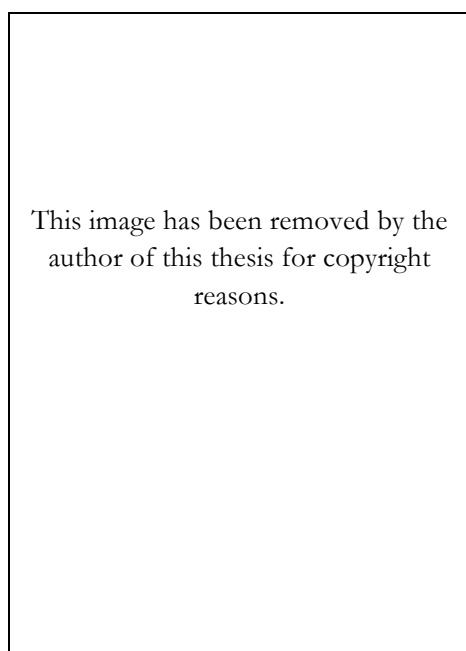


Figure 3.1: *U.S. One*, front cover.

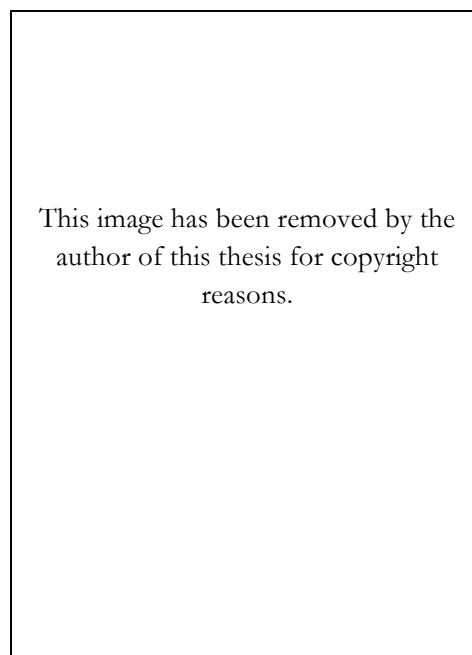


Figure 3.2: *U.S. 1*, front cover.

⁵⁹⁹ Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 12.

⁶⁰⁰ Lowney, *Literary Left*, 49.

The 1930s constituted a period of economic and spiritual crisis for America, and the chronotope of the road was central to the story the country struggled to tell about itself. Central to this story is a particular narrative of American space: as Bold notes, mobility ‘has long been a central trope of American identity, propagated in frontier mythologies’;⁶⁰¹ this ‘redefinition’, or ‘reclaiming’, of the road as a symbol of progress draws heavily on Turner’s frontier thesis. As discussed in Chapter Two of this study, Turner’s thesis was challenged by the field of New Western History in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, however, it remained influential; and its influence can be seen in the Guides, which Richard Slotkin contends ‘emphasize the development of “popular” and democratic institutions under the kind of frontier conditions described by Turner’.⁶⁰² The American road guide, ‘a genre ... coming into its own’⁶⁰³ in the 1930s, was a contemporary repurposing of the frontier myth for ‘post-frontier’ times.

The significance of the frontier in *Book of the Dead* has received surprisingly little critical attention.⁶⁰⁴ That Turner’s thesis was central to Rukeyser’s thinking about the relationship between roads and nation is evidenced by archival material. On a copy of a US government press release from 1927, titled ‘United States Route No. 1 Is a Highway of History’,⁶⁰⁵ Rukeyser drew a ruled line alongside a section of text in which the location of the highway is connected to the ‘fall line’ that runs down the East Coast. The fall line, as we saw in Chapter One of this thesis, is the first of Turner’s geographical frontiers. Rukeyser intended to write a larger work about U.S. Highway 1;⁶⁰⁶ her handwritten notes for this work include a whole page devoted to a summary of Turner’s *The Frontier in American History*.⁶⁰⁷ The summary includes a reference to the ‘fall line’⁶⁰⁸ and a direct quote: ‘Page of country—particularly in eastern states this page is a palimpsest.’⁶⁰⁹ What this archival material shows is that in 1930s America, for Rukeyser as much as for the authors of the American Guide Series, the chronotope of the road is fused to the myth

⁶⁰¹ Bold, *Guides*, 11.

⁶⁰² Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 282.

⁶⁰³ Moore, *BOD* (West Virginia University Press), 10.

⁶⁰⁴ Lowney notes that Rukeyser consulted Turner’s *The Frontier in American History* for her proposed larger work ‘U.S. 1’ (*Literary Left*, 36), but does not speak of its influence in *BOD*.

⁶⁰⁵ US government press release, ‘United States Route No. 1 Is a Highway of History’, Folder 4, Box II-11 (Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

⁶⁰⁶ See Rukeyser, notes for *U.S. 1*. Rukeyser writes: ‘*The Book of the Dead* will eventually be one part of a planned work, U.S. 1. This is to be a summary poem of the life of the Atlantic coast of this country, nourished by the communications which run down it.’ (146). This larger work never eventuated.

⁶⁰⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, Holographs and typescript of 3 poems, unsigned and undated, with holograph, outline, scheme, and notes (Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York). These notes relate to the history of colonisation in America.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.* The full quote from Turner is: ‘The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution ... Particularly in eastern States this page is a palimpsest’ (*Frontier*, 11).

of the frontier. It is into this post-frontier American landscape, in which the frontier still looms large, that Rukeyser sets us ‘on the road’.

‘These are the roads to take’: encounters in historical time

For Turner the frontier is both a temporal period and a line moving westward through geographical space. The ‘close’ of the period is also the closing of a space; the line reaches the final barrier of the Pacific Ocean, and the geographical space it leaves behind forms a political space—the ‘nation’ of America. The work of constitution, it would appear, has been done. Yet the motion generated at and by the frontier does not dissipate at its ‘close’; rather, it is absorbed into the very air and soil, becoming what could be *the* defining characteristic of the nation. In ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, Turner writes:

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.⁶¹⁰

This principle of perpetual motion generated by the frontier, which finds expression in the WPA’s American Guide Series, is also harnessed by Rukeyser in *Book of the Dead*. Rukeyser positions her long-form poem as a parallel text to the WPA’s *U.S. One*, not only through a stylistic congruity in title and cover design, but also by appropriating its form as a travel narrative. The opening poem, ‘THE ROAD’, situates us at the beginning of a journey:

These are the roads to take when you think of your country
and interested bring down the maps again,
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

reading the papers with morning inquiry.
Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light
chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights

indicate future of road, your wish pursuing
past the junction, the fork, the suburban station,
well-traveled six-lane highway planned for safety.⁶¹¹

From the outset, *Book of the Dead* propels us into action. The first line—‘These are the roads to take when you think of your country’—is written as a second-person address in

⁶¹⁰ Turner, *Frontier*, 37.

⁶¹¹ *BOD*, 71.

the imperative, one that directs both the speaker and the reader to ‘bring down the maps’ in preparation for travel. Our movement through the landscape is figured in predominantly spatial terms:⁶¹² beyond the first three stanzas, the ‘you’ of the poem moves ‘[p]ast your tall central city’s influence’,⁶¹³ to ‘[t]ouch West Virginia where/ the Midland Trail leaves the Virginia furnace’,⁶¹⁴ and then on to ‘[t]he simple mountains, sheer, dark-graded with pine’.⁶¹⁵ If we read the second stanza carefully, however, we see that the speaker, who ‘sit[s] at the wheel’, is accompanied by a ‘small light’ and ‘headlights’, indicating that between the first and second lines of the stanza, between the end of one sentence and the beginning of another, we have not only moved from a desk or kitchen table to a car, but from morning (‘reading the papers with morning inquiry’) to night—whether of the same day or a different one.

Of the chronotope of the road, Bakhtin writes: ‘its fundamental pivot is the flow of time’.⁶¹⁶ What Rukeyser alerts us to, from the beginning of her poetic sequence, is the significance of the *temporal* dimension of travel on the road. In the second-last stanza, as we approach Gauley, the scene of the tragedy, this dimension is given more visible expression:

John Marshall named the rock (steep pines, a drop
he reckoned in 1812, called) Marshall’s Pillar,
but later, Hawk’s Nest. Here is your road, tying
you to its meanings: gorge, boulder precipice.⁶¹⁷

The voice here is reminiscent of an authoritative travel guide, drawing our attention to a landmark, ‘Marshall’s Pillar’, and providing brief informative commentary that tells us how to ‘read’ this landmark (‘Here is the road, tying/ you to its meanings’). Yet something unsettling occurs on the level of syntax through the use of parentheses. A true parenthetical clause is self-contained; the one we read here—‘(steep pines, a drop/ he reckoned in 1812, called)’—which does not coincide neatly with the line breaks, but begins partway through the first line and ends partway through the second—seeks to run on past the boundary of the closing parenthesis; it obtrudes, that is, into the framing sentence. What occurs through the parenthetical clause is a subtle splitting of the time-space of the poem through what appears to be a second voice. The statement, ‘John Mashall named the rock.../ Marshall’s Pillar’, which sounds in the present of the speaker’s travel narrative, is modified by a more vivid account of discovery that seems to break through from the past, the two colliding at the ostensible barrier of the closing parenthesis.

⁶¹² Also noted by Dayton, *Muriel*, 74.

⁶¹³ *BOD*, 71.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁶ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 244.

⁶¹⁷ *BOD*, 72.

This sense of a collision of disparate historical time-spaces through a splintering of poetic voice is further developed in the next poem, 'WEST VIRGINIA', which begins:

They saw rivers flow west and hoped again.
Virginia speeding to another sea!
1671—Thomas Batts, Robert Fallam,
Thomas Wood, the Indian Perecute,
and an unnamed indentured English servant
followed the forest past blazed trees, pillars of God,
were the first whites emergent from the east.
They left a record to our heritage,
Breaking of records. Hoped now for the sea,
for all mountaines have their descents about them,
waters, descending naturally, doe alwaies resort
until the seas invironing those lands ...
*yea, at home amongst the mountaines in England.*⁶¹⁸

The voice in the first nine lines appears to be contiguous with the one that speaks to us in 'THE ROAD': that of the travel guide, narrating our travelling present. Between the end of the line 'Hoped now for the sea,' which ends in a comma, and the beginning of the next '*for all mountains*'—that is, in the middle of a sentence—there is a change, marked not only by the switch from roman to italics, but also by the use of archaic spelling. A new voice—a speaker for whom 'home' is still 'England', presumably one (or more) of the seventeenth-century explorers referred to in the preceding lines—takes us backwards, into the past and Old World Europe. Through references to 'descents' and 'descending', the new voice further complicates our sense of location in time and space by introducing a vertical spatial dimension into what has otherwise consisted of predominantly horizontal movement. Our motion *across* is arrested and diverted *down*, in tandem with a movement from the present into the past, but this diversion is, for the moment, temporary: at the end of the stanza another switch—a switchback—occurs, and we continue our journey on the road:

Coming where this road comes,
flat stones spilled water which the still pools fed.
Kanawha Falls, the rapids of the mind,
fast waters spilling west.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. Note that the text set in italics in this stanza was set in maximal capitals in the first edition of the poem published in *U.S. 1* (11). The West Virginia University Press edition follows the setting of the McGraw-Hill edition I cite here, but the words 'For' and 'Yea' at the beginning of lines 10 and 13 are capitalised (63), for reasons unknown.

Found Indian fields, standing low cornstalks left,
learned three Mohegans planted them; found-land
farmland, the planted home, discovered!

War-born:

The battle at Point Pleasant, Cornstalk's tribes,
last stand, Fort Henry, a revolution won;
the granite SITE OF THE precursor EXECUTION
sabres, apostles OF JOHN BROWN LEADER OF THE
War's brilliant cloudy RAID AT HARPERS FERRY.⁶¹⁹

In this rapid account of West Virginian history, we move from first white settlement on 'Indian fields', through two battles that roughly mark the beginning and end of the American Revolution, to the armed slave revolt at Harpers Ferry, led by pre-Civil War abolitionist John Brown—or, rather, the site of his execution. Here, Rukeyser appropriates another convention of the American Guide Series, in which places of interest are marked out from the general travel narrative by the use of maximal capitals. On page 11 of *U.S. One*, for instance, we find: 'The GRAVE OF AUNT PEGGY BEAL, in the cemetery near the public square'.⁶²⁰ Like the grave of Aunt Peggy Beal, the 'SITE OF THE ... EXECUTION ... OF JOHN BROWN LEADER OF THE ... RAID AT HARPERS FERRY' is an actual historic marker (located in Charles Town, West Virginia). In Rukeyser's poem, however, the relationship between the world and its representation is complicated by the insertion of words in lower case—'the granite', 'precursor', 'sabres, apostles' and 'War's brilliant cloudy'—that act as a musical counterpoint, altering the meaning of the whole. Placed in the new context of Rukeyser's poetic sequence, a monument to death becomes, also, a celebration of 'brilliant' revolutionary action. What we see here is another collision between disparate historical time-spaces, though in this instance it is the living speaking voice that carries or moves through the 'voice' of a sign from the past, disrupting its fixed rigidity and 'respeaking' it in the present.

As Michael Davidson notes, *Book of the Dead* is 'unique among Rukeyser's poems in its direct quotation of nonliterary materials'.⁶²¹ While much has been made of its 'documentary' character, seen as characteristic of the place and time of its composition,⁶²²

⁶¹⁹ *BOD*, 72.

⁶²⁰ Federal Writers' Project, *U.S. One*, 11.

⁶²¹ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 149.

⁶²² James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939) is perhaps the most recognised example of a literary work produced in this period. The book, which contains text by Agee and photographs by Evans, blurs generic distinctions, particularly between fiction and non-fiction. On the significance of the documentary aesthetic of the 1930s in *BOD* see, e.g.: Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 140; Shulman, *Political Art*, 182; Lowney, *Literary Left*, 36; Gander, *Connection*, 2; and Dayton, *Muriel*, 63.

a too-narrow focus on this aspect of the poem ignores the manner in which Rukeyser puts appropriated documentary material to *use*.⁶²³ Rukeyser has spoken of her poetic method as ‘the method of collision. The work, laid on, as it were, stroke by stroke, emphasizes placing and timing, the relations between the parts’.⁶²⁴ The use of maximal capitals in the stanza cited above is another stylistic feature of *Book of the Dead* that highlights the centrality of the poetic methodology of collage in the poem. In *U.S. One*, each ‘chapter’ title—the name of a destination town or city—is set in maximal capitals; in *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser mimics this convention by using maximal capitals for the titles of individual poems (‘THE ROAD’, ‘WEST VIRGINIA’). This typographic feature of *Book of the Dead* is replicated in each of its editions, but not remarked in any critical readings (where initial caps are used to cite individual poem titles—e.g. ‘West Virginia’). By appropriating this stylistic and structural convention of the genre of the American road guide, Rukeyser positions *Book of the Dead* not only as a travel narrative, but also as a collection of poems that themselves function as *places*.

To figure the poems in *Book of the Dead* in this manner accords with Rukeyser’s general conception of poetry as a genre—the poem, she contends, is ‘a meeting place just as a person’s life is a meeting place’.⁶²⁵ In ‘Chronotope’, Bakhtin stresses ‘the close link between the motif of meeting and the chronotope of the road (“the open road”)’.⁶²⁶ Moreover, ‘one crucial feature of the “road” ... is that [it] is always one that passes through *familiar territory* ... it is the *sociological heterogeneity* of one’s own country that is revealed and depicted’.⁶²⁷ This function of the chronotope of the road, as a means by which to stage scenes of encounter between the varied constituents of a *national* space, is particularly apropos to *Book of the Dead*, the very first line of which—“These are the roads to take when you think of your country”—sets both its speaker and its reader out on the road to encounter ‘[their] country’. On the road, as Bakhtin writes, ‘the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages—intersect’.⁶²⁸ The America that we encounter in Rukeyser’s poetic revisioning of the American road guide is one that is composed of voices drawn not only from different time periods, as we have seen, but also different social strata within the same slice of historical time. In the poem ‘PRAISE OF THE COMMITTEE’, for instance, which begins ‘*These are the lines on which a committee is formed*’,⁶²⁹ the body of the committee advocating for victims of the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy is constituted by members from diverse racial and social backgrounds:

⁶²³ As Hurm has observed: ‘Given her journalistic background it is important to note that Rukeyser decided against publishing her response to the Hawk’s Nest outrage in the form of a newspaper or magazine article. Instead, she chose the genre of poetry’ (‘Water’, 197).

⁶²⁴ Rukeyser, ‘Speed of the Image’, 5.

⁶²⁵ Rukeyser, ‘Craft’, 34.

⁶²⁶ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 98.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 245 (original emphasis).

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁶²⁹ *BOD*, 77.

Here are Mrs. Jones, three lost sons, husband sick,
 Mrs. Leek, cook for the bus cafeteria,
 the men: George Robinson, leader and voice,
 four other Negroes (three drills, one camp-boy)
 Blankenship, the thin friendly man, Peyton the engineer,
 Juanita absent, the one outsider member.⁶³⁰

In the Notes to *U.S. 1*, Rukeyser writes: 'Poetry can extend the document';⁶³¹ Rukeyser's project to 'extend the document' through poetry is enacted in *Book of the Dead* by way of an imagined extension of U.S. Highway 1,⁶³² linking the local to the national, and making the concerns of Gauley Bridge the concerns of the nation. This impulse towards a form of national unity is also one that animates the American Guide Series: the *American Guides Manual* asked for the compilation of 'the complete, standard, authoritative work on the United States as a whole and every part of it'.⁶³³ At a time when economic instability raised the very real prospect of internal social collapse, the Guides functioned not only to promote a sense of progress, but also of *unity*.⁶³⁴ To this end, the chronotope of the road served a crucial role: materially and discursively joining one town to the next, the road became a form of national commons, both a physical space *and* a narrative that bound the disparate constituents of the nation into a whole. This rhetoric of unity bears the mark of Turner's account of the closing of the frontier:

a people composed of heterogeneous materials, with diverse and conflicting ideals and social interests, having passed from the task of filling up the vacant spaces of the continent, is now thrown back upon itself, and is seeking an equilibrium. The diverse elements are being fused into national unity.⁶³⁵

The purpose of perpetual motion in Turner's thesis, the goal towards which all this restless energy is directed, is the formation of 'nation'; the American road guides, drawing on frontier mythology, follow suit.

There have been various characterisations of the Guides. Some, such as William Stott,⁶³⁶ Jerrold Hirsch,⁶³⁷ and Wendy Griswold⁶³⁸ claim that they followed through on promises

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁶³¹ Rukeyser, *U.S. 1*, 146.

⁶³² As Gander has noted, Highway 1 does not actually pass through West Virginia (*Connection*, 177).

⁶³³ Cited in *ibid.*, 172.

⁶³⁴ See, e.g., Bold, *Guides*, 7.

⁶³⁵ Turner, *Frontier*, 220–1.

⁶³⁶ Stott, *Documentary Expression*.

⁶³⁷ Jerrold Hirsch, *America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

of inclusivity and cultural plurality, even if these ideals coexisted uneasily with a strong sense of nationalism.⁶³⁹ Others, such as Bold and Slotkin, argue that the Guides gave only the appearance of plurality while suppressing any real differences, at both production and content levels.⁶⁴⁰ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make a statement about all 378 of the Guides, but an examination of *U.S. One* bears out the assessments made by Slotkin and Bold. After a general introduction, for instance, *U.S. One* opens with a section titled ‘Special Foods From Maine to Florida’.⁶⁴¹ This state-by-state glossary of dishes—including apple fritters, clam chowder and deviled baked ham—caters to the palate of an exclusively white audience.⁶⁴² Referring to the novel *Don Quixote*, Bakhtin writes: ‘On the boundary line between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Don Quixote sets out on the road in order that he might encounter all of Spain on that road—from galley-slaves to dukes.’⁶⁴³ In *Book of the Dead* the road we travel, like Don Quixote’s, has ‘been profoundly, intensely etched by the flow of historical time, by the traces and signs of time’s passage, by markers of the era’.⁶⁴⁴ If the Turnerian impulse, evidenced in the American Guide Series, was to fuse ‘heterogeneous materials’ into a single ‘national unity’, Rukeyser’s project is to produce an alternative road guide that makes this heterogeneity visible. She does so by exposing the parts of which any ‘whole’—spatial, temporal, social or political—is always composed.

‘Go down as roads go down’: descending into epic space

Thus far, I have discussed Rukeyser’s use of the chronotope of the road in *Book of the Dead* as it pertains to predominantly horizontal movement: that is, movement *across* landscapes. This is consistent with the tradition of the travel narrative, a feature of the genre of the road, with its emphasis on spatial mobility. However, as the above analysis shows, in *Book of the Dead* all travel narratives are also narratives of time travel. This temporal component of chronotope of the road, which constitutes one of its central features, is given prominence in the poetic sequence through a shift in the plane of movement. As we saw briefly in ‘WEST VIRGINIA’, where the intrusion of voices of seventeenth-century explorers and references to ‘descent’ took us backwards into the past, this shift occurs in the change from horizontal motion (across the landscape) to

⁶³⁸ Wendy Griswold, *American Guides: The Federal Writers’ Project and the Casting of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁶³⁹ See also Lowney, *Literary Left*, 50.

⁶⁴⁰ See Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 282; and Bold, *Guides*, 8.

⁶⁴¹ Federal Writers’ Project, *U.S. One*, xvii.

⁶⁴² That Native Americans are positioned as ‘other’ is indicated, for instance, by the entry for succotash, which reads: ‘corn and lima beans stewed together, a dish adopted from the Indians’ (Federal Writers’ Project, *U.S. One*, xxii).

⁶⁴³ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 244.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

vertical motion (down into the landscape). In the sixteenth poem, 'POWER', we arrive at 'The power-house'⁶⁴⁵—the entrance to the Gauley Tunnel:

This is the midway between water and flame,
this is the road to take when you think of your country,
between the dam and the furnace, terminal.⁶⁴⁶

In these lines, Rukeyser evokes the three key stages of a journey, though not in their traditional order: the first line refers to the 'midway' point; the second line, which recalls the first line of 'THE ROAD' ('These are the roads to take when you think of your country'), takes us back to a beginning; and the third line, through the word 'terminal', signals the end. 'Terminal', here, not only suggests the conclusion of a journey, but also, through its reference to disease, the cessation of life. Our guide through the hydroelectric power station is 'the engineer Jones, the blueprint man',⁶⁴⁷ who takes us into its heart:

The stairs. Descend.

...

the iron steps go down as roads go down.

This is the second circle, world of inner shade,
hidden bulk of generators, governor shaft,
round gap of turbine pit. Flashlight, tool-panels,
heels beating on iron, cold of underground,
stairs, wire flooring, the voice's hollow cry.
This is the scroll, the volute case of night,
quick shadow and the empty galleries.

Go down; here are the outlets, butterfly valves
open from here, the tail-race, vault of steel,
the spiral staircase ending, last light in shaft.⁶⁴⁸

In the line 'This is the second circle, world of inner shade' we find an allusion to another long-form poem characterised by predominantly downwards movement: Dante's *Inferno*. In 'Chronotope', Bakhtin argues that Dante's poem presents 'a world that has its life and movement tensely strung along a vertical axis ... The temporal logic of this vertical world consists in its sheer simultaneity'.⁶⁴⁹ Yet this verticality is not strictly 'pure'. Within the *Inferno*, horizontal or historical time is introduced via historical figures such as Francesca and Paolo, and Count Ugolino, whose stories form 'horizontal time-saturated

⁶⁴⁵ BOD, 93.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 93–4.

⁶⁴⁹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 157.

branches at right angles to the extratemporal vertical of the Dantesque world'.⁶⁵⁰ In poems such as 'THE ROAD' and 'WEST VIRGINIA', Rukeyser invites the reader to travel through a world saturated in horizontal historical time. In 'POWER', Rukeyser changes course, in an inverse gesture to Dante's—the roads that, above the surface, traverse the landscape, here become 'iron steps' that dig into the ground. We follow them 'down as roads go down'.

Rukeyser's depiction of the power station's 'second circle'—the 'round gap of turbine pit', 'cold of underground', 'the voice's hollow cry'—encourages not only a dynamic, but also a thematic parallel between Dante's narrator's path through the nine circles of hell, and the path we take here through the station and into the tunnel. The next four lines read:

"Gone," says the thin straight man.
 " 'Hail, holy light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,
 'Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam
 'May I express thee unblamed?' ”⁶⁵¹

The first speech fragment, 'Gone', following on from 'last light in shaft' at the end of the preceding line, acts as a percussive light switch that plunges us into darkness. The word is assigned by the verb 'says' to the 'thin straight man'—that is, Jones—whose voice we have heard so far in 'POWER'. The next three lines appear to also belong to Jones, and yet the shift into a more archaic linguistic register, as well as the use of a set of single quote marks within the double quote marks, alerts us to the presence of an external textual source, and a second voice. This voice speaks from another epic poem in which hell is figured: the lines beginning "Hail, holy light..." are from the opening of Book III of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁶⁵² 'In great poetry,' Rukeyser writes, 'you feel a source speaking to another source':⁶⁵³ in these three lines in 'POWER', we hear not only one source speaking to another, but speaking in multiple voices. These lines become, in effect, concentric circles of speech: quotes within quotes, voices within voices.

If we study the poem in more detail, we see that Rukeyser has made a subtle intervention that further complicates what we 'hear'. While faithfully rendering Milton's words and lineation, she has added two more open single quote marks *within* the quote. Placed at the beginning of each line, these open single quote marks, which by syntactic convention mark out the beginnings of separate speech fragments, introduce the possibility of the addition of further voices in the second and third lines of the quote. These voices are

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁶⁵¹ BOD, 94.

⁶⁵² John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63 (bk. 3, lines 1–3). The third line is quoted in part (the line ends with 'since God is light'). This source been remarked by other critics: see, e.g., Dayton, *Muriel*, 102.

⁶⁵³ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, Massachusetts: Paris Press, 1996), 15.

either joined in succession or, if we were to read the lines as a musical score—where notes to be played together are ranged along a vertical axis and time is marked by movement horizontally across the page—in concert. In this deceptively simple arrangement, which interweaves multiple voices, texts and time-spaces, Rukeyser creates her own version of an epic chorus. While the traditional epic chorus is composed of multiple voices speaking as one, Rukeyser's is constituted by multiple acts of speech, from multiple time-spaces, occurring simultaneously. By alluding to and appropriating from two seminal epic long-form poems, and by invoking the rhetorical device of the epic chorus, Rukeyser transforms our physical descent through the geological earth, which proceeds in historical time, into a figurative descent into the extratemporal vertical world of the epic.

In *Book of the Dead* the chronotope of the road functions as a space of encounter, then, not just between disparate voices in historical time, but between historical time (time proper) and epic time (no time), which is also the time of myth. As Davidson has remarked, in *Book of the Dead* 'we understand that the roads also have a vertical dimension, the descent into mythological realms'.⁶⁵⁴ In using the chronotope of the road to enable this descent into the space of epic myth, Rukeyser engages with and appropriates one of the defining characteristics of the genre of the road: the quest narrative.⁶⁵⁵ Quest narratives also have particular significance for American national mythologies: according to Slotkin, 'the myth of the heroic quest ... is perhaps the most important archetype underlying American cultural mythology',⁶⁵⁶ and 'involves the departure of the hero from his common-day world to seek the power of the gods in the underworld'.⁶⁵⁷ Our passage into the underworld in *Book of the Dead* is facilitated not only through allusions to and appropriations from two epic long-form poems—Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*—but also The Egyptian Book of the Dead,⁶⁵⁸ the namesake of the sequence. Like Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, The Egyptian Book of the Dead is a collection of disparate texts: spells intended to assist the souls of the dead in navigating the afterlife.⁶⁵⁹ It is also, in this sense, another form of 'road guide'—one that Rukeyser uses to navigate *our* path through the underworld.

We first encounter this source text in the eighth poem 'ABSALOM'. The title evokes the Old Testament figure of Absalom, whose death is mourned by his father David.⁶⁶⁰ The poem opens with the voice of a mother, whose sons are affected by silicosis:

⁶⁵⁴ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 149.

⁶⁵⁵ See, e.g., Brian Ireland, 'American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre', *The Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 4 (2003): 474–84, 479.

⁶⁵⁶ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 10.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ This source is identified by Rukeyser in the notes for *U.S. 1* (147). To avoid confusion with my primary text, I set the title of this source in roman, preceded by the words 'The Egyptian'.

⁶⁵⁹ See, e.g., Gander, *Connection*, 196.

⁶⁶⁰ For a discussion of the story of Absalom in relation to *BOD*, see Dayton, *Muriel*, 48.

I first discovered what was killing these men.
 I had three sons who worked with their father in the tunnel:
 Cecil, aged 23, Owen, aged 21, Shirley, aged 17.
 They used to work in a coal mine, not steady work
 for the mines were not going much of the time.
 A power Co. foreman learned that we made home brew,
 he formed a habit of dropping in evenings to drink,
 persuading the boys and my husband —
 give up their jobs and take this other work.
 It would pay them better.
 Shirley was my youngest son; the boy.
 He went into the tunnel.⁶⁶¹

At intervals, the text set in roman is interposed with fragments of text set in italics and indented slightly. The first fragment reads:

My heart my mother my heart my mother
*My heart my coming into being.*⁶⁶²

Arranged in counterpoint to the testimony of a grieving mother in Gauley Bridge,⁶⁶³ these incantations from The Egyptian Book of the Dead introduce the voices of the dead into the heterogeneous mix in Rukeyser's poetic sequence. In the prominence Rukeyser gives to The Egyptian Book of the Dead, among all her source texts (not only does it give *Book of the Dead* its title, but also the final poem, 'THE BOOK OF THE DEAD') Rukeyser signals her intentions. If she sends us on a quest through the underworld, it is not to encounter the gods, but the dead themselves. In 'ABSALOM', the mother 'give[s] a mouth to [her] son'⁶⁶⁴ by becoming a medium for his voice:

The youngest boy did not get to go down there with me,
 he lay and said, "Mother, when I die,
 "I want you to have them open me up and
 "see if that dust killed me.
 "Try to get compensation,
 "you will not have any way of making your living
 "when we are gone,
 "and the rest are going too."⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶¹ BOD, 81.

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ Dayton has identified Rukeyser's source texts as the congressional testimonies of Emma Jones, Philippa Allen and Charles Jones (*Muriel*, 47).

⁶⁶⁴ BOD, 83.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 82.

Though the quoted text reads syntactically as two complete sentences, the use of open quote marks at the beginning of each line, as in 'POWER', introduces once again the notion of a chorus—this time of the dead. Through these lines, the mother gives voice not only to her 'youngest boy', but also to those others affected by the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy who can no longer themselves speak. While the final punctuation mark is a double close quote mark, the absence of close quote marks at the end of each preceding line gives the sense of openendedness; the voice or voices, this arrangement suggests, are not silenced by the ragged right margins of the poem, but continue into the spaces beyond. After the end of this stanza, Rukeyser inserts another incantation from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*:

*I have gained mastery over my heart
I have gained mastery over my two hands
I have gained mastery over the waters
I have gained mastery over the river.*⁶⁶⁶

These lines, each beginning with an affirmation of the existence of an 'I' beyond death, convey a sense of power and agency. The gesture here is restorative: if Rukeyser presents us with a 'book', it is the book *of* the dead. The use of the conjunction accords with Rukeyser's commitment to openendedness and multiplicity: this is a book in which the dead, who have 'gained mastery' over the world of the living from which they have departed, are both subjects and authors.

Our journey 'down as roads go down' has a terminus. The final lines of 'POWER' read:

Down the reverberate channels of the hills
the suns declare midnight, go down, cannot ascend,
no ladder back; see this, your eyes can ride through steel,
this is the river of Death, diversion of power,
the root of tower and the tunnel's core,
this is the end.⁶⁶⁷

This could be seen as the nadir not only of the poem, but of the poetic sequence as a whole: we have travelled as far as we can into the underworld, shifting from horizontal, historical time into the vertical world of epic no-time, in which 'Death'—capitalised, as in the epic tradition—reigns. We have reached 'the root of tower and the tunnel's core'; 'the end' from which we 'cannot ascend,/ no ladder back'. Yet this is not the end of *Book of the Dead*. The next poem, 'THE DAM', begins with a firm disavowal of endings:

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 95.

All power is saved, having no end. Rises
in the green season, in the sudden season
the white the budded
and the lost.⁶⁶⁸

A road, Bakhtin writes, 'is almost never merely a road, but always suggests the whole, or a portion of, "a path of life"'.⁶⁶⁹ In 'POWER', we appear to reach 'the end of the road'—the road that ends in death. But what we arrive at is an intersection, which 'always signifies some turning point'⁶⁷⁰ (the chronotope, we remember, is a point around which the major events of narrative turn).⁶⁷¹ As a result of encounters on the road, something *happens*—the nadir must be reached, 'Death' must be met—in order for something else to begin. What occurs at the intersection that marks the end of 'POWER' and the beginning of 'THE DAM' is a reset of our temporal-spatial coordinates—in the word 'Rises' we begin moving again, and the direction in which we move is *up*. If our descent into the extratemporal vertical world of the epic is facilitated by the chronotope of the road, so is our ascent back into living, horizontal historical time. The poem 'ABSALOM' concludes, in part, with another incantation from The Egyptian Book of the Dead:

*I open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal
I come forth by day, I am born a second time,
I force a way through, and I know the gate
I shall journey over the earth among the living.*⁶⁷²

In 'THE DAM', this incantation is reiterated and extended:

I open out a way over the water
I form a path between the Combatants:
Grant that I sail down like a living bird,
power over the fields and Pool of Fire.
Phoenix, I sail over the phoenix world.⁶⁷³

The typography here—the setting of the incantation in roman, rather than italics—indicates that another shift has occurred. We have descended on roads made by the living into the earth; it is by new roads—'*a way*', '*a path*'—opened by the dead that we ascend. The source of the 'power' that we have sought on our quest into the underworld is here revealed to be within the dead themselves, who rise again in the form of the mythic Phoenix, and are 'the white the budded' from which new growth can spring.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 120.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 250.

⁶⁷² *BOD*, 82–3.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 95.

The multiple trajectories that our journey through *Book of the Dead* have taken via the chronotope of the road lead to the terminus of the poetic sequence: the eponymous poem 'THE BOOK OF THE DEAD'. The poem is split into three movements.⁶⁷⁴ The first two stanzas read:

These roads will take you into your own country.
Seasons and maps coming where this road comes
into a landscape mirrored in these men.

Past all your influences, your home river,
constellations of cities, mottoes of childhood,
parents and easy cures, war, all evasion's wishes.⁶⁷⁵

We have heard the opening line before—at the beginning of the fifth stanza in the first poem, 'THE ROAD': 'These roads will take you into your own country.'⁶⁷⁶ This line itself takes us further back, being a variation of the very first line in *Book of the Dead*—'These are the roads to take when you think of your country'⁶⁷⁷—and from here, forwards to 'POWER', where it appears as a repetition with a variation: 'this is the road to take when you think of your country'.⁶⁷⁸ Dayton has termed this 'the sequential refrain (that is, a refrain with variations)'⁶⁷⁹ of the poetic sequence. For Rukeyser, '[t]he phrase in a different position is new ... I use this as other poets use rhyme. It's a time-binding thing, a physical binding, a musical binding'.⁶⁸⁰ If we compare 'THE ROAD' and 'THE BOOK OF THE DEAD' further, we find that there are numerous resonances, both with regard to form—these are the only two poems in the sequence written in tercets—and content. For instance, the lines 'These are the roads to take when you think of your country/ and interested bring down the maps again'⁶⁸¹ in 'THE ROAD' reappear in 'THE BOOK OF THE DEAD' as 'These roads will take you into your own country./ Seasons and maps coming where this road comes'; and 'Past your tall central city's influence' becomes 'Past all your influences, your home river,/ constellations of cities'. Such comparisons reveal that *Book of the Dead* contains not one sequential refrain, but many.

⁶⁷⁴ Indicated by asterisks between movements.

⁶⁷⁵ *BOD*, 102.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁷⁹ Dayton, *Muriel*, 31.

⁶⁸⁰ Rukeyser, 'Craft', 25.

⁶⁸¹ *BOD*, 71.

In her essay collection *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser states that while the poet makes images, once ‘the images have each been set in motion ... they carry throughout, reverberating backward and forward’.⁶⁸² ‘Full meaning’ is only revealed ‘after many reverberations, sound after sound and image after image hunting back—not only to the beginning, but to each successive image and each successive sequence of sound’.⁶⁸³ What the multiple sequential refrains in *Book of the Dead* achieve is the production of *perpetual motion*. If we consider that the title of the final poem—‘THE BOOK OF THE DEAD’—is also the title of the entire sequence, we see that this motion is circular. Circular motion is a feature of the chronotope of the road, which Bakhtin conceives of as ‘both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement’.⁶⁸⁴ In this light, ‘THE ROAD’ and ‘THE BOOK OF THE DEAD’, ostensibly the beginning and the end of *Book of the Dead*, are in fact its centre; what binds them is the chronotope of the road.

As we have seen in Chapters One and Two of this thesis, circular motion is also a feature of the epic in general, and Turner’s frontier myth in particular. In Turner’s account, the closing of the frontier marks the transformation of ‘open’ to ‘closed’ space. Motion does not cease, but changes course—from linear to circular. Like the circulation of blood within the body, the circulation of people is seen to be healthy for the corpus of the nation: ‘Nothing works for nationalism,’ Turner declares, ‘like intercourse within the nation. Mobility of population is death to localism, and the western frontier worked irresistibly in unsettling population.’⁶⁸⁵ This statement contains within it an intriguing paradox—in the process of settlement, the nation becomes permanently *unsettled*. That Rukeyser seeks to harness the energy generated by this paradox is evidenced most clearly in the first movement of ‘THE BOOK OF THE DEAD’. After the first five stanzas, which are set in left-aligned tercets, the formatting changes (with the third line in each tercet indented), indicating a shift into a different register or mode. From here, we are given a summary of American history:

... Told in the histories,
 how first ships came

seeing on the Atlantic thirteen clouds
lining the west horizon with their white
 shining halations;

they conquered, throwing off impossible Europe—
could not be used to transform; created coast—
 breathed-in America.

⁶⁸² Rukeyser, *Poetry*, 170.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁸⁴ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 243–4.

⁶⁸⁵ Turner, *Frontier*, 30.

See how they took the land, made after-life
fresh out of exile, planted the pioneer
base and blockade,

pushed forests down in an implacable walk
west where new clouds lay at the desirable
body of sunset;

taking the seaboard. Replaced the isolation,
dropped cities where they stood, drew a tidewater
frontier of Europe,

a moment, and another frontier held,
this land was planted home-land that we know.⁶⁸⁶

This telling of an American foundation story—in the use of the words ‘frontier’, ‘west’, ‘pioneer’ and ‘home-land’; and the forceful actions by which the American landscape is, stage by stage, overcome (‘took the land’, ‘planted the pioneer/base and blockade’, ‘pushed forests down’, ‘taking the seaboard’)—is deeply steeped in Turnerian mythology.

Critics such as Dayton and Robert Shulman have argued that in her treatment of history, Rukeyser evinces an ambivalence regarding the nation’s colonial past.⁶⁸⁷ Such ambivalence is difficult to locate in the heroic language of this final poem, but if we look elsewhere, Rukeyser’s sympathies become more evident. In ‘WEST VIRGINIA’ acknowledgement of prior Native American presence is made in the lines:

Found Indian fields, standing low cornstalks left,
learned three Mohegans planted them; found-land
farmland, the planted home, discovered!

War-born:
The battle at Point Pleasant, Cornstalk’s tribes,
last stand, Fort Henry, a revolution won;⁶⁸⁸

Rukeyser does not linger on these events, but plants a seed that bears fruit in a later poem, ‘THE CORNFIELD’, which refers to a field used as a mass burial site for silicosis victims. The violent land wars referenced in ‘WEST VIRGINIA’ are reprised in the lines ‘Swear by the corn,/ the found-land corn’,⁶⁸⁹ and their consequences illustrated:

⁶⁸⁶ BOD, 102–3.

⁶⁸⁷ Dayton, *Muriel*, 111; Shulman, *Political Art*, 235.

⁶⁸⁸ BOD, 72.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

Here is the cornfield, white and wired by thorns,
old cornstalks, snow, the planted home.

...

... Under the mounds,
all the anonymous.
Abel America, calling from under the corn,
Earth, uncover my blood!

...

walking in furrows of corn, still sowing,
do apparitions come?
Voyage.
Think of your gardens. But here is corn to keep.
Marked pointed sticks to name the crop beneath.
Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe.⁶⁹⁰

In Chapters One and Two of this thesis, I argued that the dispossessed and displaced ‘others’ of national history are uncanny presences that haunt the ‘clearings’ and ‘empty spaces’ of ‘Articulation’ and *Collected Works*. In *Book of the Dead*, ‘apparitions come’ in the form not of haunting, but of a bodily uprising: ‘Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe’. Rukeyser’s keen awareness of the exclusions perpetrated by national histories is evident in her extra-poetic writing: ‘There is also, in any history,’ she writes, ‘the buried, the wasted, and the lost.’⁶⁹¹ In *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser foreshadows a reckoning, not only for the victims of the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy, but for ‘all the anonymous’, ‘the buried, the wasted, and the lost’. In his reading of the sequence, Lowney highlights what he believes is ‘often understated’: the manner in which ‘Rukeyser foregrounds the racial politics informing the cultural memory—and amnesia—of Gauley Bridge’,⁶⁹² in particular with respect to the treatment of African-Americans.⁶⁹³ George Robinson, an African-American tunnel worker affected by silicosis, is singled out in ‘PRAISE OF THE COMMITTEE’ as ‘George Robinson, leader and voice’,⁶⁹⁴ the one who ‘holds all their strength together’;⁶⁹⁵ and in the poem ‘George Robinson: Blues’, Robinson’s testimony, which significantly takes the form of a blues poem,⁶⁹⁶ ‘is centrally positioned ... to underscore the exemplary tradition of African American resistance to “white” authority’.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁹¹ Rukeyser, *Poetry*, 85.

⁶⁹² Lowney, *Literary Left*, 35.

⁶⁹³ See *ibid.*, 46–7.

⁶⁹⁴ *BOD*, 78.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ Lowney, *Literary Left*, 61.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 62.

A foregrounding of racial politics is also present in ‘WEST VIRGINIA’, where Rukeyser selects not the founding fathers—Washington, Franklin, Lincoln—but John Brown, the abolitionist who led an armed slave revolt, as her ‘precursor’ or prototype of American exceptionalism. We return, symbolically, to the site of Brown’s execution at the end of ‘THE BILL’,⁶⁹⁸ the penultimate poem in *Book of the Dead*:

Words on a monument.
Capotilane thunder. It cannot be enough.
The origin of storms is not in clouds,
our lightning strikes when the earth rises,
spillways free authentic power:
dead John Brown’s body walking from a tunnel
to break the armored and concluded mind.⁶⁹⁹

Here, as in ‘THE CORNFIELD’, we see that the principle of circular motion extends, on a thematic level, to the return of the dead. As Dayton argues, however, Rukeyser’s vision is ‘rigorously historical as opposed to mythical’.⁷⁰⁰ The circle of the epic is a closed loop that endlessly repeats; in *Book of the Dead*, ‘return’ is manifested not in the form of epic rebirth, which occurs in dead epic time, but *historical revolution*—which occurs within living historical time. John Brown returns from the underworld not to repeat the past, but ‘to break the armored and concluded mind’—to remake the present.

Shulman has observed that ‘Rukeyser shares with the other radical writers of the 1930s a principled hope that basic change is possible’.⁷⁰¹ In *Book of the Dead*, hope and change are both associated with the direction ‘west’. ‘WEST VIRGINIA’ begins with a vision: ‘They saw rivers flow west and hoped again’;⁷⁰² continues by way of ‘fast waters spilling west’;⁷⁰³ and ends with ‘Live country filling west’, ‘coming to life’.⁷⁰⁴ Later, in ‘THE DAM’, we see ‘the white surf filling west,/ the hope, fast water spilled where still pools fed’.⁷⁰⁵ This predilection for westward movement is a feature of the American genre of the road.⁷⁰⁶ It is also, as we have seen in Chapter Two of this thesis, a feature of Turnerian frontier mythology, in which the American frontier and the American West are considered coterminous.⁷⁰⁷ Yet, an examination of the poetic sequence shows that the source of Rukeyser’s hope lies not in old national narratives of progress, but in the living present of

⁶⁹⁸ *BOD*, 100.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁰⁰ Dayton, *Muriel*, 116.

⁷⁰¹ Shulman, *Political Art*, 186.

⁷⁰² *BOD*, 72.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁰⁶ See Hansen, ‘Space, Time’, 31–2; and Ireland, ‘American Highways’, 475.

⁷⁰⁷ See, e.g., Ireland, ‘American Highways’: ‘The road genre contains frequent use of myths and symbols of the American West or the frontier’ (475). See also Hansen, ‘Space, Time’, 19.

the nation's constituents. In 'THE DISEASE: AFTER-EFFECTS', a bill to 'prevent industrial silicosis'⁷⁰⁸ is scuttled: 'Bill blocked; investigation blocked.'⁷⁰⁹ The poem ends not on this inadequate response from politicians, but on a powerful response from the body politic: 'over the country, a million look from work,/ five hundred thousand stand.'⁷¹⁰

Book of the Dead uses the chronotope of the road to set its reader on a journey through the nation. This journey is enacted by way of a second-person address; *who* the 'you' is assumes vital importance. At the end of the second movement of 'THE BOOK OF THE DEAD', we arrive at a 'you' that is more explicitly defined:

You standing over gorges, surveyors and planners,
you workers and hope of countries, first among powers;
you who give peace and bodily repose,

opening landscapes by grace, giving the marvel lowlands
physical peace, flooding old battlefields
with general brilliance, who best love your lives;⁷¹¹

Here, we see that 'you' is an inclusive term, one that, importantly, extends beyond the constituents of any single nation: the 'you', occupying the space of the 'hero' in the poem, is 'you workers and hope of countries' (note the plural form). In the final movement, set once again with the third line of each tercet indented, we return to a 'historical' mode, though our orientation has altered. The movement begins:

These are our strength, who strike against history.
These whose corrupt cells owe their new styles of weakness
to our diseases;

these carrying light for safety on their foreheads
descended deeper for richer faults of ore,
drilling their death.

...

all these men cry their doom across the world,
meeting avoidable death, fight against madness,
find every war.

⁷⁰⁸ *BOD*, 98.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

Are known as strikers, soldiers, pioneers,
fight on all new frontiers, are set in solid
lines of defence.

Defense is sight; widen the lens and see
standing over the land myths of identity,
new signals, processes:⁷¹²

While Turnerian mythology is once again evoked in the words ‘pioneers’ and ‘frontiers’, Turnerian ideology has been superseded. In ‘WEST VIRGINIA’, ‘frontier defines two fighting halves’;⁷¹³ in ‘THE BOOK OF THE DEAD’, the singular colonial frontier has been swept away by multiple ‘new frontiers’, different not only in number, but also in kind. Significantly, we are encouraged to ‘widen the lens and see/ standing over the land myths of identity’, and these myths, in our widened vision, jostle against ‘new signals, processes’. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser writes: ‘Our age is opening now ... disclosing undefined possibilities, new meanings for multiplicity, and new meanings for unity.’⁷¹⁴ The imperative to *remake* in this final movement of ‘THE BOOK OF THE DEAD’ is evidenced by the prevalence of the word ‘new’, which reverberates in the phrases ‘new clouds’, ‘new signals’, ‘new perfection’, ‘new styles’, ‘new frontiers’, ‘new qualities’, ‘new uses’, ‘new processes’, and ‘new possession’.⁷¹⁵

The final five stanzas of ‘THE BOOK OF THE DEAD’, figured in the language of travel, and drawing us towards the end of our journey, read:

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene.
to photograph and to extend the voice,
to speak this meaning.

Voices to speak to us directly. As we move.
As we enrich, growing in larger motion,
this word, this power.

Down coasts of taken countries, mastery,
discovery at one hand, and at the other
frontiers and forests,

fanatic cruel legend at our back and
speeding ahead the red and open west,
and this our region,

⁷¹² Ibid., 104–5.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 72.

⁷¹⁴ Rukeyser, *Poetry*, 25.

⁷¹⁵ *BOD*, 103–5.

desire, field, beginning. Name and road,
communication to these many men,
as epilogue, seeds of unending love.⁷¹⁶

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser writes: 'If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future'.⁷¹⁷ Just as the meaning of a poetic phrase is altered by its placement in a different context, so, too, the frontier myth can do different service in a different time and place. In these final stanzas, as Shulman argues, 'Rukeyser puts to new uses the myth of discovery and conquest she had drawn on earlier ... Now, with the "fanatic cruel legend at our back," she looks ahead hopefully and taps into the positive energy of the American myth of virgin land, of westward expansion'.⁷¹⁸ This energy is directed not towards the building of 'nation'—that is, to the epic past—but its dismantling in favour of 'the red and open west', an openly communist and communal vision of the future. If we have been sent 'on the road', it is to move *past* history and myth into a *post*-national space beyond.

The formatting of the final stanza of the final poem—with all three tercets left-aligned—in its typographical contiguity not only with stanzas at the beginning of 'THE BOOK OF THE DEAD', but also the entire sequence—describes yet another circle. 'The luck of the book', Rukeyser states, 'is that we then may go back, to the top of the page, and begin to arrive again'.⁷¹⁹ If we return to the beginning of *Book of the Dead* and set out, once more, on 'THE ROAD', we see that the journey it enacts is one that occurs on multiple temporal planes:

These are the roads to take when you think of your country
and interested bring down the maps again,
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

reading the papers with morning inquiry.
Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light
chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights

indicate future of road, your wish pursuing
past the junction, the fork, the suburban station,
well-traveled six-lane highway planned for safety.⁷²⁰

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁷¹⁷ Rukeyser, *Poetry*, 21.

⁷¹⁸ Shulman, *Political Art*, 238.

⁷¹⁹ Rukeyser, *Poetry*, 171.

⁷²⁰ *BOD*, 71.

These lines are composed in present tense, but across the caesura between the second and third stanzas, there is a leap into a future space: ‘headlights/ indicate future of road, your wish pursuing/ past the junction, the fork, the suburban station’. At the beginning of the fifth stanza, the sequential refrain—‘These are the roads to take’—returns, reframed more explicitly as an action yet to occur: ‘These roads *will* take you into your own country’.⁷²¹ The journey that begins in ‘THE ROAD’ is also, and most importantly, a journey of the future, in which the imperative to travel falls on the reading ‘you’. Sascha Pöhlmann, who characterises Rukeyser’s work as ‘future-founding’, argues that ‘Rukeyser places great importance on poetry ... as a place of beginning from which one can proceed into the future’.⁷²² In *Book of the Dead* the ‘you’ of the poem is not only all the workers of the world, but also ‘you young, you who finishing the poem/ wish new perfection and begin to make’.⁷²³

Dayton gives this summation of Rukeyser’s achievement in *Book of the Dead*: ‘in her insistence on [a] radical hope ... Rukeyser produced a profoundly moving poem, a searching poem that resonates into both past and future’.⁷²⁴ We arrive, at the end of the sequence, with the ‘fanatic cruel legend at our back and/ speeding ahead the red and open west’, to a region that Rukeyser claims as ‘our[s]’, one of ‘desire, field, beginning’. In ‘Chronotope’, Bakhtin speaks of the vital and mutually constitutive relationship between the literary work and the world it represents, through the binding agent of the chronotope:

However forcefully the real and the represented world resist fusion ... they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction ... The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life.⁷²⁵

This vision is shared by Rukeyser, who places a book of spells and incantations—The Egyptian Book of the Dead—at the heart of her long-form poem. For Rukeyser, poetry is ‘[m]ore like a transformation than anything that I know’.⁷²⁶

In his essay ‘Circles’, American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: ‘Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that

⁷²¹ Ibid. (my emphasis).

⁷²² Sascha Pöhlmann, *Future-founding Poetry: Topographies of Beginnings from Whitman to the Twenty-first Century* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2015), 207.

⁷²³ BOD, 104.

⁷²⁴ Dayton, *Muriel*, 4.

⁷²⁵ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 254.

⁷²⁶ Rukeyser, ‘Craft’, 33.

there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning'.⁷²⁷ Unlike the circle of epic time, Emerson's circles are oriented towards the future: 'In the thought of to-morrow,' he writes, 'there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures, of the nation, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted'.⁷²⁸ In *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser sows 'seeds of unending love', a gesture to immortality clothed in the language of communion. In seeking to extend the poem beyond its textual bounds, to engender a movement that does not cease at the final word, but continues in the minds and actions of its readers, Rukeyser also sets in motion a radical hope. It is a hope that draws on Turnerian frontier mythology, while recasting its energy to suit present needs. It is a hope that relies on the belief that the relationship between a work and the world it represents is one of mutual influence; that a work of literature can, as Bakhtin too believed, exert a reciprocal effect on the world that creates it, and in doing so, 'afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it'.⁷²⁹

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Muriel Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road in *Book of the Dead* to engage with the 'post-frontier' space of 1930s America, in which the frontier still looms large, in part by engaging with the genre of the American road guide. In *Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road to produce an alternative guidebook to the nation, one in which poems function as meeting places where diverse voices and disparate time-spaces collide—destabilising the notion of a unified homogenous nation. The road is also the means by which Rukeyser takes us down into the extratemporal world of the epic, descending into the underworld in order to encounter the dead. Finally, Rukeyser uses the chronotope of the road to generate circular motion, which, in historical time, is characterised by constant change. She repurposes the energy and hope in Turner's account of the frontier, dismantling the bounds of 'nation' in favour of a common global community, and sends her readers beyond the edges of the poem, to journey on a revolutionary road into the future.

⁷²⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Circles', in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 173–84, 173.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

Conclusion: Frontiers and Futures

In this thesis I have used the Bakhtinian theory of chronotopes to undertake analyses of three twentieth-century long-form poems: Susan Howe's 'Articulation of Sound Forms in Time', Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. I have argued that in these long-form poems Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser seek to unsettle national mythologies and narratives of settlement, and that their acts of unsettlement centre on the use of particular chronotopes of American spaces: the forest, the desert and the road. The forests of New England in the seventeenth century, the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona in the late nineteenth century, and the roads that wind through the nation in the 1930s, are topographical landscape features that can be positioned in meaningful relation to a 'frontier' line, drawn across the nation by Frederick Jackson Turner in his influential treatise 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', as well as in relation to certain canonical American genres of literature—the captivity narrative, the Western and the genre of the road. As such, my application of chronotopic theory engages the representational, generic and narrative functions of the chronotope, as well as their necessary relation.

Edward Said has stated that 'representations—their production, circulation, history, and interpretation—are the very element of culture'.⁷³⁰ In this thesis, I have conducted an investigation into the manner in which chronotopes serve to assimilate 'real historical time and space'⁷³¹ into artistic time-space: in Bakhtin's formulation, '[o]ut of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)'.⁷³² What constitutes an 'actual chronotope'? The argument I have advanced with respect to American spaces is: a dominant landscape feature in a particular place and time. Yet the determination of what constitutes a 'dominant landscape feature' in, for instance, seventeenth-century New England, can only be derived from *representations* of such features, on the site of and contemporaneous with that particular place and time. As Timo Müller argues:

there is at least an implication ... that chronotopes are *always* transmitted via texts. It is difficult to imagine ... how a particular set of time-space parameters could be disseminated in the collective imagination were it not for some kind of textual mediation.⁷³³

Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope seeks to give shape to a region of irresolvable uncertainty: the point at which the 'real' enters the 'imagined', and vice versa. What

⁷³⁰ Said, *Imperialism*, 70.

⁷³¹ Bakhtin, 'Chronotope', 84.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 253.

⁷³³ Müller, 'Literary Chronotopes', 594.

applications of the theory highlight—and have highlighted in this thesis—is the persistent aporia in the place of the ‘real’, encountered in any study that seeks to read a literary text alongside its contexts. My discussion of the chronotope of the desert in Chapter Two, in which I argue that the chronotope functions as a means by which to represent *absent presence*, can be seen, in this respect, as axiomatic. The chronotope—a unit of literary time-space—is always implicated in the absence of real time-spaces that have existed in the historical world. In the literary text, these real time-spaces undergo a necessary transmutation and become something other: the True West morphs into the Wild West. The chronotope is therefore a figure haunted by that which, in the process of incorporating and communicating, it displaces and replaces.

Winfried Fluck speculates on the nature of literary representations: ‘the whole point of their existence is that they do not simply reproduce something that is already there but that they redefine (and thereby recreate) it in the act of representation’.⁷³⁴ This ability of literature to not only represent, but in representing *produce*, space is recognised as a feature of the chronotope by Bakhtin, who writes, ‘[t]he work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life’.⁷³⁵ To focus on representation is to posit a process with a discernible end point—reached once the ‘real world’ has successfully entered the literary one. To focus on production is to envision a chain of activity and mutual influence that continues indefinitely: one in which not only the author, but also the reader (and critic)—through acts of interpretation—are actively engaged as joint producers.

If the chronotope—itself an ideologically neutral device—is a unit of *production* then, as I have argued in this thesis, it can also be employed to *contest* the very ideologies it has been used to serve elsewhere. The centrality of the chronotope of the forest, for instance, to the early frontier space in Turner’s narrative of national origins and the New England captivity narrative, makes it the ideal tool of subversion in works like ‘Articulation’, which seek to unsettle such narratives. The chronotope, in other words, is the literary equivalent of a double agent. In this manner, the chronotope is revealed to be not only an epistemological device—a means by which we *know* the world—but also an ethical one—a means by which we *respond* to it.⁷³⁶ The chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road, which connect textual space to actual (historical) space, as well as generic to mythic space, are the means by which Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser not only represent particular American spaces, but also work to actively *intervene* in their production—and thereby in the production and dissemination of national myths.

⁷³⁴ Fluck, ‘Imaginary Space’, 25.

⁷³⁵ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 254.

⁷³⁶ Liisa Steinby argues for an interpretation of the chronotope as an ethical *rather than* epistemological device (‘Acting Subject’, xx).

I have characterised the myth of the American frontier as the ghost in the machine of American history; one that haunts not only the American spaces in my primary texts, but also the field of American Studies—from New Western History to more recent extensions of the Myth and Symbol School. In ‘Chronotope’, Bakhtin writes of the distinction between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ chronotopes, stating that each major chronotope ‘can include within it an unlimited number of minor chronotopes’.⁷³⁷ In this study into American spaces, it could be said that the frontier has emerged as a master chronotope, composed, at least in part, by the minor chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road. Eric Heyne has argued that ‘the frontier has meant both the border one crossed to reach new places and the places themselves’.⁷³⁸ To figure the American frontier as a chronotope is to broaden its conception out from Turner’s two-dimensional line to a three- or (if we include time) four-dimensional space. A study into the nature of such a chronotope may present itself as a research trajectory of the future. For the present, I’d like to make some remarks about the temporalities Turner’s frontier myth invites us to consider. In referring to Turner’s thesis as a ‘myth’, it’s easy to forget that it is relatively young in the pantheon of myths. Delivered as an address in 1893, this national origin story is a twentieth-century myth; it haunts the stories told about America in the twentieth century across a variety of disciplines and in a number of genres. Predicated on the closing of pre-twentieth-century America into what Bakhtin would characterise as epic time, it seals off the pre-twentieth century American past, we might say, in order for the American twentieth century to begin.

The chronological structure of this thesis, arranged according to the *represented* time-spaces of my primary texts, is inverse to that of the time-spaces of *representation* (that is, production and publication) of these texts (in the 1980s, 1970s and 1930s, respectively). As a consequence, a certain convergence can be discerned. The distances between real and represented time-spaces decrease as we progress from chapter to chapter, as do the distances between each text and the publication of Turner’s frontier thesis: in Howe’s case, almost a century has passed; in Rukeyser’s, a mere thirty years. Richard Slotkin makes a distinction between the makers of primary myths (such as Turner) and ‘consummatory myth-makers’ (such as Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser):

the consummatory myth-maker ... has the benefit of historical knowledge and can look back over a span of time in which myths have developed and decayed, have shaped and been shaped by human and national history ... the consummatory myth-maker has a degree of critical distance from his material and his works which does not exist for the mystic of the primary myth⁷³⁹

⁷³⁷ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 252.

⁷³⁸ Eric Heyne, ‘The Lasting Frontier: Reinventing America’, in *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the American Frontier*, ed. Eric Heyne (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 3–18, 6.

⁷³⁹ Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 13.

What we witness, through the small window provided by these three long-form poems of the twentieth century, is the evolution of the frontier myth itself: its metamorphosis, over time, from ‘fact’ to ‘myth’. Rukeyser, writing in the 1930s, at a time when Turner’s thesis was considered ‘fact’, evinces a less discernible critical eye than Howe or Ondaatje, for whom greater distances in time and space grant greater perspective. For the authors of the long-form poems in this study, the myth of the frontier is a force to be reckoned with, not because it speaks a truth about the past, but because it reveals itself to be an active influence in shaping the present. As Slotkin argues, ‘[w]e resort to our myths not merely to evade the discontents of our historical moment, but to find something—a precedent, a bit of wisdom, a new perspective—that will allow us to imagine a way of coping with and even transforming the present’.⁷⁴⁰ In this thesis, I have shown how Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser each take a specific American space, and, by disrupting narrative and sequence—in particular troubling the notions of beginnings and endings—open these spaces out to the continuous present, showing that the past—which is inevitably a textual or documentary artefact—is always undergoing construction. In this way, they use narrative to work *counter* to epic narrative forms, in which, in Bakhtin’s terms, the past is a closed circle, separated from the present by epic distance.

Slotkin provides this blunt summation of colonial American history: ‘The United States was ... an Indian-killing and slaveholding power, with an ideological commitment to removing all alien races from the path of progress’.⁷⁴¹ In seeking to unsettle national narratives of settlement through unsettling national spaces, Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser make clear that the story of a nation is also the story of a *haunting*. If American spaces are haunted by the still-present ghost of the American frontier, they are doubly haunted by what the frontier has suppressed (and repressed)—namely, the displacement and dispossession of all those considered ‘other’. These ‘others’ may be buried, but do not disappear. In their representation, production and contestation of American spaces, Howe, Ondaatje and Rukeyser show that American spaces are defined as much by what is made invisible as what is visible. They posit a relationship of contiguity between an aesthetics of unsettlement and Freud’s concept of the uncanny, and create textual spaces characterised by silences and gaps, through which buried voices find ways to return. In these long-form poems—which contest not only the nature and composition of American spaces, but also the boundaries between genres and forms—these authors bequeath us provocations in the present; provocations that ask us to revision the past so as to envision and move towards new futures.

⁷⁴⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 88.

⁷⁴¹ Slotkin, *Environment*, 179.

Bridging Statement: The Significance of the Hotel in American History and Culture

In the creative component of this thesis, I present a collection of poetic narrative sequences titled 'Hotel America', which takes as its subject the chronotope of the hotel in American history and culture. I use the term 'hotel' as a generic category of architecture that includes hotels, motels, and other variants such as inns. Each sequence is set within a real hotel, from geographically and historically diverse places and times within America; with each new 'destination' revealed in the progression from sequence to sequence (I therefore do not include a contents page). Each sequence references a historical event—the arrest of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955; the flooding of the Salton Sea, California, in the late 1970s; the rise of the United Sciences of America pyramid scheme in 1986; the fatal shooting of a Japanese exchange student in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1992; and the presidential election in 2016—though these events are not my primary focus. Through this creative work, I extend upon my analyses of the chronotopes of the forest, the desert and the road in the critical dissertation of this thesis, to explore the ways in which the chronotope of the hotel has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the composition of American spaces.

In *The American Scene*, American novelist Henry James famously declared, 'one is verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just *be* the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself'.⁷⁴² The legendary Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, of which James was speaking, is an instance of a particular kind of hotel establishment—the 'grand hotel', which historian Molly Berger claims as an American, rather than European, invention.⁷⁴³ The era of the grand hotel in America, Berger writes, 'ends neatly in 1929, with the juggernaut of the Depression';⁷⁴⁴ its decline is paralleled by the ascendancy of another wholly American creation: the roadside motel. John Jakle, Keith Sculle and Jefferson Rogers, in their study of the motel, trace the first use of the term—'a contraction of *motor* and *hotel*, with *motor hotel* the implied full form'⁷⁴⁵—to San Luis Obispo, California, in 1926.⁷⁴⁶ A product of 'the automobile's adoption as America's preferred mode of transportation',⁷⁴⁷ the motel in its infancy occupied a liminal space that Jakle, Sculle and Rogers characterise as a form of frontier—'if one thinks of the automobile roadside as a frontier, an unsettled land'.⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴² James, *The American Scene*, 102 (original emphasis).

⁷⁴³ Molly W. Berger, *Hotel Dreams: Luxury, Technology, and Urban Ambition in America, 1829–1929* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 5.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 257. This was the year of the closure of the Waldorf-Astoria.

⁷⁴⁵ John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 18.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

While the grand hotel and the roadside motel initially represented two distinct genres of American architecture, over the course of the twentieth century this distinction began to fade: as Jakle, Sculle and Rogers note, in response to consumer demand hotels became more motel-like and motels more hotel-like.⁷⁴⁹ This levelling effect reflects a general change in the nature of American spaces over this period. With its associations with travel and the hyperspeed pace of modern life, the modern and contemporary hotel has been termed a ‘non-place’ by spatial theorist Marc Augé—a space ‘of circulation, consumption and communication’,⁷⁵⁰ a product of what he terms ‘supermodernity’.⁷⁵¹ Augé’s *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, first published a century after Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, illuminates a new kind of space, one characterised by ‘the erasure of frontiers’.⁷⁵² The non-place is defined in direct opposition to ‘anthropological place’, where space is situated in a network of meaningful relations: ‘If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.’⁷⁵³ Non-places, Augé maintains ‘are the real measure of our time’.⁷⁵⁴

In ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, Mikhail Bakhtin identified a number of chronotopes for further study, including the chronotope of the road⁷⁵⁵ and the chronotope of the parlour or salon.⁷⁵⁶ The chronotope of the hotel—often figured as a ‘home away from home’⁷⁵⁷—combines characteristics of both. As a public space of transit it is a ‘place where encounters occur’;⁷⁵⁸ as a quasi-domestic space, it is also a place ‘where *dialogues* happen’;⁷⁵⁹ and it is in the *intersection* where the chronotope of the hotel emerges as a unique hybrid. Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope is antithetical to Augé’s definition of the non-place, but as Augé concedes, neither places nor non-places ever exist in ‘pure form’.⁷⁶⁰ Non-places, in other words, are also to some degree ‘places of identity, of relations and of history’.⁷⁶¹ My interest here is to explore the ways in which the American hotel is *both* place *and* non-place, and where and how the shift may occur.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁵⁰ Augé, *Non-places*, viii.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁵² Ibid., xii.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁷⁵⁵ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 243–5.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., 246–7.

⁷⁵⁷ See, e.g., Jakle, Sculle and Rogers, *Motel*, 56.

⁷⁵⁸ Bakhtin, ‘Chronotope’, 246.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid. (original emphasis).

⁷⁶⁰ Augé, *Non-places*, 64.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 43.

Part Two: 'Hotel America'

1979, The Palms Motel

Don't climb on that, he says, you'll fall and who knows where the nearest hospital is. I step away from the steel playground equipment, orange with rust and too hot to touch anyway, and slouch back to the car. I leave you for five minutes, he says, slamming the door. He throws the soft plastic bag into the back, and a Pepsi and two sticks of jerky spill across the seat. What's the matter with you, he says, you're too old for that. I don't reply because I'm busy watching flies hover around the half-eaten cheese sandwich on the dash. The sandwich is pretty beat and the flies are having a good time scoping it out. Cory, he says, Stop staring into the blue yonder and get the map out. We've got a ways to go. He uses the voice he has when he's about to hit something. I pull the map out from the glovebox. There are multicoloured lines snaking everywhere—they promise to go any place you might want, but the more you follow them round, the more it starts to feel like they'll end up nowhere. Cory, he says, gravel in his throat. Okay Walt, I say, I know where we are. Get back on the interstate. He steps on the pedal and we pull out into the stream of traffic heading east.

This was the twenty-fourth of July. If I think back three days I hear doors slamming and them yelling, and I can make out what they're saying, even with my headphones on, even with dead Jim Morrison in my ears. You're a bum, she yells, You're a lousy good for nothing bum. You come in here, you come into *my* house, and you ruin my fun. All I want is to have some fun on my days off. What's so wrong with that? Huh? What's so wrong? Who earns the living round here anyway? You don't, that's for sure. You just sit there on that couch all day, you lousy good for nothing. If *I* were her, I would have left you, too. *I would have left sooner.* She stops there, but it's too late. I hear his anger, even before he does it, even before the sound. And then he's at my door and hurling my duffle bag at me, yanking my clothes out of the closet in great bunches. Get up, Cory, he says, we're leaving. His voice is shaking, with anger or grief, and his hand, when he steadies himself against the door frame, is pressed so hard it goes white. On the way out, I see her in the corridor, sullen and weeping, with a bruise already glowering up through the pale of her cheek, a bottle of Kentucky by her side. See you, Esther, I say, but her eyes are black and running with cheap mascara and she doesn't look up.

At first we weren't going anywhere, not anywhere I could tell. Walt kept getting on one highway and then changing his mind and getting on another. I kept my mouth shut, I knew better than to ask dumb questions. At one point I thought maybe he was taking us to Bill and Anne's, but we hadn't seen them in years—probably they wouldn't even

recognise us now—and we were only on the I-15 for about twenty minutes before he took the exit to Grantville. At the first gas station that loomed up he pulled over and went for a long walk. It was late by then and the sun was melting behind a billboard with somebody's big smiling mouth plastered all over it, the teeth all white and sparkling. I sat for a while making leery faces at the window, and then it was dark and all the cars going by were black masses pressed between two sets of lights—white coming, red going. When Walt got back he was breathing normally again, but my stomach was making noises and that seemed to set something off behind his eyes. It's okay, he said, I've got a plan. He walked into the gas station and came out with a map and two stale cheese sandwiches. You're navigating, he said.

When Walt met Alison they were only a few years older than me. She'd just moved to National City with her family, which consisted of Bill and Anne and her sister Laurie, who was older and wilder and always had one foot already out the door. Laurie wore cut-offs and smoked Camel cigarettes and knew all the seniors who had cars and places to go on Friday nights. It was summer then, too, and Alison had a job at the local grocery store, ringing up the till. Walt would walk past and see her standing there, staring off into the distance when nobody else was around, long blonde hair drifting down past her shoulders, and I guess something happened to him because pretty soon he was going in and buying things he didn't need. I don't know what he was like then—there aren't so many pictures of Walt at that age and there's nobody around now who knew him well. I heard all this from Anne, whose memory maybe isn't so reliable, not since she fell from that stool trying to rehang her living room curtains. They were real ugly curtains—some kind of large purple flowers on a grey background—and I thought it was a shame she knocked herself out hanging them up in her living room, but that's life. I imagine the version of Walt that Alison met was nicer. I imagine he smiled more and broke things less. Anyhow, it beats me why two people end up together. Maybe when she was looking across the counter at Walt she didn't really see him. Maybe, even if she did, she never looked hard enough to realise how wrong they were for each other. Sometimes I think about it—Walt and Alison in the grocery store. Just kids, thinking they were in love. Not knowing how things would turn out. If I was the owner of the grocery store I would have told Walt to scram, and that would have been that.

Walt unfolds the map, which already has breadcrumbs and grease marks all over it, and the state of California spreads out on the dash. It's like staring at a sunset, with big splodges of oranges and yellows and reds to show where the deserts and cities and roads are. I try to remember what Miss Deloitte said about California in geography class—interesting facts that maybe you would get asked on *Jeopardy!* (before it got cancelled)—but all I can think about is the fact that Miss Deloitte was a full-grown woman who wore braces on her teeth, and how after lunch there'd always be a bit of parsley or tomato stuck in between the little metal squares or under the wires. Walt scans the map, his eyeballs darting around like pale fishes. Here, he says, pointing to a blue blob in the

middle of a larger blob of yellow. I have to bend my head sideways to read the label. The Salton Sea, I say, what's that? That's a place your mother and I used to go in the summer, before you were born, says Walt. I look out the window at nothing in particular. He waits a while, and I can tell he's staring at me so I say, What's there to see? I've got a plan, he said. She's going to meet us. Who, I ask, but he's already putting the car into reverse and the engine drowns me out like I'm no louder than a mouse.

We take our time. He says it's because he hasn't had a holiday in years. Been living in California my whole life, he says, and haven't seen hardly any of it. So I sit in the passenger seat of our old Torino, which is really Bill's old Torino that he gave to us out of kindness and maybe also pity, and watch the scenery go by. Pretty soon, with the windows down and the radio on, and the sun shining on the tops of our heads and our bare arms, it starts to feel like we really *are* on holiday. In Cuyamaca there are Jeffrey pines, sugar pines, yellow pines, white firs and incense cedars. They stand with their arms reaching up to the sky. Sometimes the road winds parallel to the Sweetwater, which runs green here, so far from the mountains; sometimes it crosses the river, then gets lost among the trees. If I half close my eyes I can see the water out there like a silver whip, curling along in bright flashes. Out the window my hand catches it as it twists and jumps through the trees.

At Julian, we stop to stretch our legs and fill up on gas, but the place seems lively so we linger a while. There are signs all over town about the gold rush and prospectors arriving a hundred years ago to try their luck. The signs are brown, with white writing in an old-timey font, and some of them have pictures that are blurry and faded. It's summer break, so there are lots of little kids running around with their parents. Everybody seems relaxed and happy, and when we pass an ice-cream store on Main, Walt even offers to buy me a shake. Inside, the queue is long, but the walls are mint green and there's the heady scent of candy to keep you occupied. When we finally get to the front, I take my time reading all the little labels fixed to the vats to make sure I get the best flavour. The man behind the counter has hairy arms and is wearing a candy-striped apron. A banana malt please, I say. And he says, Sure kid, coming right up. Walt doesn't get anything for himself, but I let him take a few sips of mine: it's thick and gloopy and settles in my stomach like sweet mud. Outside, we go back to wandering the streets and I stare at all the sepia-toned faces of the people on the brown signs and think: what a bunch of crazies—hiking halfway across the world to a place they'd never seen, not knowing if they'd ever get home. Not that anybody I knew stayed in one spot for long. Alison had moved to National City from somewhere out east—South Dakota or Wyoming, or some such place. Horse country is what Bill called it, though you could tell he missed being there. Laurie had moved back the minute she quit school, which wasn't too long after they arrived. I never heard how her life turned out—she and Alison weren't close. They didn't even look similar. Sometimes I wondered if they were really sisters, but when I asked Anne once she just told me to mind my own business and go take out the trash.

Late in the afternoon, Walt falls into a long conversation with the guide at the visitor centre, who is older than me, but younger than Walt. She wears her hair in a high ponytail and twirls it in her fingers. Her dad owns the hardware store in Julian, she says, and she helps out there on her days off. You can ask me anything you like about drill bits, she says, I know all there is to know and then some. The nails on her right hand are painted pink and her ponytail is bright red. I wonder if her hair will fall off soon from being twirled so much. The guide is laughing and laughing, so I do a few laps of the visitor centre to stave off boredom. The centre is shaped like a small oblong and there's an interactive display down the back: a kid with long, messy hair keeps hitting a large blue button on the wall. When he does a voice says, Howdy! This here's *gold* country! And lights flash on a mounted sign that says 'GOLD!' After the eighth time, a young woman sidles over and leads the kid away by the hand. Benny, she says, you're making mommy's head hurt. Back at the front I droop over the counter and start lining the souvenir erasers up in a row, but Walt and the guide both ignore me until someone in a pickup outside honks. The guide jumps about a mile and says, That's my ride. And I can tell, when we finally leave, that she's sorry to see us go. When Walt is in a good mood he can charm a snake or a bird or any animal you might want to tame.

When we reach Scissors Crossing the next day, the sun has disappeared and Walt has soured. He keeps switching radio stations and eventually we sit in edgy silence as the odometer clocks the miles. We pull over at a large gas station, and I climb out and wander over to some play equipment. It looks fine from a distance, but up close is a heap of rusted metal. When Walt gets back, he's a thundercloud. What's the matter with you, he says, you're too old for that. And I watch the flies and read the map and say, Okay Walt—and we pull out into the stream of traffic heading east.

The colour is the first thing you notice: the hot blue of a summer sky. We'd rounded a bend on the 111 and the thing had appeared as if by magic—a line of glowing water on the horizon. Walt's spirits pick up again quick smart. There it is, Cory, he says, the Salton Sea. He sounds as if he put it there himself. I squint, but there's hardly anything to see yet. As we get closer, dots start moving along the surface like tiny white ants: it's not until some of them rise into the air that I realise they're birds.

We hit the outskirts of town in the afternoon, when the heat of the day is most punishing. It's been getting hotter the further east we go and sweat is dripping down my neck like water from a leaky faucet. I'm dying for a soda, but Walt's in a hurry now and not inclined to pull over. Where the speed limit slows there's a sign that says 'Welcome to Salton City'—the kind you see on postcards, with friendly palm trees bending over the letters—and then a few houses appear, and cars parked on wide, dusty lawns. The houses

are made of timber and mostly painted white, though the paint is peeling. We drive on, and the houses start looking even crummier. Some of the cars are rusted, too, and there's bits of trash stuck to the fences. In town the buildings are spaced closer together, but they're all in the same state or worse. Walt slows down and the Torino cruises past shops with their windows barred and doors locked. On one corner is a UPS store that looks emptied of its envelopes and stamps and boxes. I start to get this creepy feeling. Walt, I say, where is everybody? He keeps driving. Walt, I say again. I don't know, Cory, he says. Ahead, at the end of the main street, the sea suddenly looms. When we get there, it's like we've wandered into an aviary: gulls and terns and white pelicans and more. There's so many birds flapping about the air is bursting with trills and screeches. We turn and follow the curve of the shore for another fifteen minutes, and just when I'm about to ask Walt to pull over because I need to pee, a building appears from behind a withered-looking stand of palm trees. The sign out front reads 'The Palms Motel'. There's a long, low roof, a faded blue balcony, and some tennis courts that have weeds growing up through them. Walt hits the brakes and we idle in the middle of the road for a while. Hey Walt, I say eventually, why are we stopping. This is it, he says, this is where we're staying. I look over at the weeds climbing up over everything and say, Are you sure? I just said so didn't I?, says Walt, but I can tell he's nervous, too. He eases the car back into gear and turns down the drive. The red neon sign next to the office is lit up and buzzing gently, which is good news I guess. The parking lot only has two other cars in it and they look more worn out than the Torino. We peel ourselves out of our seats and edge across the cracked concrete.

Inside there's nobody around, but a small desk fan is whirring and Springsteen is singing from a hoarse and busted radio. I check the temperature gauge above the desk, plastic and shaped like a palm tree, and it says 100 degrees. Hello? says Walt, Anybody here? Something heavy crashes to the ground near the back of the room and then a man appears. Jesus, he says, you scared me. Hi, says Walt. Hi, says the man, how about this heat. I mean, it's pretty hot here on a regular day, but this is something else. I didn't know if you were open, Walt says, sounding relieved. The man has a thin layer of hair stretched across the top of his head. His shirt looks ironed, though there are two dark patches beneath his arms that almost meet across his chest. Oh we're open, it's just that business is slow, you know, with the way things have been. What do you mean? says Walt, What happened? The man peers at Walt and blinks a few times. I said what happened? says Walt a little louder, We passed through Salton City and everything was closed and empty. Where is everybody? Don't you watch the news? says the man. No, says Walt. The man blinks again, but it's true, Walt doesn't watch the news. Well, there was all the flooding, the man says finally, the whole town's pretty much wiped. It sure looks dead, I say. Walt looks at me and the man looks at me and neither of them seem very happy. You got a pretty observant young fella there, says the man. I'm Paul. He extends a surprisingly small, but damp, hand and Walt takes it unwillingly. Walt, says Walt. He tips his head in my direction. This is Cory. Hi Cory, says Paul. Either of you been to Salton before? I have, says Walt, before Cory was born. It used to be mad with people. Paul shakes his head. Those were the days, he says, you couldn't swing a cat.

Now ... he gestures to the mostly empty lot. Then he squints at the Torino. You fellas here to stay? he asks, Or just passing through? On the radio Springsteen fades out and Linda Ronstadt takes over. *We're going back some day, come what may, to Blue Bayou.* Walt hesitates before he replies. We're staying, he says, we're here to meet somebody. Paul is already settled behind the desk and pulls out what I guess must pass for a register. What kind of room you after? he asks. Twin? Family? Walt hesitates, then says, Twin, the cheapest you've got. Okay, says Paul, and his delicate hand hovers in the air before plucking a key from the wall. There are a lot of keys on the wall; some of them look rusted in place. I'll give you room 39, Paul says, the penthouse. Walt's jaw opens slightly and Paul says, I'm joking, it's a regular twin. It's got a nice view of the sea, though. How long you staying for? A few days maybe, says Walt, and my ears swivel in their beds. Okay, says Paul and gestures again to the parking lot. You can see I'm in a terrible hurry for the space. Har har har. When he laughs the wiry hairs in his nostrils dart in and out. Can I ask you to fill out this form? Walt takes the clipboard and pen, which has a palm-tree-shaped lid, and while he's writing, I take a good look around. There are photographs stuck to the walls, some of them of Paul when he had more hair, holding fish of different sizes, upside-down and gaping sightlessly at the ground. There are pictures of tow-headed kids bobbing about in a kidney-shaped swimming pool, women with tanned legs playing tennis in all-white outfits, boats and ice-cream trucks and beach umbrellas. Paul catches my gaze and says, You're looking at some bona fide history there, Cory. There's a lot of people come through here over the years. A lot of people with good memories. His eyes go a little glassy and sad. This used to be the place where good memories were made, he says. I glance over at Walt and his eyes are also sad and fixed on the wall, though he's focusing somewhere beyond it. Those were the days, he says, though not to Paul and not to me either.

The room is on the top floor, which is better than it sounds because there are only two floors. It's poky and dark, there's dust piled up over everything, and the air is stale. It feels like nobody has been in there for a hundred years. Walt hands me my duffel and sits heavily on the bed closest to the door. It creaks and sags a little under him. *How* long are we staying? I say. You heard me, he says, a few days; you'd better unpack your things. Okay, I say. I open the wardrobe and stare at the handful of skinny wire hangers inside. A few of them are still in the usual shape, but others are bent at odd angles. Walt is looking out the window at the sea. Hey, Walt, I say. Hey what, he says. What about Esther, I say. He doesn't move. What about her, he says finally. Shouldn't we call her or something? I say, Won't she be worried about where we are? Cory, he says, forget about Esther. But she loves you, I say, Don't you love her, too? Outside, a tired palm tree leans away from the sun. Cory, he says, don't talk about things you don't understand. Esther's nothing special to me, she was just someone to pass the time, that's all. He says it like he means it, and I get angry then, thinking about how she took us in after Alison left, how she paid for everything and cooked and cleaned, and dragged Walt out of raging hell until he was almost like a normal person again. How she never used to drink so much until he started breaking things. I kick the side of the bed and it makes a dull, thudding sound.

Don't be such a baby, says Walt, what would your mother think? She's not here, I say. But she might be, he says, she might walk through that door any minute. No, I say, she won't. Oh yeah? he says, what makes you so sure? Because she *hates* you, I say. Walt gets up then, real quick, but I'm faster than him and out the door before his arm swings round.

It doesn't take long to reach the sea. There are fewer birds here than close to town, but they still make an awful racket. As well as birds, there's bits of plastic—bottle caps and straws and some sodden bags—bobbing this way and that on the water. They look like strange new marine animals, in shades of orange and fluorescent yellow. There's also a smell I didn't notice before—like something rotting. I turn around, half expecting Walt to come crashing down from the motel, but the building is still and quiet. Now that I'm out here, I can't go back, at least not for a while. I pace a bit along the shore and think about my options. None of them are good. I think about hitching a ride back to San Diego, but I haven't seen a single other car on the roads since we got here. I think about asking Paul to use the office phone so I can call Bill and Anne, but I don't remember their number and there must be a million Bills and Annes in the phone book. I even think about making my way to South Dakota or Wyoming to look up my aunt Laurie, but I know it's as crazy an idea as it sounds. There's no helping it, I think, I'm stuck with Walt. By now the smell, whatever it is, is really getting to me. I pinch my nose for as long as I can, but somehow it feels worse to be gulping the air through my mouth, so I give up and head back to the motel.

The door is wide open and Walt is still sitting on the bed: he seems to have calmed down, though, because when I tiptoe in he just looks up with his pale eyes and doesn't say anything. Hey Walt, I say, I'm hungry. Can we go eat? He looks at me a while longer and then picks up the keys and a Xeroxed map from the table. We climb into the car. It's so hot my lungs feel like they're burning up for a good five minutes. The map has a few sights and landmarks marked on it with arrows, and someone has circled a rectangle to the north of the motel and written 'Store (for food)' in thick red pen. On the way there, we pass a sign that says 'World Famous International Banana Museum'. I think of my banana malt in Julian and try not to salivate. Beneath the sign for the museum is another that says 'BAIT ICE BEER'. The parking lot is empty and the building looks closed, and neither of us feels like stopping anyway. Ten minutes down the road, we find the Salton City General Store. From the outside it looks shut, like everything else, but when Walt pushes against the front door, it swings open. A tinny bell rings. Inside there's a ceiling fan spinning lazily and a chocolate Labrador lying across the entrance to the pasta aisle. There are only three aisles and one of them seems to be entirely filled with pasta. Apart from the Labrador, there's nobody around. Hello? says Walt. A wet cough erupts from the newspaper stand near the front, and an old man materialises in a worn cane chair. Hello, he says, getting up so slowly I'm worried he won't make it. What can I do for you? We were just wondering, says Walt, if you sold meals? The man shuffles towards the

back of the store and motions for us to follow. In the corner is a bain-marie counter, with a few shrivelled slices of pie and some hot dogs floating in what looks to be tepid water. Is there another place to eat around here? Walt asks. Sure, the old man says, there's the Parker Restaurant over at Bombay Beach. He looks us up and down. Bit pricier, though, he says. Walt glances at me and I shrug. We'll take one slice of pie and one hot dog, he says. The old man manoeuvres around to the other side of the counter and picks up a pair of tongs with a spotty hand. He files the hot dog into a squashed, pre-cut roll, and then places it into a large paper bag. Okay if they go together? he asks. Sure, says Walt, that's fine. The old man edges a spatula under a slice of pie and then transfers it to the bag. That'll be three dollars, he says, wheezing a little. Walt gives him the money and takes the bag. You from out of town? the man asks. Yeah, says Walt. Where from? San Diego, says Walt, but I grew up in National City. Oh, says the man. By now we're back up the front and he leans down to pat the Labrador. What brings you to Salton, he says. I used to come here with my wife, says Walt, More than ten years ago. The old man straightens up and looks at him with interest. Is that so, he says. I've lived here my whole life, he says. Now it's just me and Jem. The dog wags its tail, but otherwise appears dead. Me and Jem and the birds, he says. We're staying at the Palms, says Walt. The manager there told us about some floods passing through? Oh yeah, says the old man, they were some floods alright. One day the sky just opened up and it rained and rained and rained. You had to ride a boat to get from place to place. Then the shops starting closing and everybody moved out. Some folks didn't even stay long enough to sell their land; they just packed everything and sailed off. He paused to hack up a wad of grey mucus. Pardon me, he said. That was two years ago, and it hasn't rained since. Now the sea's receding, getting saltier and saltier. That's why there's all them fish—they ain't used to the salinity. At the word 'fish', Jem's tail thumps twice. What fish? Walt asks. Have you been down to the beach yet? says the old man. No, says Walt. I have, I say. The man turns to me and I can see a milky film over his eyes. Well young man, he says, did you look down? No, I say. Go back, he says, and take a good look.

Walt and I carry what passes for our meal over to the shore. When we get there I look down and almost run straight back to the car because what I thought was white sand is actually bones. Millions of fish skeletons packed in together and bleached to a blinding white. What's scary is you can see their mouths with all their sharp, tiny teeth, and the round, empty sockets where their eyes used to be. Keep it together, Cory, Walt says, but he looks rattled, too. What's that smell, he says. It must be the fish, I say, I smelled it before. We go back to the car and eat our food in silence. I steal a glance over at Walt. Some holiday this has cracked up to be.

On the way back to the motel, we take a different route, through some of the streets further back from the shore, and see more signs of decay: a soft armchair in the middle of a flat white plain, its springs exposed; a pink and purple boat half-sunk into the ground with its nose pointing up; cars and trailers encrusted with salt and rusted away to

scrap. The more I see the crazier the whole place seems. Walt is off in his own world and I wonder if he's thinking about the same things, or if he's looking out at all of this, but not seeing it. At night, in the room, we try the TV and miraculously it works, though there are only two stations with a decent signal, and otherwise a whole lot of static. One of the stations is broadcasting a sappy movie, so we switch to the other one, which is playing a murder mystery set in a small town. We come in partway through, and neither of us knows what's going on. At some point I begin to drift off, and when I open my eyes again I'm watching the two of us, Walt and I, on screen. We're walking through the town and it's the middle of the night, and the moon is full and round and has a face on it with rows of tiny sharp teeth. The moon is smiling and Linda Ronstadt is on the radio again, and there's something coming up behind us. And I know that its face, even though it's behind us, is round and full and smiling.

The next day is even hotter, though it doesn't seem possible. I wake up in a sweat because the air conditioner stopped working during the night. My sheets are soaked through. I try the shower, but after an initial gust of rusty water nothing comes out. I try the sink and the same thing happens. Walt is sleeping like a piece of furniture, so I put on my shoes and walk down to the office. When I pass the lot, there's one less car—somebody must have left in the night or early in the morning. In the office the radio is still playing, but it's nothing I know. Hello? I say. Hello Corey, says Paul, right behind me. I yell. Sorry, he says. He's wearing what looks like the same shirt as yesterday, but his hair is parted the other way over his head. Is everything okay, he says, with the room? Actually, I say, the water's off. Paul nods slowly. Yes, he says, that's not good. I'll have someone see to it today. Okay, I say, and head towards the door. Only, he says, it might not be today. There's only one plumber left in town. He looks out the window. Going to be another scorcher, he says.

Walt sleeps in till ten and by the time he gets up I'm so hungry I can eat a horse. We drive out to the store again, and there's just pie and hot dogs like yesterday, but the old man isn't there. Even Jem has disappeared, though the doors are open and the ceiling fan is spinning. I walk up and down the aisles while we wait, and one of them has a stack of faded greeting cards poking out from a rotating display. There are Christmas cards and Easter cards and 'Sorry for your loss' cards. One of them says 'Have a Nice Cruise!' and there's a picture of a boat on it, with tiny multi-coloured people waving from the deck. We wait for a full fifteen minutes, and eventually Walt goes round the bain-marie himself, takes two hot dogs, and leaves three dollars on the counter. When we get back to the motel, the other car has gone and there's no-one in the office. In the room, the water is still off. Great, says Walt. And then we remember there's supposed to be a pool. We leave the room with some scratchy towels and when we get to the pool, it's just a kidney-shaped hole in the ground, with couch grass needling up through the tiles.

Do you remember what she was like? he asks. We're sitting on the balcony in our shorts, drinking sodas from the vending machine downstairs. No, I say, I was just a kid. He takes his wallet out and hands me a photograph worn thin at the edges. You know where this was taken? Walt says. No, I say. Right here, he says, pointing at the sea. It was the first summer after we were married and we came out for a holiday, just to get away. Bill and Anne loaned us some cash and we stayed here, at The Palms. They had a fair on Bombay Beach, with rides and candy floss, and we walked there and back every night. That was the best summer of my life. Walt looks away and I look at the picture, though I've seen it before. They're both young. They're standing in front of the sea, smiling, with shapes of birds in the sky behind, and the sun is setting and casting purple shadows over everything but their faces. And I'm not there yet. I'm not even a thought that's passed between them. They look happy and hopeful, staring into the camera, at the future that neither of them can see. I hand back the photograph. She's pretty, I say, and I mean it. She's more than that, he says, staring hard, as if Alison might climb out of the flat surface and love him again. She's smart, he says. She has this way of moving her hands, and she really likes to dance... He trails off. Cory, he says, you have to treat a woman right, or she'll leave. I keep my mouth closed and he turns his pale eyes on me. She'll come back, he says, We'll start again and it'll be different this time, I know it. Everybody deserves another chance. I think about Esther with her bruise and her bottle of Kentucky, and stare up at the giant satellite dish on the roof, its metal face keeling over the eaves with the white sun glancing off.

After that we go down to the beach—Walt wants to see it again, even with the smell, and there's nothing else for me to do so I tag along. From the shore you can see clear across to the other side—everything over there looks small and indistinct, but somehow also more alive. You could almost believe there were sailors playing cards in the yacht club, retirees wandering through the museum, kids messing with buckets and spades at the beach. Except there's nobody and nothing anywhere. Walt, I say, what are we doing here? Waiting, says Walt. For what? I say. But Walt just walks off, making for a small jetty nearby. I start to follow, but halfway there I give up and sit down. I feel like crying, but there's no point. Suddenly, Walt stops. Then he turns and waves at me like it's something urgent. Corey, he yells. I pretend I can't hear, but he keeps at it. Okay Walt, I yell back, I'm coming. By the time I get to the jetty, he's waded knee-deep into the sea and is pointing at something. Corey, he says, look. I look. What? I say. See that bird over there? he says. There's a lot of birds here, Walt. Don't be smart, he says, I mean the one standing alone, at the end of the jetty. I look again and it sounds crazy because there really are a lot of birds, but I see the one he means right away: a delicate thing with deep blue and green feathers. What kind of bird is it? I say. I don't know, says Walt, but it was here every summer when your mother and I used to come. And it's still here, he says, I knew it would be. There's a smile across his face as wide as the sky and I know, now, why we've come; why we've been hanging round a dried up old town in the middle of the desert—this is what he's been waiting for, some kind of sign.

He calls her in the late afternoon, when the white pelicans are sleeping, when he thinks I'm asleep. I hear the dial tone and then the connection, and the fuzz of the line. Hello, she says, and he doesn't reply. Hello, she says, Who is this? And I can see him sitting there, with his back to me in the dim room, on the edge of the bed with its sagging mattress, the body of the telephone heavy in his lap. I don't even recognise her voice—it's been years since I've heard it. I only know it's her by the way his back looks—rounded and small. For some reason he still can't speak and she hangs up. It takes another two goes and finally, when she says, Look, whoever you are, stop calling, he says, Al. He says, It's me. And the phone may as well have gone dead because for a long time there's nothing from either of them but silence and regrets. Al, he says, I'm here, with Cory. There's a pause and then she says, reluctantly, Where's 'here'? The Palms, he says, The Palms at Salton. Remember how we used to come in the summer? We'd go swimming and fishing, and walk to the fair at night? There's a lot that's different, but the birds are still here. I saw that special one again today, down by the jetty. Remember? With the green and blue feathers? I know it's the same one, I just know. I've never seen another like it. Al, he says, Cory's growing up so fast, he's doing so well in school. (I wasn't.) Don't you want to see to him and say hello? Don't you want to come home? There's another pause, but in the background I hear a man's voice say, Honey, who is it? Is it him? Is he calling you again? She takes a moment and then she says into the receiver, so clearly and evenly it's like she's standing in the room with us, Don't you ever contact me again. I don't want to ever see you, do you hear me. You and me are over and that's it. Don't make me call the police. And then the line goes dead properly and in the room there's just the smell of the receding sea—acrid and drifting through the thin gap in the window—the two of us breathing softly.

1955, Villa West

It's evening, and in the rain all the lights—the yellow of the lamps and the blue of the television screens—glow gently. Mary Ellen, arms filled with stiff, white towels, walks along the open corridor outside the battery of rooms, identical and lined up like soup cans on the first floor. She takes tentative strides on newly unfamiliar legs—it seems she's grown inches in weeks and the development is alarming. 'Tall women can't be dancers, Miss Jackson had said. This pronouncement had filled Mary Ellen with quiet terror and she'd looked down at her lengthening torso and shins in dismay. Down the empty walk, her footsteps echo. Snatches of conversations from television lives curl into the damp air as she passes each room. All the guests seem to be out, or asleep, but she's not really paying attention. If you don't quit, she tells her renegade body, we won't be able to go to dance school. We'll be stuck in Florence forever. Last spring, before the growth spurt, Miss Jackson had cast her in the part of the sugar plum fairy in *The Nutcracker*. Mary Ellen had practised and practised until her whole body ached. Everyone had been full of compliments afterwards—she'd glowed with pleasure for weeks. Miss Jackson is a person to be grateful for, thinks Mary Ellen. A town like Florence wouldn't even know what *The Nutcracker* was if it weren't for her. A town like Florence barely knew a great work of literature from a telephone directory. She stops at room 101, the first at the end of the corridor, and knocks. Housekeeping, she says. There's no reply, and after counting to ten, she knocks again and says, louder this time, Housekeeping. Still nothing. A count of five and then she fiddles with the bunch of keys at her hip. The door opens with a click, and she pushes her slight shoulder against it to move inside. A flick of the switch to her right summons a tepid pool of light, in which the lonely quorum of a straight-backed chair, a lean double-bed and a bedside table, mildly favouring one leg, reveal themselves. The television in the corner is on, though the sound is off. Mary Ellen skirts the furniture and heads through to the bathroom, taking care to step over the half-opened suitcase on the way, its contents spilling gently onto the worn brown carpet. There's a crumpled blue shirt, a few ties, and a sealed packet of Twinkies, its cream filling ballooning all over the inside of the plastic. She replaces the used towel in the bathroom with a clean one, checks the toilet paper, then sets to making the bed.

When Miss Jackson appeared in Florence, Oregon, almost exactly a year ago, she was without precedent. She came with her dark eyes, her Southern accent and a decided lack of a husband. People talked, in that small-minded way. How did a pretty woman—not *young*, exactly, but still young *enough*—end up all the way over the other side of the country, in a place like Florence, without a man? Miss Jackson had stared them all down calmly, with those large, dark eyes—at school assemblies, at PTA meetings—and

eventually everybody stopped talking and found something else to fix on. Mary Ellen thought that Miss Jackson had had a sweetheart in the war: one who died tragically (though, she supposed, everybody died tragically in the war). He would have been tall and dark and looked like Gene Kelly. Maybe he'd even been a dancer as well. Miss Jackson dressed and moved like a Southern gentlewoman (or how Mary Ellen imagined a Southern gentlewoman would), but she wasn't all that gentle. She had a tendency to make people feel anxious and inferior just by being herself. Isn't her skin just a little *dark*, said flaxen-haired Marion Banks, but nobody paid her much mind. Miss Jackson's mysterious past gave her an aura of romance, and for a time all the girls were pinning their hair back like Miss Jackson, and wearing delicate blouses with slim pencil skirts like Miss Jackson—though the object of this attention gave it just as much notice as the gossip, which is to say hardly any at all. The imitations soon stopped, and Mary Ellen was relieved to find, at the end of the school year, that she seemed to be the only one who still looked on her teacher as an angel sent from heaven—or at least someplace more exciting than Florence. One day, thought Mary Ellen, Miss Jackson will turn to me and say: Mary Ellen, there isn't a soul I want to teach in this town except you. You're the only one with even a *skerrick* of talent. Though she wasn't sure Miss Jackson would use a word like 'skerrick', so she had to revise this sentence a few times to find the right expression. One had, always, to find the right expression.

A flick of the switch and the room lapses back into darkness. At the end of the hall Mary Ellen runs out of towels and loops back to the office to restock. This is her first week on the job, and after the inevitable days of fumbling, she already feels like an old hand. She knows where the linens and lavatory rolls are stored. She knows where the spare keys are hung, and who to call in emergencies (so far there'd only been one: a drunk who fell down the stairs and gashed his knee—when she'd offered to call the doctor, he'd asked for more whiskey). She'd only met Bobby, the owner, once—when he interviewed her for the job. The meeting was so disappointingly informal that she could hardly have called it a proper interview, and Bobby was remote as a satellite: it seemed owning a motel wasn't how he planned his life to turn out. On the upside he wasn't around much and didn't seem to care that she'd never had a job before. She'd told him she was a fast learner, and she was. A few days in and she already knew the names and habits of the other staff—Rich, the night duty man; TJ, the cook at the diner; and Patrice and Cindy the waitresses. She knew that TJ liked to take long smoke breaks, that Rich dropped out of the army not long ago, and that Patrice and Cindy spent most of their time complaining about their husbands and children. They'd been kind, but she thought of them all with generous pity. When I'm gallivanting around New York, she said to herself ('gallivanting' was a word she'd picked up from Miss Jackson), I'll be sure to send postcards.

In the office, Rich is watching the six o'clock news and finishing a cup of instant coffee. On screen is the image of a woman with thin frameless glasses and a dark suit. Her hands

are in cuffs. The announcer is saying, On a bus in Montgomery, Alabama ... but Mary Ellen is busy scanning the guest list to see which rooms on the second floor needed fixing. Abrams, Markham, Storr ... she stops at a familiar name. Hey, she says, Rich, I know this one! Oh yeah, he says, unimpressed. The man in 208, she says, Mr. Lamar. He's a history teacher at my school. She has a blurred vision of dark hair, an olive tie, the face of a man who has recently stopped being young. The man in 208? Rich sits up, interested. Yes, says Mary Ellen. Rich looks around and then leans forward conspiratorially. He's having an affair, he says. Really? she says, But he's married. Rich rolls his eyes and sits back. That's why it's called an affair, he says. Oh, she says, and thinks on it a little. How can you tell? she asks. It's obvious, he says, He always comes on a Thursday night, at the same time. He rents one of the upstairs rooms. He goes in first and then twenty minutes later, *she* shows up. They're in there for a couple of hours, maybe more, and then they leave, in the same order. It's like clockwork. Rich yawns. It's boring. Mary Ellen stares up at the balcony, eyes gleaming. I think it's romantic, she says. You would, says Rich. The phone rings and Rich picks up the receiver. Villa West, front desk, he says. The voice on the other end has the low timbre of a man's. Mary Ellen turns to leave, but Rich motions her to stay and lays a finger across his lips. You've had a spill? All over the carpet? he says. Yes, sir, we can do that. Don't worry, we'll be right along. He places the receiver back on the hook and grins at Mary Ellen. Looks like you're up kid, he says, That was 208: they need more towels.

On the way to and from the linen cupboard, Mary Ellen's thoughts gallop into the distance like spring ponies. She searches for a clearer image of Mr. Lamar, but his face, above the olive tie, refuses to resolve into more distinct lines. She gives up and speculates, instead, on his paramour. What kind of woman would have an affair with a history teacher? She'd *have* to be beautiful. And smart. Maybe a little cruel. She thinks of Joan Crawford in *The Women*—Joan Crawford with her thin, arched eyebrows and nipped waist—and this apparition sustains her all the way up the stairs and along the corridor until she reaches the room. At the door she hesitates, feeling extremely bold, and then knocks. Housekeeping, she says. No reply. Her heart is hammering loudly, though the rain, thankfully, is louder. Mary Ellen, she thinks, get a hold of yourself. Hello sir, she says, knocking again, you asked for some towels? There is the sound of muffled feet and then the chain being drawn. The door opens and a woman appears in a dressing gown. Behind her the soft yellow light glints off a pool of amber liquid and the jagged shards of a broken whiskey glass. Mary Ellen drops the towels, and in the silence that stretches on there is only the rain and the low, dull sounds of the night. Mary Ellen, says Miss Jackson, What are you doing here? Miss Jackson, Mary Ellen says, and bursts into tears.

Outside the frosted windows of the diner, the highway delivers its steady cargo of travellers into the night. The two women sit at a booth tucked into the far corner, away from the counter. The older one pours the younger another glass of orange juice. After she'd helped pick up the towels Mary Ellen had dropped (these would have to be

laundered again), she'd pulled the door closed behind her in the cold corridor and said: Will you do something for me? Will you meet me in the diner in twenty minutes? Mary Ellen had nodded, feeling like a small child, but had the presence of mind to take the towels to the dirty linen closet on the way. The diner was quiet. Inside there was only Patrice working the floor, and a few lone men slowly demolishing burgers. Mary Ellen picked the booth in the corner and sat down to wait. The smell of grease, this close to the kitchen, was almost overpowering. From the window, she had a clear view of the horseshoe of rooms, wrapped around the square of the car park. Less than twenty minutes elapsed—it really hadn't been that long at all—and then she saw, without meaning to, a shape that must have been Mr. Lamar leave the room, and walk briskly down the stairs, throwing on his coat. He had the air of a hunted man. There were only four cars in the lot, and he found his quickly, got in quickly, drove away like the devil himself. A few minutes later, the door opened again and Miss Jackson appeared, fully dressed, with a coat elegantly draped over her shoulders. She stood staring out into the darkness for a while, in the direction of the dunes, and then slowly, on graceful dancer's legs, descended the stairs.

In the booth, with her hair pinned back, Miss Jackson begins to talk. I don't know how to explain this, she says, but maybe you're old enough to understand that sometimes life isn't as simple as it seems. You don't plan for things to happen the way they do, or to end up where you are. You don't *plan*, she says with emphasis, to fall in *love*. Certainly not with a man who has a wife. Mary Ellen nods and sips her juice and thinks about what a mature woman in her position would say. Do you love him? she asks. It seems just bold enough a question to be right. Miss Jackson's gaze trails the brief lives of the passing cars. Yes. A pause and then: Very much. What will you do? says Mary Ellen, but her mind is already racing. Perhaps Miss Jackson will say: Mr. Lamar and I have decided to elope, we'll be in Paris within the fortnight. Or: We're going to declare our love before the whole school at assembly, first thing Monday morning. Nothing, says Miss Jackson, closing her eyes, absolutely nothing. But, says Mary Ellen, you love him. Miss Jackson shakes her head. That's not enough, she says, not in this world. Do you read books, Mary Ellen? Watch movies? None of the books or the movies tell you the truth. It's not enough in this world to be in love, she repeats. Harry has a home, a family. He doesn't need ... complications. And I'm ... where I'm from, people like Harry don't mix with people like me. Miss Jackson's fine, long fingers are twisting a paper napkin with surprising force. Mary Ellen, says Miss Jackson, I'd like to ask for your help. Me? says Mary Ellen. Yes, says Miss Jackson, Mary Ellen, you know that if anybody found out about us—about Mr. Lamar and me—we'd both lose our jobs? Really? says Mary Ellen, though some part of her instinctively knew this to be true. People are afraid, said Miss Jackson, They're afraid of what they can't control, they're afraid of other people not living by the same rules, of being braver and finer than they are. For a moment her eyes are deep pools of anger. They see some spark of brightness, she says, and they have to stamp it out. It's the same no matter where you go. Mary Ellen prepares for Miss Jackson to tell her about her dead sweetheart from the war, but instead the older woman reaches

over and takes one of Mary Ellen's hands, and says, You won't let that happen, will you Mary Ellen? Mary Ellen shakes her head. No, Miss Jackson, Of course I won't. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you, she says truthfully. Miss Jackson's wonderful eyes stare intently into hers for long seconds, and then the teacher releases her hand and sits back, satisfied. I've passed some kind of test, Mary Ellen thinks with elation. Her hand, resting on the table with its bitten-down nails, seems to belong to an older, more sophisticated woman. She waits for Miss Jackson to say the words: *Mary Ellen, there isn't a soul in this town I want to teach except you* ... But Miss Jackson just smooths her hair and brushes her skirt beneath the table, and says, in a different voice, Good. So you're working here over the school break? Yes, says Mary Ellen, They let me stay during the week and eat at the diner so I save on food and board and bus money. That's wonderful, Mary Ellen, Miss Jackson says approvingly. It's imperative to learn the value of hard work. When I was your age, I did just the same; it will stand you in good stead for the future. Mary Ellen blushes with pleasure and all the newfound confidence rises up within her. Of course, it's just temporary, she says. I'm saving up. Oh? says Miss Jackson, What for? And it all comes tumbling out—how she wants to dance for the New York Ballet and see her name in lights, travel the world. You see, Mary Ellen finishes breathlessly, I'm going to be a star. When she looks up, she sees that creases have appeared in Miss Jackson's pretty forehead. There is a pause in which one of the solitary diners coughs. Oh Mary Ellen, Miss Jackson says, her face soft with pity, You won't get into dance school. She pats the hand held in such vivid communion minutes before. I'm not being mean, Mary Ellen, really, I'm not—it takes years and years of training and discipline. You've started too late. And, she adds, retrieving her hand—which Mary Ellen notices *is* a shade or two darker than her own—you're getting awfully tall.

From the diner Mary Ellen watches as Miss Jackson steps across the black expanse of asphalt, glittering and bejewelled from all the rain, and into a small white car. Long after it turns its nose toward the highway and is swallowed up by the night, the girl sits, motionless, until Patrice taps her on the shoulder and says, gruffly but not unkindly, Honey, we're closing, why don't you go on up to bed? In the office, Rich is watching an episode of *I Love Lucy*. Lucille Ball is crying into a cup of coffee and Ricky is trying to comfort her, though without much success. Hey kid, says Rich, how'd it go? You were gone a long time. Oh, says Mary Ellen, it was nothing. I made a mistake—it was a stranger. Rich shrugs. It doesn't matter, he says, these things always end badly. Yes, says Mary Ellen, I know. The laugh track on the show mingles with the rain outside, and they both seem oddly amplified. Rich, she says, can I use the phone a minute. Sure, he says, not taking his eyes off the screen. She carries the phone into the adjoining room with the telephone book, and partly closes the door, leaving a small gap for the cord. She thumbs through the ratty pages until she finds the name, then dials the number next to it. On the other end, the phone rings and rings (she realises, then, how late it is). And then a woman picks up. Mrs. Lamar? says Mary Ellen. Through the partly open door, she can make out a black-and-white image of a man and a woman on television. From where she sits there's no way of telling if they are happy or sad.

1992, Oasis Inn

Fall came early to Lake Charles that year. In the last week of August a light chill settled into the mornings and evenings and the hickories began losing their leaves. Benji had worked steadily through the summer, shoring up his fledgling electrician business, taking any job that came in and making sure he did it well. He was polite and punctual and efficient, so that people soon started to know his name and ask for him in town. It was a time of financial ease, the first he'd had in his adult life, and the knowledge that he had money in the bank and a place of his own suffused him with a pleasant warmth. On that particular morning, the weather was fine; the sun slanted through the shedding branches that arched over the streets with a clean and gentle light. He'd woken early, shaved and picked out his best shirt, before climbing into the car with Patty, who asked no questions and had no eyebrows to raise. She sat in the passenger seat, nose out the window, yawning into the crisp air. He reached over to scratch her ears and she turned to him, tail thumping into the upholstery. I know, he said, in the gentle beam of her eyes, Don't get my hopes up. But there they both were, with the day spreading around them like a gift, and he whistled anyway.

Just past seven o'clock, he pulled into one of the bays marked 'Reserved' in the parking lot of the Oasis. The inn slept under a blanket of sparkling dew. He opened the door for Patty and hauled his tools out of the trunk. At the entrance to the bistro, he looped Patty's lead around a pole and waited patiently as Sal turned on the lights and unlocked the door. She looked bone-tired, but managed a smile as he came in. Morning Sal, he said. Mornin' darlin', she replied. I've just put the coffee on, won't be more'n a minute. Black, right? He nodded. And eggs scrambled? You bet, he said. Marlon, she yelled into the kitchen, one scrambled. What rooms you fixin' today darlin', she asked, when the coffee was done. Two oh two to two oh eight, he said, watching the dark liquid stream into his mug. That's a decent batch, she said, How many more days you got here? As many as possible, he thought, but said aloud: Oh, maybe two or three. His eggs arrived and he salted them a little, chewed each mouthful as slowly as he could. From the counter he had a clear view of the first floor, with its fifteen rooms, their doors painted bright yellow. When he was halfway through, one of the doors swung open and a woman emerged, yawning and stretching. She came into the bistro and sat down at the counter. Hello, he said. Hi, she said. He cleared his throat. Did you sleep well? he asked. She considered this. Yeah, she said, I really did. She yawned again, exposing a set of small, sharp teeth. Excuse me, she said, I ain't partway respectable before I've had my coffee. She smiled at Sal and said, Can I please have some coffee? Cream and two sugars? Thank you. I'm sorry, she said to Benji, We met, but I forgot your name? Benji, he said. Nice to

meet you, she said, *again*. Well, I don't know if your memory is shot like mine, but just in case you forgot, I'm Lou.

The day before, Benji had been drilling small holes into a wall on the second floor. He'd looked down momentarily and seen her enter the car park from the street in a floral-print dress. From this height, there wasn't much to see—thin arms and legs stuck out from the sleeves and hem of the dress with all the awkwardness of youth—but she'd carried herself with such grace he involuntarily stopped what he was doing. When she got closer, he saw that she had long brown hair, cut in no particular style, and large, round glasses. And she was very, very pregnant. From the balcony, he'd watched her walk into the office and then walk out again, fifteen minutes later, with Pete carrying her bag. They stopped in front of room 112. Here you are, he'd heard Pete say, now you just holler at me if you need anything. Thanks Pete, she'd said, and then she'd pulled her bag inside and shut the door. Benji realised he'd been standing there with the drill motionless in his hand, and set to work again. She must have gone out while he was busy rewiring 208, because the next time he saw her was a couple of hours later, hugging a brown paper bag to her hip. Morning, he'd said. Mornin', she replied. Would you like a hand with that? he offered. Naw, she said, I ain't got far to go. He was afraid that was going to be the end of it, so like a blind man veering into oncoming traffic he gestured broadly at her stomach. Expecting? No sooner was the word out then he wanted to drag it back in. I mean, he'd said, blushing profusely, you probably don't need another stranger asking. She'd peered up at him with her owlish eyes. Well, what's your name? she'd asked. Benji, he'd said. Well, hi Benji, I'm Lou. She held out a small hand and he took it shyly. Her handshake was surprisingly firm. Now we ain't strangers no more, she said. Am I expectin'? She'd looked down at her belly. Well, I guess I am.

In the bistro he chewed his last mouthful of eggs and watched as she stirred four sachets of sugar into her coffee. She saw him looking and said, It's a lot, ain't it? I don't mean to judge, he said. Naw, she said, I know it. I got a sweet tooth a mile long. There's nothing wrong with a sweet tooth, said Benji. Well, she said doubtfully, I ain't so sure it's good for babies. They both looked at her stomach. Do you know if it's a boy or a girl? he asked. No, she said, and I don't hardly care neither. Benji didn't know what to say to that, so he took another long sip of coffee. I mean, she said, I'd love it to bits no matter which one it turned out to be. Oh, said Benji, that's nice. Do you have any? she asked. Kids? he said, no. Well, this here's my first, she said, and I'm nervous as hell. Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night and can't sleep for worryin'. He wanted to ask about the father, but was afraid to, so he said, Do you have someone you can talk to about it? No, she said, my parents passed when I was little. I got a sister in Houston, she said, but we ain't friendly. I'm sorry, he said. No need to be, she said, that's just how it is. She stared down into her mug for a few moments, then looked up. Listen to me, she said, I've been going on about myself all this time. What about you? Me? said Benji. Yeah, she said, you from round here? I live in Westlake, he said, over the river. I got an electrical

business, he added, I only started it a year ago, and it's doing fine, I get plenty of work. He couldn't help being proud. Well, good for you, Benji, she said with warmth. Is that why you're at the inn? Yes, he said, I'm fixing things up while it's not so busy. Behind them the bistro was starting to fill with other guests and the sounds of the day starting up. Benji reluctantly checked his watch. It was eight o'clock. You have to get going, I guess, she said. Yes, he said, I guess so. Are you staying for long? Well, she said, I was thinkin' on going a little further west, but I'm all tired out from the bus yesterday. I can't seem to do much these days without needin' to nap. And now I've found a friend, maybe I'll stay on just a little while longer. Benji realised she was referring to him and blushed with pleasure. In his embarrassment, he wedged too many bills under his plate, mumbled, see you later, to nobody in particular, and almost tripped on his way out the door. Outside Patty greeted him with a solemn face. You're right, Patty, he said, I've got to work on my conversational skills.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. The inn was busy, people came and went. Benji worked his way slowly down the hall, checking fuses, testing sockets, trying to keep his mind focused, though his cheeks felt flushed. In the afternoon a fire alarm wailed and guests grudgingly filed into the parking lot, milling around on the asphalt like cows. There was a woman in a bathrobe, and a man chewing on a sandwich. What's happening, asked the woman, I got a meeting. I can't be late. The fire alarm went off, said the man with the sandwich. I know that, said the woman, but what I want to know is, what's *happening*? Nobody answered. The alarm continued to howl and more guests joined the crowd. Benji stood at the edge, scanning the faces anxiously. Hey, said a young man in tight black jeans. It took a moment for Benji to realise he was talking to him. Yes? He said. You're the electrician, right? Yes, I am. Do you know what's going on? No, he said, everything seems to be working fine. Okay, said the young man, and moved away. The woman in the robe was shaking her head and pacing. Patty, sensing distress, padded in her direction and lay on her foot. The woman looked down and said, Oh, a dog. Benji, hoping to see long brown hair and large glasses, and failing, felt he was just about going to burst when he saw Pete making his way down from the office. Pete, he said, striding over to meet him, what's going on? Oh hey, Benji, said Pete, I think we got a fire somewhere. I've called the fire department. Hey, said the young man in the tight jeans, who reappeared at Benji's right shoulder. Is there a fire or what? I don't know, said Pete, We're trying to find out. He walked towards the crowd. Hey folks, he yelled. What's happening, said the woman in the robe. We don't know what it is exactly, said Pete, but the fire department is on its way. You all did the right thing by coming out here. It's so loud, said a woman in a corduroy jacket, can't you turn the volume down? I'm sorry, said Pete. We can't do anything until we figure out what's wrong. We'll let you know as soon as we do. Thanks, everybody, for your patience. The guests muttered ungraciously. The man with the sandwich had finished the sandwich and was now starting on a roll. Pete, said Benji, is everybody out? I don't know, said Pete, I was about to do a sweep. Do you want some help? said Benji. Sure, said Pete. You take the lower floors, I'll do the upper. Benji wanted to rush to the end of the hall, but he made himself begin with 101 and

methodically knocked and called at each door. At 108, a beautiful woman appeared in a sheer nightgown. Sorry, said Benji, averting his eyes, You may have heard the fire alarm is going off? Yes, she said, smiling, I thought it was a false alarm. No, he said, it doesn't appear to be that. Everybody is out in the parking lot. I think you should be going, too. Hey, she said, are you the sparky who's been fixing up the rooms? Yes, he said. I noticed you around the place, she said, her eyes grazing his face. Okay, he said, Please can you leave now? Sure, she said, I'll just need a minute to get dressed. Benji started to speak, but thought better of it and waited. She drew back into the room and a few minutes later came out in tight blue jeans and a silk blouse, with the top three buttons undone. He turned to go. Isn't the parking lot the other way? she asked. I'm helping to check all the rooms, he said, not stopping to look around. Well, okay then, she said. See you later.

When Benji got to 112, his stomach was somersaulting all over the place. He knocked. Lou, he called, trying to sound calm. There was no answer. In his head he played out several scenarios and none of them were good. Lou, he said, if you're in there let me know. Otherwise I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to break down this door. He waited another minute and then made good on his word. Inside, the curtains were drawn. There was a packet of Lays two-minute noodles on the small table and a generic bottle of aspirin; some loose change and other bundles of objects in brown paper. Lou was on the floor, sprawled on her back. Lou, he said, shaking her shoulders gently. She didn't respond. He bent down and listened to her shallow breathing. The air entered and left her body in ragged fits. He slid his arms beneath her neck and knees and, cradling her head against his shoulder, gently lifted her up.

In the parking lot, a loud murmur rose when Benji appeared, Lou dangling in his arms. Is there a doctor here? asked Benji. There was a general shaking of heads, and then a woman stepped forward. Lay her down, she said. Somebody gave up their jacket and Benji placed her down as gently as he could. The doctor felt Lou's pulse and lifted her eyelids. How far along is she? she asked Benji. How far? The doctor pointed at Lou's belly. I don't know, he said. You don't know? I'm not the father, he said. We only just met. The doctor brushed a strand of hair from Lou's sweaty forehead. Has anybody got any water? She asked the crowd. The man with the sandwich and half-demolished roll offered up a gallon bottle of water. The fire alarm was still wailing and to Benji it was the sound of utter disaster. Patty, sensing she was needed elsewhere, left the woman in the robe and came to stand against his leg. The fire brigade had arrived and somewhere behind him Pete was leading a group of firemen through the hotel. The doctor poured water onto a handkerchief and added some drops of a strong-smelling liquid from an amber-tinted bottle in her handbag. She waved it slowly under Lou's nose. A few seconds later, Lou's eyelids fluttered open. Benji allowed himself to breathe again. Lou blinked a few times and struggled into full consciousness. Hello, said the doctor, I'm a doctor. Hi, said Lou, what happened? I'm not sure, honey, what's the last thing you remember? Lou closed her eyes. I was standin' in the room, she said. I was standin' in

the room and suddenly I felt light-headed. She opened her eyes. 'That's it, she said. Okay, said the doctor. I'm sorry, said Lou, I can't remember anythin' else. Has this happened before?' asked the doctor. Not really, said Lou. Not really? Well, it's happened a couple of times since ... She suddenly seemed to remember her belly. Is it alright?' she asked. Did I kill it? Do you feel any pain?' asked the doctor. Lou considered. No, she said. No, it feels okay. As if in affirmation, a little bulge—a fist or a foot—stretched out the taut skin of her stomach. Look, she said with relief, there it is. How far along are you?' asked the doctor. I'm not sure, said Lou. You're not sure? I'm not sure. Okay, honey, said the doctor. I think you may just have fainted, but given your condition, and how far along you *look*, I think you should go to the hospital. Just to make sure. Lou shook her head. No, she said. The doctor raised an eyebrow and sat back on her heels. No? I'm alright, said Lou, struggling to sit up. The doctor pushed her down again gently. Not yet, honey. I can't force you to do what you don't want to, but I *really* think you should go to the hospital. Do you have any family or friends around? How about the father? There was an awkward pause. I'll take her, said Benji. Lou looked up. Hi Benji, she said. Hi Lou, he said. I'll take her to the hospital, he said to the doctor. Thank you, she said. Right then the alarm stopped. The silence seemed vast and unnatural. Pete appeared on the second-floor balcony. Hey, he yelled, Hey everybody. We found the problem. He held up what looked like a large, deformed wand. A wraith of smoke was speedily escaping from its tip. Who's curling iron is this?' said Pete. Oh, said the woman in the robe. That's mine.

The doctor—Jenny García—left Benji her number, scrawled on a napkin from the bistro (I'm sorry, she said, I usually have cards, but this is my day off), and instructions to take Lou to the nearest hospital as soon as possible. I know she doesn't want to go, she said, but she really should. Okay, said Benji. I mean she really needs to, for her sake as well as the baby's, said Dr. García. Okay, said Benji, I'll take her. I promise. Life at the inn had reverted back to its usual course. Benji asked Pete if he minded him finishing up for the day, so as to take Lou to the hospital, and Pete waved his hand. Sure, he said, don't even worry about it. When Benji led Lou slowly to the car, they had to step over a drunk. Merry Christmas, yelled the drunk. It's a while yet, said Benji. Patty was already in the back seat. Lou, he said, meet Patty. Hi Patty, said Lou, smiling weakly. She reached in and gave her a stroke, and then gingerly sat down. How're you feeling?' he asked. Like I just fainted, she said. Benji, she said, as he settled into the driver's seat. Do we have to go? He turned so she could see his face. Doctor García said it would be a really good idea, he said. I know, she said. Well, he said, I think she's right. Okay, she said, closing her eyes. Okay, let's go.

At the hospital Lou seemed to shrink into herself. In the bleached, white corridors she looked like a lost and frightened child. Name?' said the nurse on duty. Louise Miller, she said. Where you from, Louise? Baton Rouge. What's ailing you? I think I fainted, she said. You think? Yes, she said. I mean, I did faint. How long ago? Maybe half an hour? How many weeks along are you? I don't know, said Lou. The nurse narrowed her eyes

and Benji rushed in. You see, Benji said, there was this fire at the inn. It was only a small fire, actually just some smoke, but Lou fainted, and there was a doctor, Doctor García. She said we should go to the hospital and have Lou checked out, so here we are. Who are you? asked the nurse. Benji, he said. Relation? I'm ... a friend, he said. Okay, she said. Please both of you stay in the waiting room and someone will call you in.

The attending doctor was an older man with kindly wrinkles and worn-in leather loafers. He asked Lou some questions, checked her pulse and blood pressure, and ran some other tests. Lou, he said, have you been taking your insulin? Benji tried not to look surprised. Lou stared at her feet and mumbled, I forgot. The doctor said, What's that? I forgot, she repeated, I was in a hurry and I left and I forgot my medication. Where is it? he asked. At home, she said, in Baton Rouge. Ah, he said. Can you go back and get it? She shook her head. He looked at Benji. How about you? No, said Lou, he can't go. Lou, said the doctor gently, you need your medication. Can anyone else bring it to you? No, she said, they can't. Her voice was firm, but when Benji looked at her hands, he saw they were trembling. Doc, he said, is there somewhere round here where we could get some? Just temporarily? The doctor looked from one to the other and said, Yes, yes there is.

On the way back to the Oasis, Lou fell asleep in the car. Her head lolled back against the seat and her mouth was slightly open. Benji glanced over every now and then, and was reassured by the rise and fall of her thin shoulders. When they reached the inn, Benji helped Lou to her room. She barely made it to the bed before her eyes closed again. It was evening by then, and getting cold, so he found a blanket in the cupboard and draped it over her still form. He placed her medication in the mini refrigerator and tiptoed to the door. Benji, she said. Yes? He turned around. She was still lying there with her eyes closed. I'm sorry, she said, I didn't mean for you to go to all this trouble. It's okay, he said, don't you worry about a thing. Benji, she said, I can't go back. I know, he said, you just rest now and we'll talk about it later. He called in at the office, where Pete was on the phone to the insurance company. Look, said Pete, I already told you, there was no fire, but the alarm went off so we had to call the fire department. After some heated back and forth he hung up. What the hell do I pay my premiums for anyway? he said in disgust. He noticed Benji's face. Hey Benji, he said, how's the girl? She's okay, said Benji. She's just got some trouble with her blood sugar. But we got her some meds. Okay, said Pete. That's a relief. Where's her family? Baton Rouge, said Benji. Pete shook his head. What, said Benji. Didn't you hear? said Pete. About what? said Benji. That foreign exchange student, said Pete, from Japan. He was on his way to a party dressed in a white tux—I think he was going as John Travolta from *Saturday Night Fever*. Anyway, he shows up at the wrong house and rings the doorbell. The owner comes out and shoots the boy right on his front doorstep. He said he thought he was being robbed. Happened in Baton Rouge just a few days ago. What happened to the kid, said Benji. He died on the way to the hospital, said Pete. That's awful, said Benji, his poor parents. Yeah, said Pete, all he was doing was going to a party dressed as John Travolta. *This country*, he said. Got family

anywhere else? he asked, and for a moment Benji thought he was talking about the exchange student. Lou? said Benji, She's got a sister in Houston, but I don't think they talk. *Families*, said Pete. Hey, listen, said Benji, I'm heading home for the night. She's resting now, but do you mind checking in on her once or twice? Make sure she eats something when she wakes? I'll be back early next morning before I start. Okay, said Pete. Then he fixed Benji with a look. How come you're so interested? Benji blushed. She's a friend of a friend, he lied. Oh, said Pete, sounding unconvinced. Anyway, said Benji, I'm leaving. See you tomorrow. See you tomorrow, pal, said Pete.

Benji spent a restless night at home and was back before dawn. He sat in the car with the radio on and tried not to think about Lou, while Patty napped. Patty, he whispered, feeling helpless. An hour or so later, he was in the diner eating breakfast, though his appetite was poor. I heard the girl fainted, said Sal, she okay? Yes, he said. What's she doin' out here all by herself, in such a state? Sal asked. Benji shook his head, not wanting to spread gossip. I don't know, he said. Sal caught his drift and busied herself with other customers. When the door to room 112 finally opened, it was almost eight-thirty. Lou walked in and said, Mornin'. Morning, said Benji, how are you feeling? Oh, she said, I'm fine. I mean, a little under the weather, but it ain't nothin' serious. She eased herself into a chair as Sal came over to pour her a cup of coffee. Thank you, said Lou. Benji, she said, I want to say that was real kind of you to take me to the hospital yesterday. I hope I didn't scare you any—I just needed to take my medication, that's all. I'm really fine now. She sat with her long hair sweeping down and her face hidden from view. Benji waited for her to say something else. Lou, said Benji. Yes? Is there anything you want to talk about? Her fingers strayed to the sugar caddy, and then snapped back like elastics. Well, she said, about what I said yesterday. About not goin' back. Well, she said, it's just that things are a little ... I mean, I just wanted to be somewhere else for a while, is all. Get some fresh air. Okay, he said. Well, she said, that's all. He knew this was as far as she wanted to go. Okay, he said, as long as you're feeling better, that's all that matters. He got up from the counter. I'll be around all day, he added, you just let me know if you need anything. Sure will, she said brightly, but her face remained concealed behind the swath of soft hair.

Towards the end of the day, he passed Pete outside the bistro. Hey Benji, said Pete, how's the work? Fine, said Benji, so far no major repairs or faults. I think I'll be done by tomorrow. And the girl? asked Pete. Okay, said Benji, I think. She doesn't want to talk about it much. I feel for the poor thing, said Pete, running a distracted hand through his hair. The guy sounded pretty angry. What guy? asked Benji. You hadn't heard? said Pete, I thought she might have told you. He sighed. She had a phone call today—some guy named Jules. Oh, said Benji. Yeah, said Pete, I reckon she might be in trouble. The man said he was her husband.

Benji resisted the urge to go straight to her room. She knew he was around, and could find him easily enough—if she wanted to. And so he kept working. Eventually, though, he had to stop so that people could use their lights and TV sets. When he found her, it was by accident—he had just pulled out of the drive when he saw a familiar figure at the bus stop. Hi Lou, he said, winding down his window. Hi Benji, she said, getting up with some difficulty and walking over. Where are you going? he asked. To Houston, she said. Patty, recognising a face, leaned across his lap and stuck her nose out for a pat. I wanted to say goodbye, Lou said, and then bit her lip and started to cry. Have you eaten? he asked. They found a small Chinese restaurant on the other side of town and ordered chow mein and prawn crackers. She had stopped crying, but her eyes were red. I was on my way to Houston, she said, to find my sister. We ain't spoken in years, but I had nowhere else to go. And then I met you at the inn, and you made me feel safe. So I stayed. But I shouldn't have, she said, I knew he'd find me if I stayed in one spot for long. Jules doesn't like being fooled, she said. And I fooled him. I told him I was goin' out to have my hair done, and I just jumped on the bus, she said. I just did it. And I should have kept going. I'm sorry, said Benji. Don't be, she said, I'm so glad we met. She smiled at him with her small, sharp teeth and there was a lot he wanted to say, but couldn't bring himself to. I'm so glad, too, he said instead. What will you do? I guess, she said, I'll go on to Houston like I planned. Does your sister know you're coming? No, said Lou, but she's the only one I got. I don't have nowhere else to go. She started crying again and Benji's heart contracted. Don't cry, Lou, he said. Her glasses were fogging up and she took them off and wiped them with a napkin. I'm sorry Benji, she said, you don't hardly know me and you've been so kind. It's all my fault, she said, I picked a real shiner for a boyfriend and now I've got to face the chorus. He didn't even want it, she said, he wanted me to get rid of the baby. Sometimes I think I kept it just to spite him. That's not true, said Benji. She patted her belly gently. No, she said, it's not. The baby kicked. Don't you listen to me, she said to it fiercely. Lou, said Benji, I've got an idea. She put her glasses back on and peered at him across the table. He cleared his throat. Well, I've been thinking. I've got my own place. And it's just me and Patty, it's real small, but there's enough space. You could come stay—I mean, you'd have your own room and everything. Lou stared. What about the baby? she said. The baby will be there, too, he said. I meant it for the both of you. You can stay as long as you like—until the baby comes, and you get back on your feet, or ... however long you want. Behind them, somebody was turning 60, and a large family was singing 'Happy Birthday'. Lou sat so still and so quiet he started to think it had been a bad idea. Then her small hand was clasping his and she was saying, Benji. Oh, Benji.

The days that followed were a kind of bliss. Lou was wary at first, but then she relaxed and stopped jumping at every passing car. Benji wanted to clean his place up before she moved in (and he needed to find an extra bed, and a cot for the baby), so she stayed at the Oasis while he busied about—doing his electrical work during the day, and fixing up the house at night. By this time, he'd finished up at the inn, and was working other jobs, so he wasn't around as much as he would have liked. He still stopped in at the bistro

every night, though, so they could eat supper together, and he could make sure she had everything she needed. Lou teased him for being a mother hen, but her belly was swelling by the day, and she was having a harder time managing on her own. One evening, after they'd had their meal and he and Patty were escorting her across the parking lot, a man detached himself from the side of a sleek cruiser and said, Hey Lou. Hey Jules, she said. She made no move towards him. Lou, he said, what's up? You don't seem so happy to see me. Don't you want to come and show your husband some love? She crossed her arms protectively over her stomach. Lou, he said, you're breaking my heart. I thought after our little phone call you'd come home, but days go by and I find I gotta come haul you back myself. I'm not comin' back, Jules, she said. What was that? I said I'm not comin' back. I think you just said you weren't comin' back, but that can't be right, can it, Lou? I mean, why would I drive all the way over here if you ain't comin' back? Hey, said Benji, she said she's not going with you. Who the fuck is this guy? he asked. Nobody, said Lou. I mean, he's a friend, nobody you got to know about. Is that right? he asked, looking Benji over. This nobody better mind his own business. Get in the car, he said to Lou. No, she said, but Benji sensed her fear. Benji stood between them. You don't have to do anything you don't want to, he said. Hey, said Jules, This here is my wife. You ain't got no business gettin' involved. Jules, she said. You shut up, he said. Hey, said Benji, Don't talk to her like that. Or what, said Jules, What are you gonna do, nobody? This is *my* wife and I can do whatever the hell I want. He spat in Lou's direction. The gob landed at her feet and she jumped slightly. Patty growled. Some diners had come out of the bistro and were watching from the edge of the lot. Hey, said Benji again, louder this time. *Hey*, said Jules in a mocking tone, Is that all you're gonna do? Just stand there and say 'hey' all the time? Benji turned to Lou again. Don't you worry, he said, I won't let anything happen to you. You just hold onto Patty, okay? She nodded and clutched Patty's collar. I don't need to prove myself, said Benji, I'm not interested in proving myself to you. Jules, said Lou. He ignored her. Sonofabitch, he said to Benji, Who do you think you are, you red-headed sonofabitch, messing with my woman? Look, said Benji, trying to keep calm, If she's your wife you should have done better. Then she wouldn't have needed to leave. What did you say? said Jules. I said, Benji began, but didn't get much further because Jules was rounding his fist in the direction of his jaw and he had to duck. He stepped back and Jules stepped forward and they circled each other warily. This is stupid, said Benji, I'm not asking for a fight. I ain't askin' if you want one, said Jules, and lunged again. This time his fist connected and a sharp pain bloomed in Benji's left side, somewhere beneath his ribs. Patty barked; one of the spectators cheered and was hushed by the others. Benji caught his breath and stepped back again. In the corner of his eye he could see Lou, and she was his first and only care. I'm not fighting, he said quietly. The hell you ain't, said Jules, and from his pocket pulled out a revolver. He pointed it at Benji's head. Jules, said Lou, and this time it was urgent enough that both of them stopped and turned. Her face was pale and a sheen of sweat reflected the light. What? said Jules. I think, she said—and behind her glasses her eyes had a glazed look—it's comin'. What? Said Jules again. The baby, said Benji, moving past him to give her his arm, The baby's coming.

In room 112 they laid her out on the bed with a stack of towels and a pail of boiled water close by. Benji had wanted an ambulance, but Lou had cried out in terror. So they called doctor García, who gave clear instructions and said she was on her way. Pete stood near the door, wringing his hands. Can I do something, he asked, What can I do? Lou was moaning. Jules bent down and said, Hey Lou, it's me, what do you want baby? What can I get for you? The revolver had disappeared and his voice was tender and full. Benji, she said, turning her face away, Where's Benji. Jules jerked back. For a moment he stared at his wife, then at Benji. Well alright, he said. Then he turned and walked out the door and into the night. Benji, said Lou weakly, panting, her arms stretched and searching. They'd taken her glasses and placed them carefully on top of the dresser, and without them she looked helpless and far too young. He crossed the worn carpet in two strides and knelt quietly by the bed, took her small hand in his. Here, he said, I'm here. And she bared her teeth in the direction of his voice before another contraction took her away.

1964, The Holiday Inn

At the airport they lost their bags and had to wait around for half an hour to file a report. The woman behind the desk asked for their address in a monotone. Do you mean where we're from? asked Janice, Or where we're staying in Florida? Howard stood a few feet behind the fracas and let Janice handle it. Janice was better in these situations; she had a certain tone to her voice and a talent for getting her way. The vacation had not got off to a good start: on the plane Cooper had consumed three packets of Reese's cups without either of them knowing, and then vomited over himself, Janice and Howard—in that order. Howard could still smell the sour tang rising off his new linen shirt: a shirt he would have to stew in until their luggage was retrieved from whatever city it had been sent to by mistake. He shifted the weight of his son from one hip to the other. Cooper was sleeping off the effects of his mid-air misadventure and seemed to be having a dream that involved kicking. Howard could already feel a bruise forming somewhere around his ribs. Ahead, he could see Janice was wrapping up. Well, I assure you this is the last time I fly United, she said, the *very last* time. The clerk looked at her impassively and said, Next.

The attendant at the Hertz counter had alarming bags under his eyes and a three-day growth on his chin, which he kept scratching. But I don't understand, said Howard, I booked this over the phone *months* ago. Sorry, sir, said the attendant, I can't find a record of your booking. Howard looked over to where Janice was sitting with Cooper, who had woken up and was sucking on a juice box she had packed in their carry on. A tide of desperation washed over him. Can you check again? Sure, said the man. The name is Peterson, said Howard, Howard Peterson. For a moment he lived in hope. The man shook his head. Sorry Mr. Peterson, he said, still nothing. Howard closed his eyes and remembered to breathe through his nose. Look, said Howard, we've had a rough day. My kid threw up all over us. We're only in Florida for a few days and we don't go on vacation very often. Do you have *anything* else we could take? The man scratched his stubble and said, Give me a minute. He spoke to someone on the phone. Okay, he said, there's a standby vehicle. It was due for standard servicing this afternoon, but that can wait a few days. If you don't mind, you can have it. Thank you, said Howard, I'll take it. He signed what seemed like a particularly long form. Okay, said the man, it's just parked a little further away than the others.

'A little further away' turned out to be a twenty-five minute walk through a vast sea of identical Hertz cars. By the time they found the right one, Janice's lips were pursed and

wisps of hair were flying about around her face. Hey, said Howard, at least we didn't have to carry our bags! Janice ignored him and opened one of the back doors. She stopped. Howard, she said, did you remember to ask for the child safety seat? He opened his mouth and then closed it. I'll go back, he said. An hour later, he returned with the seat and they found their way out of the maze of the car park. On the interstate, heading out of Jacksonville, Cooper screamed for a full five minutes and then fell asleep. Howard and Janice drove the forty miles to St. Augustine in bristling silence.

They pulled up at the Holiday Inn, which looked like a large apartment block topped by orange turrets and pointy spires. That's strange, said Howard, I don't remember there being a golf course. When they tried to check in, the receptionist said, Oh, dear, you have the wrong place. But, said Howard, isn't this the Holiday Inn? Yes, she said, but you're wanting the Holiday Inn St. Augustine *Historic*. This here's the Holiday Inn St. Augustine *World Golf*. Oh, said Howard. It happens, said the receptionist, there are a lot of Holiday Inns round here. They got back into the car and drove a few more miles until a sign saying 'Holiday Inn St. Augustine Historic' told them they'd found the right hotel. This one had palm trees out the front. The receptionist in the lobby looked like a college sophomore. Welcome to the Holiday Inn! she chirped. Thanks, said Howard. To his relief, they had his booking on file, and he was soon handed two sets of key cards tucked into cardboard wallets. There you go, Mr. Peterson, she said, Reception closes at midnight and breakfast is served from seven to ten. Checkout is 10am. If you need anything, please just dial '1'. Thank you, said Howard. He turned around and Janice swept past him to the counter. Excuse me, she said, we're just waiting on some bags to be delivered. We'll have them sent up the minute they arrive, said the receptionist. And who do we have here? This question was directed at Cooper, who had appeared from beneath Janice's skirt. Cooper glared and said nothing. This is Cooper, said Howard. Say hello to the nice lady, Coop. Cooper disappeared under the skirt without a word. Sorry, said Howard, he's had a long day. That's okay! said the receptionist. I hope it gets better! Upstairs, Janice opened her carry on and pulled out three fresh shirts for them all, as well as a handful of cookies and some clean underwear. Thank god, she said, I trained as a Scout.

There wasn't anything else to unpack, so they left the hotel in search of food. Around the corner, they found a Denny's. They ordered a cheeseburger for Cooper and a club sandwich for Howard. Janice had a cob salad with no bacon, no cheese and no potato sticks: when it arrived, it consisted of some wilted iceberg lettuce, a handful of grape tomatoes, three thin slices of avocado and an egg. After three bites, Cooper refused to eat the rest of his burger, so they gave in and ordered pancakes. In the afternoon, they took turns in the shower, Cooper going in with Janice. Howard could hear Janice cooing and Cooper giggling, and he felt his exclusion deeply. There's no denying it, he thought, Coop is a mommy's boy. What six-year old hides under his mother's skirt? Howard resolved to make more of a man of his son, though without much of an idea of exactly

how. He tried to think back to his own father, and how they'd spent their time together, but Fred—an insurance salesman—had been a largely absent figure, materialising sporadically and silently at Christmas and other major events, before disappearing with finality sometime around Howard's eighth birthday. Enid had raised Howard and his brother Jack almost completely on her own: in the memories he had of his mother, she always had one hand plunged into a sinkful of suds, and the other holding a cigarette. The image made him thirsty and he cast about vaguely for something to drink. Howard, said Janice, right next to his ear. What? said Howard, almost falling off his seat. She looked at him as if he were a senile old man. Let's go for a walk, she said.

When they'd planned the trip, they'd picked Florida because it was warm, and St. Augustine on a recommendation from one of Howard's colleagues at the firm. It's the oldest town in America, this colleague had said, settled by the Spanish. It's like being in Europe, only *cheaper*. Now that they were here, Howard felt a rising sense of disappointment. He'd imagined squares filled with cool gushing fountains and women with dark eyes in red dresses, half-concealed in shadowy doorways. Above all, he imagined music and dancing. Instead, they encountered a McDonalds and a JCPenney within two blocks, and the only accents he heard around him were Southern American. He was beginning to think they'd made a mistake (one of many), and then they turned into Aviles Street, above which a sign proclaimed 'Oldest Street in the Nation', and everything changed. Howard knew that the cobblestones and closely packed pastel buildings were mostly just for show—relics that no longer served a purpose except to charm tourists like himself—but he couldn't help feeling charmed. He had a secret passion for history, which he didn't like to admit to anybody, even Janice, and the thought of walking down a street that had existed for hundreds of years gave him an immense thrill. Isn't this super? he said to his family, but when he turned around they were nowhere to be seen.

After half an hour of frantic searching, he realised his best option was to go back to the hotel. In the elevator he remembered that Janice had slipped both key cards into her purse, so he rode back downstairs and went to the bar. At four o'clock the bar was largely empty, except for a few die-hard alcoholics. Howard had only intended to order a soda, but when he sat heavily at the counter and the bartender asked, What can I get for you, sir?, he involuntarily said, Scotch, please. When the drink arrived, he stared down at the amber liquid and considered what it might mean. On the advice of his doctor (and under threat of Janice leaving him), Howard hadn't had a drink in months. It's okay, he told himself, you're on holiday. You've had a hard day. You're just going to have one drink while you wait for Janice and Cooper. Four hours later, he stumbled up to the room and found Janice sitting on the bed, her lips white. Janice, he said, what happened? What happened? she repeated. What happened is that Cooper had to tie his shoelace, and when we looked up, you'd wandered God knows where. We spent the whole afternoon looking for you, we haven't had dinner, and now you show up *drunk*. Janice,

said Howard, I thought ... I mean I turned. And you were gone. And I *looked*. And then ... his explanations withered under the blast furnace of her gaze. I'm sorry, he said, except it came out as *Isborry*. Don't, said Janice, don't say another word. We'll go over this later. Right now we're going downstairs to get something to eat. 'Kay, said Howard, and followed her out.

The on-site restaurant at the Holiday Inn St. Augustine Historic was named Barnacle Bill's Seafood House. It occupied a large portion of the lobby, and at the entrance there was a picture of a fishing basket tied with heavy rope, out of which a lobster extended a friendly claw. The *maitre d'* seated them beneath a vent that was blowing cold air, and Howard wished he'd brought a jacket. A young waitress bounded up with menus and said, How're you all doing today? Fine, mumbled Howard. That's great! Now our specials this evening are a shrimp gumbo, fried shrimp with potatoes and a shrimp salad with our famous super *secret* house dressing. At the word 'secret' she winked at Cooper, who screwed up his nose and took a deep breath in, presumably to scream. We'll take one of each, Howard said quickly. He expected to be corrected by Janice, but she just quietly unfolded her napkin across her lap and did the same for Cooper. They sat in stony silence while around them honeymooning couples held hands and small children chased each other around the tables. Howard desperately wanted another drink. Janice, he said, but she went on ignoring him. Cooper said, Daddy, why is your face all red. Howard said, because it's cold, that's why, and shifted uncomfortably under the vent.

They put Cooper to bed and had a fierce whispered argument, during which Janice detailed every flaw in Howard's character and person. Howard took it until he couldn't anymore and almost yelled, You're a self-righteous *pedant*! To make matters worse, the large quantities of shrimp he had consumed at dinner, out of a need to offset the silence with some kind of activity, was sitting badly in his stomach, mixed in with all the alcohol. After his small outburst, Janice closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. There was a knock on the door. Neither of them made to get up. Go away, thought Howard, but the knocking persisted. What? he said, opening the door. Outside was a young man with a moustache and bad posture. Luggage, he said. Howard looked down and saw their bags, plastered with stickers. One of the locks had been busted open and the end of a sock (his) lolled between the zippers like a thirsty tongue. Okay, said Howard, thank you. He tipped the bellhop, who slouched off, and closed the door. Janice had disappeared into the bathroom. I don't want to talk any more, she said, when he walked in. I'm going to bed. She fished a nightgown out of a bag, turned off the light and climbed in next to Cooper.

In the morning, Howard had a terrible hangover. He'd forgotten how debilitating these could be, and he lay in bed willing his liver to process the alcohol faster. There's no denying it, he thought, I'm not twenty-four anymore. Howard looked back at his youth

with regret: he'd been a fit young man in college and the physical conditioning of football matches and daily running had seen him through his twenties, when he began working at the firm and sitting for long hours at his desk. After thirty, though, there'd been a marked decline. Whether as compensation or comfort, the drinking had crept up on him, and he couldn't, now that he was trying, pinpoint exactly *when* it had gone from normal to excessive. But excessive it had been, even he could admit that. There had been several incidents, at friends' parties or family occasions, where he knew he had crossed some line that others had not. He'd been grateful to Janice for giving him another chance—though, really, after all he'd done to keep a roof over their heads (a very nice one, at that), it was the least she could do in return. At the thought of Janice, he had a vision of her on their wedding day, in clouds of lace; one that still had the power to stir him. He risked a dizzy spell to raise his head and looked over to the other bed, where she lay with Cooper. But her face was turned away and all he could see was a mass of rumpled dark hair. There obviously wasn't going to be any sympathy from that quarter, so he got up, dressed, and made his way gingerly down to reception to ask for some aspirin. Even the dimly lit corridors sent sharp knives shearing through his skull, and in the brighter bowl of the lobby he felt a distinct wave of nausea. The upbeat young college student at reception had been replaced by a balding, middle-aged man, who wordlessly reached under the counter and procured two tablets of aspirin. Thank you, said Howard. He made it back the room just in time to see his shrimp dinner find its way out into the world again.

At breakfast, Howard sat as still as possible while Janice and Cooper made trips to and from the buffet table. The aspirin had taken effect and he was beginning to feel human again. Whether he was present or not didn't seem to make much difference: his wife and son, as usual, were in a world of their own. Cooper was chatting about something Howard couldn't quite get the drift of, having tuned out the entire first half of the conversation. And then the dinosaur ate the rabbit, concluded Cooper. Did he now? said Janice, placing a segment of orange on his plate. Would the dinosaur eat some orange, too? Cooper picked up the orange segment obediently and sucked on it. Howard, feeling his worth as a parent to have slipped in recent hours, tried to follow suit with a piece of peeled apple. Cooper threw it across the room. It hit a little girl at another table and she started to cry. I'm sorry, said Howard, when her angry and well-built father came to their table for an explanation or a reckoning. He's autistic, he said. Howard! Janice exclaimed and put her hands over Cooper's ears, that's not true! The father of the little girl, sensing a deep current of antipathy that was its own punishment, left them be. You've got some nerve, said Janice. Suddenly, Howard was sick and tired of it all. Janice, he said, taking one of her resisting hands from Cooper's left ear, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about last night and I'm sorry about this morning. Can we please, please just start our vacation over? We've only got a few days and then I'm back to work and who knows when we'll be able to get away again. I promise I'll be good. I promise I'll be better. Something in his plea soaked through the mantle of her anger, and her hand relaxed. Okay, Howard, she said. Howard looked into her eyes and a surge of emotion hit him in his newly emptied stomach. I love you, he said, and helped himself to a piece of toast.

The well-preserved seventeenth-century ruins of the Castillo de San Marcos were a half-mile from the hotel—the sun was out and there was a fresh breeze, so they decided to walk. Janice was wearing a fetching dress he hadn't seen before, one that showed off her long legs, and even Cooper was acting like the well-behaved six-year-old Howard, in weaker moments, prayed he would be. Howard felt his heart lightening with every step, and a growing sense of ease and pleasure suffused his limbs. Finally, he thought, I can have the vacation I deserve. They passed all the cars fighting for spaces in the parking lot (the sight of which made Howard feel smug, for having chosen the *right* hotel to stay in), paid their entry fees, and walked through the turnstile. The fort was shaped like a large square doughnut, with a square hole in the middle and corners pointing outwards like arrowheads. On the grounds, interspersed among the tourists, roamed people dressed in military uniforms from various eras and nations (Spanish and British, mostly). Some of them would stop wandering every now and then to play out mock battle scenes, where they pointed blunt bayonets and muskets at each other and yelled incomprehensible fragments of scripted speech. Most of it was snatched away by the wind, which was stronger up here on the bluff than it was downtown. There was a military band marching around, too, with bright brass instruments and plumed helmets. The music—though it faded in and out depending on which way the wind blew—was a fitting complement, Howard thought, to the solemn gravity of the centuries-old walls. Howard took Janice in one hand and Cooper in the other, and they walked about, stopping every now and then so Howard could read a plaque or Janice could fix Cooper's hat, which kept sliding off his head. For lunch, they paid an exorbitant amount for ham sandwiches, but Howard, for once, didn't mind. They sat on a stone bench in the shade, along with other docile families, and Howard vowed never to touch a drink again. After lunch, Janice got up to go to the bathroom. She was back three minutes later. There's a really long queue, she said. That's alright, said Howard, you go on and we'll just wander around for a little while. We'll meet you back here in ten minutes. Janice gave him a rare smile, and Howard took Cooper through a tall passageway to the outer walls, where heavy cannons were lined up at intervals, their snouts pointed out to sea. Look, Coop! said Howard, a cannon! This one was made in (he craned to read the plaque) 1695! That's more than two hundred years ago! Cooper squatted down to study a crack in the floor at the cannon's base. Despite the day's relative calm, Howard felt disappointment needling him between the shoulder blades. There were times when he harboured the uncharitable thought that perhaps Cooper wasn't *actually* his son, but he knew it was a transparent ploy to avoid the fact that between them there existed a gulf of understanding. Why, he didn't know, but it was there and it accosted him every time he tried to extend a bridge into Cooper's little world and saw it fall instead into a deep ravine. We'll have to have another child, Howard thought, surely *one* of them will turn out like me. Cooper wasn't quite like Janice, either, to tell the truth—which led Howard back in a glum circle to his earlier theory. Howard rested his hand on the broad rounded back of the cannon, warmed from the sun, and thought about what it might have been like to feel its tremor and recoil with use. To his surprise, the cannon started to shake and he stood for a few seconds dumfounded at the

power of his own imagination, until he realised that *everything* was shaking. In that same moment he also realised that he had, for the second time in two days, lost his son.

Janice was livid. I can't believe it, she kept saying, what kind of a father *are* you? I can't even go to the *bathroom* without you doing something *egregious*. Howard didn't know exactly what 'egregious' meant, but knew it was bad. He followed her stalking figure helplessly round the fort, both of them calling Cooper's name, though there were in fact lots of people searching for other people, so the fort was filled with the sounds of names being called. They rang against each other in the confused air. In the end, Howard and Janice found Cooper relatively quickly, clutching the hand of a man dressed in a seventeenth-century Spanish uniform. He had a streak of dirt on his forehead, but otherwise seemed fine. Cooper! said Janice, rushing to kneel at his side. This little guy was wandering down near the dungeons, said the man. Thank you, said Howard, I turned round for a *split* second and he just disappeared. Children get lost all the time here, said the man, it's a big place. I pick up three or four strays a day. Thank you, said Howard, glancing meaningfully at Janice. The man bent down to Cooper's height and said, Okay little man, I'm glad we found your folks. Just remember what to do if you hear the enemy approaching. Shoot them in the head! yelled Cooper. That's right little man, said the faux Spanish officer, and walked away. Look, said Howard, no harm done. Janice was busy wiping Cooper's face with a moist towelette and either didn't hear or pretended not to.

The walk back to the Holiday Inn was uneventful, but Howard sensed that things had taken an irrevocable turn for the worse. He'd tried to make light of the situation, but Janice wasn't laughing, or even smiling, and Cooper was shooting an imaginary gun at the head of every person they passed on the way. Eventually Howard lost his temper and yelled. When they entered the lobby, with Cooper sniffing and Janice not speaking to him again, they found out that the mild tremor had been the result of an earthquake in Alaska—9.2 on the richter scale. In the room, they switched on the set and sat in silence as footage of huge piles of rubble, and broken shop windows and emergency service workers in hard hats filled the screen. Oh my god, said Janice. What's wrong, said Cooper, what's Oh my god? Sweetie, said Janice, you know what an earthquake is, don't you? Yes, said Cooper, it's when lots of buildings fall down. Well, said Janice, there was a big one in Alaska. That's why everything was shaking for a while at the fort. Hey, Coop, said Howard, where's Alaska? Howard, said Janice, I don't think this is the time for a geography quiz. Howard ignored her. Go on, Coop, he said. Instead of answering, Cooper put his little finger into his ear and swivelled it round. Are we having dinner yet? he asked. Howard didn't give up. Where are we now? he asked. Cooper looked at Janice, but she was transfixed by images of destruction. America? Where in America? Cooper considered, his face a corkscrew of concentration. Howard mouthed 'Florida'. Florida? That's right! said Howard. Florida. What part of America is that? Cooper was silent. It's in the south ... the south ... eeee ... the *southeast*, Howard said. What's the opposite direction to southeast? This was too much for Cooper, who burst into tears. There, now,

said Janice, folding him in her arms, Daddy's just being a monster. The northwest, said Howard flatly. In the bathroom he retrieved a miniature bottle of whiskey from his left trouser pocket (how it had got there, he couldn't quite remember) and took a long sip. How much longer, he thought, can this go on. When he went back into the bedroom, Janice shot him a look full of venom. She hates me, he realised with sadness. She actually hates me. He cleared his throat to dislodge the lump that had formed there and said, I'm, ah. I'm going for a walk.

Howard ordered a scotch and watched, along with the bartender and other patrons, coverage of the earthquake on the TV mounted above the bar. They were pulling survivors from the wreckage: people so shrouded in white dust they resembled eerie statues with wide, blinking eyes and red wounds where their mouths were. Along with the survivors were the bodies of those that didn't make it: these they carried away from the scene on stretchers, draped with tarpaulins. Howard knew it was a poor comparison, but just then he felt like he was staring at the wreckage of his own marriage. He thought again of their wedding day, which had been in May, eight years ago, at the local episcopal church—the same one his grandparents had tied the knot in half a century before that. They'd even had the same minister, though he'd had to support himself with a cane and kept dabbing at the corners of his eyes with a handkerchief. Janice had looked radiant in a dress passed down from *her* grandmother—all lace and fine embroidery—her neck clasped by a glowing string of pearls, and Howard's entire being had been filled to bursting with happiness. He stared, now, into the ashes of that fire and wondered how and when it had gone out. On screen, a relative of one of the bodies being carried away on a stretcher was crying and saying, The last time I saw her was this morning, when I left for work. That was the last time. Now I'll never see her again. I can't believe she's gone. Howard stopped mid-drink and let the words sink in. My god, he thought, what a fool I've been. He set his almost-empty glass down on the counter, hastily paid the bartender, and raced to the elevator.

The second he swiped the key card to unlock the door he knew something was wrong. The lights flickered on and he saw that the beds were empty. One of the bags—Janice's—was gone. On the side table, there was a note on a hotel pad that read:

Howard,
I've taken Coop and we're going back home.

That was it. No 'Dear' at the start and not even a 'see you at home' or 'from Janice' to finish. Though, he supposed, it could hardly be from anybody else. He sat in the room by himself for a while, rereading the note, trying to read beyond it into the haze of the future. After a while, he finished the miniature bottle of whiskey in his pocket, then went back downstairs. He must have been gone a long time because the bar was empty and the lights were off. He sat alone in the dark, staring at the wall of bottles lined up in front

of him like fellow prison inmates. It was over, he thought, he and Janice were finished. She'd take Cooper and go live with her mother, and he'd have to sell the house and move into a small apartment and be a bachelor again. His colleagues at the firm would understand—it had happened to a few of them over the years—but how he would ever tell his long-suffering mother, to whom such things mattered immensely, he didn't know. The long vista of lonely decades stretched out before him like a curse and he laid his head down on the counter, feeling sorry and sore. In his blurred vision, he saw himself as an earthquake survivor passed over by the rescue crews: buried alive and covered in fine, white dust, glowing luminously like a coal in the rent earth. When he next lifted his head and peered at the clock on the wall, it read five a.m. He was surprised to find, on waking, that besides a dry mouth and pounding headache, he didn't feel quite so bad. In fact, he realised, he felt really very *good*. He reached over the bar and poured himself another drink.

1986, Travelodge

The inaugural convention for the United Sciences of America (Central Midwestern Division) opened in the Bonanza East function room of the Travelodge in Great Falls, Montana, with a keynote from the top distributor in the greater Great Falls region (5,000 units in the first quarter alone). Originally, the organising committee had booked the Bonanza West room ('west' being the cardinal direction of progress and pioneers), but there'd been a mix-up, and when Cynthia had arrived to unpack the signs and set up the projector, she'd been told that the group in Bonanza West (the American Geriatrics Society—Great Falls Branch) had arrived earlier and already claimed the venue for their event. First come, first served, said the manager of the Travelodge—a man with thick chest hair straining through his polyester shirt. Cynthia, who had unknowingly trailed her competitor all the way down the interstate, and had only entered the building five minutes later, had to grit her teeth and say, Fine, no problem, and wheel the suitcase with all its paraphernalia from one end of the hotel to the other. Bonanza East was almost identical to Bonanza West: the size and layout, the carpet and upholstery (in a scheme of purple zigzags on green squares), were all the same. The major differences lay in two details: its windows looked directly onto a wall of bland grey offices, rather than the river; and its name had the wrong direction in it. The view didn't bother Cynthia. Symbolism, however, was not a force to be underestimated in this line of business. She resolved to make a firm note in her event summary for the organising committee next year. Something like: It appears there was a mistake with the room booking, which *could not be rectified* on the day. Please *triple check* room booking *at least three months* beforehand, for *all future* conventions. She glanced at her watch and saw that she was now running eleven minutes behind schedule. She laid her suitcase on the ground in the middle of the room, unzipped the main compartment, and set to work. This was the fifth convention she'd run for the USA since January, and she could perform the setup with her eyes closed. Thirty minutes later, she stood at the end of the room and ran through a mental checklist: projector, signs, rosettes, ribbons, display, microphone, PA. The chairs, upholstered in fabric patterned like the carpet, were lined up in neat rows, facing the stage. On each she had placed a USA notepad, a USA pen, a USA pin, and a USA stress ball. The table near the entrance was laden with plastic name tags, and a sign-in sheet. The clock on the wall, which ran slightly fast (Cynthia made a note to use her watch instead), read eight twenty-two. She had just enough time to freshen up. There was a large wall-to-wall mirror in the washroom, lit by two unflattering fluorescents. Cynthia reapplied her lipstick from a tube that said 'Love Me Later' in purple cursive, straightened the shoulder pads on her fuchsia suit jacket, and re-tied her hair with a barrette, finger-teasing a few strands around her forehead to hide the wrinkles that had appeared in recent years. This had the unfortunate effect of drawing attention to the dark

roots at the base of her blonde perm, but Cynthia bore this as the lesser of two evils. Better to be young and scrappy than immaculate and old, she thought. She made a note to book an appointment with her hairdresser the minute the convention was over, dabbed at her freshly applied lipstick with a thin piece of toilet tissue, and gave her reflection a broad USA smile.

A few likely attendees were milling around near the door when she got back. They were all men dressed in dark-grey suits, with grey ties and cheap brass-plated cuff-links (Cynthia had worked as a jewellery-store assistant in her youth, and could tell the difference between genuine and plated metals). One of the men had slathered so much grease into his slicked-back hair that the product was already starting to run down the neck of his shirt. At her approach, the men looked up expectantly and then pretended to be studying various parts of the foyer. Good morning gentlemen, said Cynthia, are you all here for the USA Convention? Some of them switched to staring at their shoes. Well then, you've come to the right place! She gestured towards the open and welcoming doors of Bonanza East. Please, she said, go in. You'll find a sign-in sheet and name tags to your left. Sit anywhere you like! A man in his sixties (if she had to place him) ogled Cynthia's legs as he walked past and she took it with equanimity. Time may have caused certain parts of her anatomy to become ... less *firm*, but she did still have, if she could say so herself, enviable legs. Inside, a young man was standing near the lectern, talking to what appeared to be empty space. Hi, said Cynthia, you must be Mr. Ullman. The man turned and bestowed a smile that involved two rows of large, impossibly white teeth. Excuse me, he said, I was just rehearsing. And you are ... ? Cynthia, said Cynthia, extending a hand, I'm the regional convention manager. The man looked down at her hand, still smiling. How lovely, he said, eventually taking it. There should be more women in our midst. When he said 'women', his voice lowered in pitch and he swayed forward slightly. Cynthia, dazzled by the dental specimens on display, managed a smile in return, then extricated her hand. She instinctively swayed back an inch or two further than he had swayed forward, and in her retreat caught a waft of expensive aftershave (Cynthia had also worked in the men's toiletry section of her local department store). We do make up more than half of the population, she said. Do you really? he asked, with what seemed like genuine surprise. Of America? Of the world, she said. Isn't that a fascinating fact, he said. Is everything set up alright for you Mr. Ullman? she said. Please, he said, call me Theodore—*Teddy*. The setup is perfect, he said, tapping the microphone. An eardrum-puncturing thud emanated from the speakers and several people clutched their heads. Perfect, he repeated. Then he looked down. Will there be drinking water? Cynthia mentally upbraided herself for forgetting this basic detail, and left the room in search of a jug. In the foyer, more men and the occasional woman were standing around staring at the carpet and walls. Please, she said, go in. We'll get started in just a moment. She hurried to reception, where somebody (not the manager, who was, it seemed, permanently affixed to his seat) helped to procure a jug and three glasses. Cynthia surreptitiously filled the jug in the washroom, took a minute to apply a smudge more blue eyeshadow from an almost-empty compact, then returned to Bonanza East. By now

half the seats were full and people had begun impromptu and awkward conversations with their neighbours. And where did you purchase *your* shoes, she heard one man say to another. Their shoes, she noted as she walked past, looked identical. Teddy Ullman was sitting in the front row, receiving the fawning attention of what Cynthia took to be distributors lower on the chain. She placed the jug and glasses on a small table near the lectern and then checked her watch again. Eight fifty-five. Excuse me, said somebody behind her. She swivelled and almost winded a short man in glasses with her turning arm. I went to Bonanza West, he gasped. Sorry, said Cynthia, there was a room change. Maybe somebody should go over and make an announcement, he said, I think some of *our* people are in there. Right, said Cynthia. Sure enough, when she popped her head into Bonanza West, there were large patches of grey suits distributed uncomfortably among a sea of knitted vests. By the time she had made her announcement and herded the suits to Bonanza East, it was nine-oh-five. I'm sorry, she said to Teddy Ullman, there was a last-minute room change. That's fine sweetheart, he said, I'm not going anywhere. He raised his left eyebrow in what Cynthia took to be a suggestive manner, and then, just in case she had doubts or was slow on the uptake, winked. Cynthia stared at the large gold ring on his wedding finger, then got up to introduce him to the crowd.

Some of you may find this hard to believe, said Teddy Ullman, but I'm not in this to make a dime, or even a cool million. There was a twitter of laughter. I'm not standing here speaking to you because I *single-handedly* sold *over five thousand* units in the first quarter of this year, he said. I'm not standing here speaking to you because I drive a Mercedes Benz with all-leather upholstery and a state-of-the-art hi-fi system, and send my kids to private colleges, and have a *maid*. No sir, I'm here because I *believe* in the power of positive thought and positive action and I *believe* in team USA! If I was just trying to sell a product, hell, I'd list the features from A to Z and get it over with, let you go on with your day and me with mine. We've all got more important tasks to fulfil in this life, and far be it for me to keep us from those tasks. But this (he held up some small white plastic bottles and what looked like a candy bar): Master Formula. Formula Plus. The Fibre Energy Bar. These aren't just nutritional *supplements*, they are the *heart and soul* of America. They are the future of food consumption in this country and we at United Sciences of America are the prophets of this glorious future. By 'we', I mean *us*. I mean you and me, all you people in this room today, and in rooms like this all over the country. We're starting a revolution! And we're not the only ones who believe. He paused, and somebody in the room yelled out, Yeah! That's right, said Teddy Ullman, you've all seen the promotional video, made by our good friend William Shatner. Hell, if Captain Kirk thinks this stuff is alright, then it's *alright*! There was a loud burst of applause and several more 'Yeah!'s, as well as one 'That's what I'm talking about!', from the audience. Cynthia, who had lost the thread of logic early on, looked down at her watch and noted that Teddy Ullman was running overtime. She considered making some kind of sign, but the audience seemed rapt. This stuff has *saved my life*, he was saying. A year ago I was sick as a dog, visiting the doctor every month, with my medical bills piling up, I was *wasting away*—physically *and* financially. Now look at me! He stepped away from the lectern and turned

a full circle. I'm fit as a fiddle! I eat USA supplements for breakfast, lunch and dinner. My wife eats them. My kids eat them. Hell, even my *dogs* eat them. There was some clapping and cheering, and also a woof. Now, said Teddy Ullman, I know I'm preaching to the choir today. I know that all you good people (and here he pointed at various upturned faces) know what I'm talking about. I *know* you all *believe* in team USA, as much as I do. This here (he made a big circle with his arms) is not just a room of distributors, it's a *family*. And what do families do? They *inspire* each other to be *better*, to dig *deeper*. So, what I'm going to do for you today, as members of *my* USA family, is just set you all a little challenge. Ask you to set your sights a little *higher*. If you've sold 10 units this quarter, next quarter maybe you aim to sell 15. If you've sold 15, maybe you aim to sell 30. If you've sold 3,000, maybe aim for another thousand or so. Me? I pledge to sell *ten thousand* units this quarter. You might think that's an impossible figure. You might think that I've set myself up to fail, but if you think that, you're not *thinking*. What we've got here, folks, isn't a fishing rod or a necklace or a set of steak knives: it's *food*. People have to eat! This is what we call a *perpetually renewable market*. Now, I've compared notes with my colleagues at a national level, and we all agree—as far as our product lines are concerned, there's no telling how far we can go. The *sky's the limit*! Hell, we might even get the *president* in on this, and then you can all sit back and watch your pennies grow sky high. If our great founder Bobby Adler were here today, I'm sure he would tell each and every one of you that's he's *proud as hell*. I'm sure he would say that you're all contributing to the building of an empire—not just of wealth, but also of *health*. Not just *wealth*, but *health*, he repeated. He said it again and raised a fist to the ceiling. At first only one or two voices joined in, but soon the whole room was chanting Not just *wealth*, but *health*. Not just *wealth*, but *health*. Teddy Ullman looked around, smiling his megawatt smile and then bowed. Thank you, gentlemen, he said, You've been a fine audience.

At morning tea there were sachets of instant coffee and Oreos arranged in neat rows on melamine plates, the latter donated by a local shopkeeper who was also a distributor in her spare time. Cynthia was relieved to see another woman, though after four conventions she was getting used to the gender imbalance. The Oreo supplier was named Ruth, and she was (if Cynthia had to place her) somewhere in her forties. By her own account, she was also a divorcee and looking to remarry as soon as humanly possible. I'm just *so excited*, she said, to have heard Teddy Ullman speak! He's such a go getter! Five thousand units in one quarter! I thought I was doing fine selling fifty, but he must work *day and night*. And, she said in a stage whisper, isn't he just about the most *handsome* man you've ever laid eyes on? What a beautiful set of teeth! Cynthia right then had her mouth full of an Oreo, so she simply nodded and gestured vaguely with her coffee cup. After the break some representatives from the Great Falls Chamber of Commerce spoke about potential partnerships with local businesses, and presented some graphs and pie charts that Cynthia couldn't make sense of. She was not alone. By lunchtime the mood in the room was edgy and Cynthia could see the backs of several participants slumped in what appeared to be the posture of deep sleep. She caught the eye of one of the reps and tapped her watch theatrically, even though they had at least

another five minutes to go. And that's about all we have time for, he said hurriedly. The applause that followed was patchy and insincere. Lunch—which consisted of sandwiches with the usual fillings (ham and cheese, ham and tomato, and just cheese for the vegetarians)—arrived behind schedule, but as the food was also donated, Cynthia couldn't express the approbation she felt. She considered making a note of the delay in her report, and then decided, given the circumstances, it would be uncharitable. When the trays of sandwiches had been unwrapped and the hot water urn switched back on, Cynthia looked up to see Teddy Ullman striding toward her. Excuse me, she said to a man on her right, and moved past him to exit the building through a side door. Outside, she was almost hit in the face by a flying takeaway coffee cup. She ducked in time, and the cardboard cylinder slammed into the door that had just closed behind her. A splodge of light-brown liquid dripped down to form a pool on the ground. The wind, it seemed, had picked up considerably since the morning. Cynthia edged toward the windows and saw that Teddy Ullman had been intercepted by Ruth. She looked at her watch. There were exactly eighteen minutes before she had to be back. She thought about spending it in her car, but the lot was round the other side of the building, and by the time she made it there and back, there'd only be about ten minutes left to sit and rest. Her eyes lit on a bench a few yards away, under a struggling young oak. At the bench, she removed her high-heeled pumps (a sartorial decision she regretted) and inspected her feet. The polish on her left big toe had chipped and there were ugly red indentations where the buckles had pressed in. She made a note to purchase some less *elevated* shoes when her next paycheck came through. The door to the Travelodge swung open and an old man in a vest appeared. He looked around, shading his eyes, and for a moment Cynthia thought he hadn't seen her. But then she remembered she was wearing a fuchsia suit and, sure enough, he shuffled purposefully in her direction. She jammed her pumps back on in a hurry. Mind if I sit down? he asked. Not at all, she lied. It took him a full minute to lower himself onto the bench. Mind if I smoke? he said. Go right ahead, she said. She realised, as he lit up, that in her haste to avoid Teddy Ullman she had neglected to eat. Damn, she said quietly. What's that? said the old man. Ham, she said, lamely. I don't know what you're saying, he said. My name's Ray. Cynthia, she replied. I'm eighty-five years old, he said. Are you attending the Geriatric Society convention? No, she said. I thought not, he said, you look to be a young woman. Cynthia put this down to the condition of her legs. I'm managing the other convention, she said, in Bonanza East. Who would that be for? he asked. The United Sciences of America, she said. Who? he said. The United Sciences of America, she said, louder. He looked impressed. The United States of America? *Sciences* she almost shouted, *The United Sciences of America*. You mean to tell me you're managing a convention for the entire country? he said. She gave up. Something like that, she said. It's a fine place to live, he said, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. She nodded absently. By now the wind was blowing even harder. The tree behind them was bending and shaking like a baby's rattle and Cynthia had to keep a firm hold of her skirt. The other hand was keeping her hair out of her mouth. Despite the half-can of Aqua Net she'd sprayed on it before leaving her apartment, her perm was being blown every which way. You know, said Ray, you remind me of my dead wife. She knitted me this vest before she passed. Cynthia looked at the vest and saw that it had the upper half of a

horse appliqued on it. The horse sported a lopsided grin. Very nice, she said. She passed before she could finish the legs, explained Ray. Then he looked down at Cynthia's. You've got nice legs, he said, How old did you say you were? Cynthia let go of her hair to check her watch and said, I have to go. Eh? said Ray. She stood up, adjusted her skirt and picked her way back to the Travelodge, stepping over a car tyre that had appeared on the path. That's odd, she thought, but then she passed through the coffee-splattered door and was inside making a beeline for the washroom. It was twelve twenty-five.

Back at Bonanza East, everybody was just getting settled in their seats. Cynthia's head swam a little from the reapplication of Aqua Net on an empty stomach, but she managed to hold up her end of several conversations about distribution chains and upselling, and the differences between Master Formula and Formula Plus (a respectful argument ensued, but on inspection of the labels it appeared there *was* no difference), before it was time to introduce the next speaker. This turned out to be the short man in glasses she had almost winded earlier. His name was Miles and his presentation was so mind-numbingly boring that afterwards Cynthia couldn't remotely recall what it was about. She did note, however, that at approximately one fifteen all the lights in the room dimmed. Miles was ploughing on oblivious, but several heads with slicked-back hair swivelled on off-white-collared necks. Accordingly, said Miles—. He didn't get to finish because there was a loud explosion and the lights went out completely. Somebody (a man, if Cynthia had to make the call), screamed. In the office building next door the lights also flickered out. It was the weekend, so nobody was actually inside, but the sight caused further panic in the room. Everybody, said Cynthia, trying to raise her voice above the growing din, Please calm down! She pushed her way toward the windows and looked out. Inexplicably, the sky was choked with black clouds. Behind her she heard a confused scuffle—someone had knocked over the display of USA supplements and people were tripping over the little rolling bottles in their haste to get out. In the distance, beyond the city limits of Great Falls, she could see what looked like a vast funnel descending on the earth. A car tyre flew by, then another. Tyre factory, somebody said behind her. The last thing she saw before she turned away was a knitted vest with a grinning horse with its legs cut off, sailing into the black sky.

Outside, members of the United Sciences of America (Central Midwestern Division) and the American Geriatrics Society—Great Falls Branch gathered in common distress. The concrete mass of the Travelodge was a dark, inert thing rising out of the parking lot, encircled by a ring of whirling car tyres. It's quite beautiful, actually, said Ruth, who seemed an oasis of calm in the hysteria. At least, thought Cynthia, the Aqua Net is doing its job: her perm was a reassuringly solid weight on her head and her vision was unobstructed in all directions. She looked around for the hotel manager, but he was nowhere to be seen. Nor were any of the other staff. Perhaps, thought Cynthia (not unreasonably, given the times), they have an underground emergency bunker for such occasions. She grasped Ruth's hand. Ruth, she said, we've got to call ... But at that

moment Teddy Ullman appeared out of a clutch of suits. Linda, he said. He seemed to be looking directly at her. Cynthia, she said. Cynthia, he said, why has nobody called me a car? Cynthia stared while he passed a hand through his slicked-back hair and then laid it on one of her ample shoulder pads. Look, Cynthia, he swayed closer, I know you thought something would happen between us. And though it is a well-known fact that I'm attracted to *significantly older* women, I just can't afford the bad publicity. I'm *this* close to a phone call and a round of 18 with Bobby Adler himself. And Bobby, if you know anything about Bobby, is a *family* man. He's been married for forty-five years—not to the same woman, but married nonetheless. My wife and I have our differences, but when all is said and done she's thoroughly devoted to me, and that's what a man in my line of business needs most. *You* know how it is. Now, he said raising his voice and taking a few steps back, if you'll just be a sweetheart and call that car. Cynthia was vaguely aware of more panicked sounds around her, but she was still processing this little aside when a preternatural gust of wind picked Teddy Ullman up like a doll and tossed him into the air. He screamed once, and then was carried away with unbelievable speed across the rooftops of Great Falls. Next to her, she heard Ruth sob.

In her report for the organising committee, she wrote: The first annual convention for the USA (Central Midwestern Division), held at the Travelodge Hotel in the city of Great Falls, Montana, was well attended. Speakers—in particular the keynote—were received with enthusiasm and (mostly) adhered to their allocated time slots. Catering was good. (Here she crossed out 'good' and wrote 'adequate'.) The venue was centrally located and had a decent PA system, though staff were not particularly accommodating in moments of crisis. Lastly, she wrote, there was an unfortunate mix-up with the rooms. We had booked Bonanza West, but were required to move to Bonanza East at the last minute. This caused no small amount of confusion on the day. My recommendation would be to *triple check* the room booking *at least three months in advance* for all future conventions. Cynthia read the report over twice, stapled the pages together, then signed and dated the last one. She filed it in a manila folder with the other reports, and placed the folder in a drawer. Then she rang her hairdresser and booked an appointment for the following Monday.

2016, The Star Princess

In the days before the internet, Sol Whittaker had been the king of an empire: three of the city's top newspapers—the *Sun*, the *Herald* and the *Post*—traded under his watchful eye. At his local Starbucks, where his order stood ready on the counter every morning at eight am, they had taken to calling him 'King Solomon'. And then the internet came and busted it all up. Subscriptions dwindled, advertising dried up, and the newspapers withered and died: first the *Sun*, then the *Herald*, and finally (it was the last that broke his heart) the *Post*. On the final day at the *Post*, he visited the magnificent offices overlooking Elliot Bay and gave an emotional speech to the staff, many of whom were still packing their belongings into cardboard boxes. They had clapped and cried, and he had cried along with them. Somebody had opened a bottle of champagne to toast the end of an era. And then the doors had closed and the building had stood desolate for a few weeks until the next tenants moved in. When he was downtown, Sol studiously avoided the area: he couldn't bear to see what had become of decades of his life. Other media moguls had wisely invested in television, but Sol had been adamant about the invincibility of print. He'd held on—selling and mortgaging and borrowing—until there was barely anything left. Now he wasn't the king of much at all. When Myra had booked their cruise, he'd been spending his days sitting in an armchair, staring out at the small garden (they'd had to sell their sprawling family home in Broadmoor and downgrade to a condo in Shoreline). Sol, she'd said, you gotta get out of this slump. Sure, Myra, he'd said without conviction. She'd handed him a glossy brochure with pictures of older couples holding hands, their faces turned to the wind. We'll go to Alaska, she said, it'll be good for you. Sure, Myra, he'd said, leafing aimlessly through the brochure and turning back to the window. Outside, a breeze picked up a small flower and swirled it around the yard.

The morning before they were due to leave, Myra sat down suddenly at the kitchen table and said, Sol, I don't feel so good. Her face looked like half of it had been frozen. In the hospital, he'd held her hand and listened as the doctor said, It seems you've had a mild stroke Mrs. Whittaker. I think that's the worst of it for now, but I'd like keep you here for a week or so, just to monitor your condition and run some tests. Sol was all for cancelling the trip, but Myra insisted he go without her. Sol, she said, I'll be fine here. Trudy will come with the kids and keep an eye on me. But, said Sol, what if something happens? I'll be on a boat. And I'm in a hospital, said Myra, I think they'll be able to handle things without you. If it were really serious the doc would have said so. Look, she said, picking up a plastic spoon and waving it around, I can still feed myself. It's only one week. But ... Sol protested. Please go Sol, said Myra, her eyes filling with tears, I can't stand to see you so low. In the end, he relented. At home he stared at the suitcase Myra

had half-packed: some shorts, shirts, a hat, underwear and socks. All he needed to add were his night shirt and toiletries, which amounted to a toothbrush and toothpaste, some shaving cream and a razor. Next to the suitcase was the cruise brochure. Sol opened it to the first page and read: 'Ships have been sailing from Seattle to Alaska since the gold rush. Now its your turn to follow in the wake of history on a vacation filled with glacier-carved fjords, forested islets and quaint ports along Alaska's famed Inside Passage.' Inside there were vivid photographs of said fjords, islets and ports, as well as overlaid seafood buffets and entertainers wearing spangly tights and top hats. Sol kept turning the pages, waiting for a glimmer of enthusiasm, but there was only the familiar emptiness in the pit of his stomach. At nine Myra rang from the hospital to remind him to bring his pills. Myra, he said, I don't know if this is a good idea. Did you look at the brochure? she asked. Yes, he said. Did you see the pictures of the fjords? Yes, he said. How about the ports? She said, don't they look quaint? Yes, he said, but ... You'll love it, Sol, she said, I know you will. Didn't we always talk about going? Trudy was arriving early the next morning, she assured him, and the hospital staff had been *so* sweet. Oh, and I've packed your camera, she said, I want to see lots of pictures when you get back. After she hung up, he looked through the suitcase and found his old Minolta, loving wrapped in a shirt. He picked up the brochure again. The front cover said, 'Princess Cruises', with a blue logo of a woman's head in profile, her hair blowing sideways in an eternal wind. The tagline beneath read: 'come back new'.

Waiting on the gangway with his hat perched precariously on his head and his suitcase jammed against his leg, Sol was assailed by fresh doubts. Around him were a few clusters of young families and college kids, but the rest of the passengers were mostly his age or older. Some were standing with the aid of walking frames. Others were in wheelchairs and had to be wheeled onto the boat by the staff. This close he realised what a large vessel it was, and that he should probably stop calling it a 'boat'. The ship towered several stories above him, its name 'The Star Princess' painted on the side in letters the size of office blocks. The press of people in front of him was disappearing slowly into an opening between the 'P' and the 'r'. To pass the time, Sol looked for familiar faces—it seemed half the city was attempting to board—but saw only strangers. Inside there were chaotic scenes, with parents yelling at children and couples yelling at each other, and everybody getting lost. Sol had no-one to yell at, and was momentarily glad Myra wasn't there. When, after trudging up and down narrow stairs and looping through endless corridors, he finally found his balcony room (on 'Baja' deck), he was reminded again of Myra's absence by the small, neatly made double bed. In forty-five years of married life, Myra had never once allowed the bed to go unmade. He resisted the urge to call her and instead unpacked his few belongings and put them away. The noise of thousands of guests finding their rooms and settling in reminded him of being at the *Post*, back when the building was open twenty-four hours and filled with wide-eyed journalists and editors on deadline. He closed his eyes to try to feel that energy pulse through him again. Then the floor was moving and an announcement was booming over the PA. Folks, said the voice, welcome aboard The Star Princess. I'm your captain, Bill Hennessey, and I'm

joined by my co-captain Jack Horowitz, along with the best crew in the world. Shortly we'll be leaving the Port of Seattle and heading out into the Pacific on our way to Alaska. We'll be stopping at Victoria, Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway before returning to port. On board we have all the facilities you'll need for a truly memorable trip—swimming pools, cinemas, restaurants, and more. My crew and I are here to make sure it's smooth sailing all the way, so if there's anything we can do to assist you during the voyage, please don't hesitate to ask. Now sit back, relax, and enjoy your Alaskan adventure! There was a small balcony outside, screened from neighbouring cabins by thin plastic walls, with a basic outdoor setting: a round plastic table and two chairs fitted with cushions covered in pineapple print. Sol unlatched the sliding door and stepped out. He leaned over the railing and looked down: the sun was just beginning to set, and cast a reddish light over the surface of the water, far below. Somewhere on an upper deck festive music was playing. Sol felt old and alone. My Alaskan adventure, he thought, and sat heavily on a fabric pineapple. From there he watched as the large orange cranes and multicoloured shipping containers of the Port of Seattle detached themselves from the ship and slowly drifted into the distance.

On his way to dinner, he passed a sign that read 'Capturing the Last Frontier'. In smaller text below, it said: 'Find out what it takes to capture some of the best photos the Great Land has to offer, from the very photographers who took them!' Standing next to the sign was a man in a Princess Cruises uniform with a bulky black DSLR hanging from his neck. Sol remembered Myra's instructions, and the Minolta in his suitcase. Hi, he said to the man. Hi there! said the man, Do you want to learn how to capture some of the best photos the Great Land has to offer? Sol looked back at the sign and said, Yes. You've come to the right place, said the man, We offer classes starting from fifty dollars an hour with professional photographers. Did you bring your own camera? No, said Sol. No? said the man. I mean, said Sol, Yes, I have a camera. I know how to take photographs. What I was wanting to ask is, do you sell film? Film? said the man. Yes, said Sol, You know, for a film camera? The man looked slightly offended. Sir, he said, we're in the *digital* age. Never mind, said Sol, and continued on to the upper deck, where he sat by himself in a restaurant filled with raucous diners. It was Sunday, he remembered, though whether it was or not didn't seem to matter: the days of the week had for some time now lost their definition. When he rose to leave, most of his dinner sat in cold congealed lumps on the plate. Back in the cabin, Sol got undressed for bed, though it was only nine pm. He lay for a while with the light off, feeling the gentle motion of the boat lifting everything up and down, then switched the light back on and took his suitcase out from the small wardrobe next to the bed. He rummaged around in the front pocket and pulled out a small plastic cannister. It was a roll of Kodak Gold. Sol dialled Myra's number and listened for the sound of her voice. Hello, she said. Hello, he said, I miss you. I miss you, too, she said. How's the boat? The boat's okay, he said, It's big. And there's lots of people. Thanks for packing the camera and film, he said. I put fresh batteries in, she said, but I hunted through that drawer of yours and there was only one roll of film. It's all I need to get me started, he said. He told her about the man with the DSLR. You know,

said Myra, he has a point. I know, said Sol. One day, said Myra, you'll have to join the rest of us in the twenty-first century (Myra, it must be said, had taken to the internet like a duck to water). That day is not today, said Sol, How are you feeling? Fine, she said. What did the doctors say? he asked. Oh, you know, she said, they want to run some more tests. He could see her, hundreds of miles away, waving her arms dismissively. But they think it's fine, she said, really. Sometimes these things just happen. Yes, he said, though he didn't know, actually, whether they did. Anyway, she said, I'm glad you're off and away. Where's your first stop? Sol knew she knew, but said, Victoria. How exciting, she said, Canada! Yes, he said. I hope there's pancakes, she said, with maple syrup. And bears, she added. Me, too, he said. Well, she said, if there are, be sure to take some photos.

Sol woke to a wash of golden light streaming in from the balcony. He blinked and realised he'd forgotten to draw the blinds. It was early; the rest of the ship seemed fast asleep and all he could hear was the mild and constant drone of the engines. He lay in bed until the sounds of voices and feet and bodies stirring filled the air. Well, he thought, time to start the day. At breakfast, Sol managed two slices of toast before losing interest. He watched as a man older than himself went back for thirds. Around ten they docked at Victoria Harbour. Sol had glanced through the brochure in the queue to disembark and decided on the Butterfly Gardens. He looked for the right shuttle bus and found it towards the end of the rank. The driver was watching a lacrosse match on his phone and barely registered Sol's presence. Sol sat behind a small girl with pigtails. Hi, she said, hanging over the back of her seat. Why hello there, he said. Are you going to see the butterflies, too? she asked. Yes, he said, I am. I like butterflies, she said. Me too, he said. Satisfied with this response, she turned and sat back down. At the Butterfly Gardens Sol found himself in a dreamland. Inside the domed enclosure (12,000-square-feet, according to the brochure) the heat was tropical and pleasant; Sol could feel his skin softening and sweat beading gently across his forehead. He wound around the landscaped paths, under shady palms and among bushes festooned with flowers—milkweed and phlox and blazing stars. There were pools of pale-gold-and-white koi and green parrots flitting between the trees, and even two pink flamingos resting on delicate legs in patches of dark water. And overhead and all around there were the butterflies: thousands of points of colour and light darting and dancing through the air, occasionally coming to rest on the face of an open flower or the broad palm of an upturned leaf. Once, the wide eyes of a small child told him a butterfly had landed on his head, and he held as still as he could until it flew away. Around him, people held their phones out, taking photographs, and Sol remembered his Minolta. For the first few shots, he struggled with the controls—forgetting what order to set aperture and shutter speed, how to operate the exposure lock—but after that his fingers seemed to find their own way and he was off. He took pictures of the butterflies and pictures of the flowers, and pictures of the parrots and koi and flamingos. When he next went to wind the film, the advance lever stopped dead halfway. He checked the counter and realised he'd come to the end of the roll. This won't do, he thought. At the entrance to the Gardens, he asked an attendant where he

could find a place that sold film. The young woman asked a young man who asked an older woman, who eventually pulled out her phone and looked it up. She wrote some directions to a store downtown on the back of a Butterfly Gardens map. Jim's Stationery and Supplies, she said, It says here it closes at four. He looked at his watch. It was three forty-five.

A few minutes past the hour, Sol arrived at the store to find the shutters drawn and door locked. His stomach sank. The likelihood of finding film at the other ports was slim. What would he tell Myra? He leaned his forehead against the window and stared through the glass. In the dim interior, something was moving around. Excuse me, he said, knocking on the window. A man with a grey moustache emerged from the gloom and opened the door. Yes? he said. You look to be closing, said Sol. I am in fact closed, said the man, pointing to the 'CLOSED' sign hanging on the door. I see, said Sol, nodding, I wonder if you might reopen for just a minute? I've been told you sell film? I do, said the man. There was a beat of silence during which neither of them moved. What are you after? said the man. Anything you've got, said Sol. Inside, Sol tried not to trip over vaguely illuminated objects on the floor while the man peered into a small refrigerator. Will Fuji Superia do you? he said, Four hundred speed. How many rolls have you got? asked Sol. Five, said the man, I'm waiting on a restock from Japan. I'll take them all, said Sol, if you don't mind. Sure, said the man. You on vacation? he asked, as he rang up the till. Yes, said Sol. I came up on the big cruise ship. Ah, said the man, What's your weapon? What? said Sol. Your camera, said the man, what is it? Oh, said Sol, it's a Minolta X-570. The man nodded. Good machine, he said, I used to have one, too, until the transistor gave out. How long have you had yours? Sol considered. Since 1986, he said. The man whistled and tugged at his moustache. Still going? Yes, said Sol, though truth be told it's been a while since I've shot any rolls. My wife packed it for me, he said. Yes, said the man, wives do that. Back at the Butterfly Gardens, Sol was the last passenger to board the return shuttle. He saw the little girl from the morning ride and sat down behind her again. She hung over the seat and pointed to her cheek, which now had a large monarch butterfly painted on it. I have a butterfly, she said. It's beautiful, said Sol. She gave him a pitying look. It's not a real butterfly, she said. Oh, said Sol. On the ship, he drew the blinds and carefully rewound and unloaded the spent roll of film. He placed a fresh one into the film compartment and wound the leader onto the take-up reel, firing the shutter a few times until the roll was securely in place. His fingers, he realised, had found the old rhythm themselves. Myra rang just after dinner. So? she said, did you see any wild maple syrup? Bears eating pancakes? Neither, said Sol, but a butterfly landed on my head and I shot an entire roll of film. I found some more in town, too. Well, isn't that something, she said.

The next day was 'at sea', and Sol wandered around the upper decks, spying bald eagles and tufted puffins, craning his neck at towering granite cliffs and mountains with snow speckling their ridges. Every now and then he glimpsed the houses of some small

settlement—bright building blocks nestled into the foot of a cliff or set back in a shady cove—but most of the time there were just trees stretching up to the sky and birds wheeling about. Sol aimed the Minolta at most things and used up another roll before noon. There was a lot of activity on the ship: every restaurant and bar seemed teeming with people. Sol stepped into the Calypso Bar for a drink, but found himself in the midst of a debate about the two presidential candidates. Sol, uninspired by both options, preferred to forget that it was an election year. At the entrance to the bar he paused to consider the seemingly endless activities available on what was essentially a moving entertainment complex. In the end, he decided that if he was to be surrounded by water, he might as well go for a swim. He tried the pool on Lido Deck, but it was filled with tiny screaming children in orange floaties and grandmothers with visors bobbing slowly from one end to the other in endless circuits. Up on Sun Deck, all the chairs were taken, but the pool stood half-empty. Sol lowered himself in via the steps and swam a few lazy laps. Then he floated face down at one end and practised holding his breath. The Princess Cruises logo stared back at him from the bottom of the pool: with her face turned to one side, and her long hair streaming, she reminded Sol of Myra, in her younger days. Myra, it must be said, had been one of the best-looking girls he'd ever laid eyes on, then or now. An object prodded him in the side and he lifted his head. The object was the end of a long stick attached to the arm of a fit young pool attendant. Sorry, sir, he said, I was just making sure you weren't dead.

In the evening Sol went down to the Promenade Deck to see something titled 'Fantastic Journey', billed as a show 'combining rock-concert energy and spectacular aerial performers'. He thought it might be marginally better than the four others featured on the program, but less than halfway through he couldn't stand it anymore and slipped out via a side door. There were these women dressed like white chess pieces, he told Myra, and they were spinning around. And then strobe lights came on and big mirrors descended from the ceiling. Some of them had people on them and they were singing. I'm not sure why you went, said Myra, that doesn't sound like something you'd enjoy at all. It wasn't, said Sol. Don't they show movies? said Myra. Yes, said Sol, they also offer jackpot bingo. How are you feeling today? Fine! said Myra, Never better! Now tell me what movies are showing. Sol dutifully read the list from the entertainment program while the Princess Star sailed through the barrier islands of the Inside Passage and entered the Gulf of Alaska.

By the time they reached Juneau, Sol found he was actually enjoying himself. The capital was charming, with its steep streets and crooked alleys, but the real draw was a few miles out. At the Juneau Icefield, Sol came face-to-face with a dinosaur. An information panel at the end of the trail to the glacier head read: 'The Mendenhall Glacier is 12 miles long, a half-mile wide and from 300 to 1,800 feet deep. Stretching from the Juneau Icefield to Mendenhall Lake, it has been slowly retreating since the mid 1700s.' Sol had never seen a glacier before. It looked, he thought, like a bluish-white wave arrested in motion. It was

sombre and imposing and unbelievably *old*. Sol found himself unexpectedly moved and had to wipe his eyes on the back of his sleeve. He paced the viewing platform until he found a good angle, aimed his camera and took a dozen or so photographs. On the phone to Myra that night he said, I'm so glad I came. That's the best thing I've seen in years. He could almost hear Myra beaming. That's my boy, she crowed, Didn't I tell you! Yes, he said, you sure did. Did you take some more photos? she asked. Yes, he said, but I don't know that they're going to turn out right. Myra you need to see this in person. There's just something so ... *human* about it. It's almost like meeting an old friend. We'll have to come back one day, you and me. I would love that, she said. How about next year, he said, We'll book the same cruise, but maybe leave the boat and drive around ourselves for a while. We could even go camping like we used to, shake off the old tent pegs. Sol Whittaker, she said, you've got yourself a deal. In his dreams that night, Sol stood at the foot of the Mendenhall Glacier and felt a giant hand lift him gently into the air.

The call came the next morning as he was preparing to go to breakfast. He'd been up early and was just casting about for his jacket when the phone rang. It was Trudy. Hello? said Sol. Dad? said his daughter, her voice thick with tears. Sol stood very still. Trudy, he said, what's wrong? What's happened? Dad, she said, it's mom. Sol felt a tightening in his chest as Trudy told him the news. Myra had been doing fine—all the tests had come back with positive results and they had been planning to discharge her in the next day or so. And then, during the night, she'd suffered another stroke. It's bad this time, said Trudy. How bad, said Sol. She can't move her left side, said Trudy. All Sol could think of was the fact that Myra was left-handed. The doctor says she'll be able to regain motor functions alright, said Trudy. Okay, said Sol with relief, that's good news. But, said Trudy, the stroke also did something to her memory. Oh, said Sol, and the vice in his chest turned again. Dad, said Trudy, she doesn't remember who I am.

At first he had insisted on disembarking at Skagway, the next port, and driving or flying back immediately. But driving would take about as long as sailing, and the next available flight to Seattle wasn't for another couple of days. Trudy told him the doctors were sure Myra wouldn't have another stroke—not in the next three days, at least—and she was already starting to be able to speak and move normally again. They were even thinking of transferring her to a care facility so that she'd be more comfortable. Sol wanted to talk to her on the phone, but Trudy said with her memory gone to pieces, it might be distressing. Best to wait until he returned and they could speak in person. Sol resigned himself to seeing out the rest of the cruise. There was no question of him staying on board, brooding in his cabin, so in Skagway he joined a tour to visit the Klondike Summit. The bus took them up the highway, alongside the Yukon Route Railroad, and they passed stunning waterfalls and floated over deep green valleys. Over one hundred years ago, the tour guide was saying, the White Pass and the Chilkoot Trail through the Coast Mountains were used by countless stampeders to get to the goldfields. Many a

would-be miner perished on the way. At the summit, 3,292 feet above sea level, Sol got out with the others and wandered around. A young couple with three kids asked him to take a photo on their phone and he obliged. Hey mister, said one of the boys, staring at the worn leather case on Sol's shoulder, what's that? This is a Minolta X-570, said Sol, unclipping the front cover and hinging it back, It's a camera. Does it take photos? asked the boy. Yes, said Sol. Can I see? Ash, his mother said, mind your manners. It's okay, said Sol, and gave the boy the camera. The children crowded around and took turns looking through the viewfinder and turning the focus ring. That's a beautiful camera, said the father, handing it back carefully, my dad used to have one just like it. Thank you, said Sol, it was a present from my wife. When the family had moved away, Sol looked out over the patchwork of blue and green arrayed at his feet and cried. In the far distance The Princess Star—a toy-sized version of itself—sat still as a picture in the harbour.

When the ship docked at the Port of Seattle, Sol was one of the first passengers to step ashore. He'd packed his bag the night before and found a seat near the main exit early that morning. As he hailed a cab and stepped in, he could see the throng of satiated tourists pouring from the hull of The Star Princess in a lazy stream. Sol went straight downtown to Walgreens. At the film-developing counter, he handed his five rolls of Fuji Superia and single roll of Kodak Gold to a woman in a white coat. While he waited he wandered through Pike Place and let the bustling market invade his thoughts. An hour later, he was in another cab, travelling to the address Trudy had given him. The cab pulled up at a pleasant-looking block of villas, with white trellises on the windows and well-maintained shrubbery. At reception he asked for Myra and was taken to her room by a kind-faced nurse. Myra answered the door, dressed in a lilac sweater and camel skirt. Her hair was tied back in a smooth grey knot. Sol noticed that she was holding the doorknob with her left hand and standing steadily on both feet. Hello, she said with a smile. Hello, he said. For a moment he thought there'd been a miracle or a mistake, or he'd woken up from a bad dream. But when he looked into her eyes there was only genial courtesy. Can I help you? she asked. The nurse accompanying him said, Myra dear, this is that friend we were talking about before. He's come for a visit. Sol collected himself as best he could. My name is Solomon, he said, extending what he hoped was a steady hand, Solomon Whittaker. People call me Sol. Myra looked from the nurse to his hand and then shook it. It's nice to meet you Mr. Whittaker, she said. You'll have to excuse me. I seem to have a hard time remembering things. That's okay, said Sol, may I come in? Of course, said Myra, and let him through the door. The nurse said to Myra, I'll leave you two to catch up. I'll be just down the hall if you need me. Inside there was a neatly made bed with Myra's pillow and a closet filled with Myra's clothes. Somebody had placed fresh flowers in a small jug on the window sill. Won't you please sit down, said Myra, gesturing towards a small settee. Sol sank onto the soft cushions and Myra perched delicately on the bed opposite. She crossed her legs and fixed him with another bright smile. From the settee Sol looked across at his wife and felt the vast distance that had opened up between them. Mr. Whittaker, it's so nice of you to come visit, she said politely, How have you been? For a moment Sol's mind was blank—had it only been

seven days ago that he'd sailed away from her? Please, he said, call me Sol. He looked down at his suitcase and it seemed an artefact of another age. I've been on a cruise, he said, to Alaska. Oh, said Myra, I've always wanted to go there. How was it? It was wonderful, he said, and meant it. I took lots of photographs, he said, I've just had them developed downtown. Would you like to see? Oh yes, she said, I love photographs. Okay, said Sol. He took the packet of pictures out from the front pocket of his suitcase and showed her all the wonderful things he'd seen.

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Appendix: Editions, Abbreviations and Referencing

Each of my primary texts has been published in more than one edition. As these editions include variations significant for my analysis, I note below which editions I have referred to and why, as well as my manner of referencing them. Where I quote directly from secondary sources, I retain the manner of referencing of the original.

‘Articulation of Sound Forms in Time’ (‘Articulation’)

The poem was first published as an unpaginated chapbook, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, by Awede Press (Windsor, Vermont, 1987), which is out of print. The poem was subsequently republished by Wesleyan Press in Howe’s collection *Singularities* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1990). There are numerous differences between the two versions, the most significant of which is the addition of a prose introduction under the title ‘1: The Falls Fight’ (pages 3–4 of *Singularities*). Other variations include: the removal of the words ‘his only son’ before the name ‘Jonathan Wells’ from the section titled ‘EXTRACT *from* a LETTER’ (page 5); the removal of an entire page from Part 3 of the poem (which would precede page 20); the insertion of extra space between the lines ‘Second time somewhere’ and ‘seclusion in symbol sovereign’ (page 23); and the changing of the lines ‘Old Double and old beginning Vain/ Covergesture’ to ‘Old Double and old beginning/ Vain Covergesture’ (page 35). Due to these differences, I see the two versions as separate, though related, works. I quote primarily from *Singularities*, as the last version overseen by Howe.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (*Collected Works*; *CW*)

The poem was first published in an edition by House of Anansi Press (Toronto, 1970), now out of print. This edition included the subtitle: ‘Left Handed Poems’. I quote primarily from the Bloomsbury edition (London, 2004), which replicates the typesetting and pagination of the House of Anansi edition (though the ‘Acknowledgments’ and ‘Credits’ sections have been excised). With regards to endmatter, I quote from the Vintage Canada edition (Toronto, 2008), which reinstates the ‘Credits’ section, and also includes a new afterword by Ondaatje.

The Book of the Dead (*Book of the Dead*; *BOD*)

The poem was first published by Covici Friede in Rukeyser’s second full-length collection *U.S. 1* (New York, 1938). In 2018 the poem was published as a standalone

volume by West Virginia University Press as *The Book of the Dead* (Morgantown, 2018), with an introductory essay by Catherine Venable Moore. This edition includes errors, omissions or typographic changes that are not explained (see, e.g., the omission of open quote marks in the speech of the dead son on pages 80–81). I quote primarily from the version published by McGraw-Hill in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (New York, 1978), which is the last version overseen by Rukeyser. This version follows the original in all but two respects: the spacing of the poems (in the original edition, each poem begins on a separate page) and the alteration of one typographic detail (referred to in my analysis). I use italics to differentiate the overall sequence from the eponymous poem within it.

This thesis generally follows the system of referencing in the *Chicago Manual of Style* (16th ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). I use British English spelling and grammatical conventions, except in quoted text (where original spelling is retained).