

## Lisa Robertson / TWO PIECES

### HOW PASTORAL: A MANIFESTO

I needed a genre for the times that I go phantom. I needed a genre to rampage Liberty, haunt the foul freedom of silence. I needed to pry loose Liberty from an impacted marriage with the soil. I needed a genre to gloss my ancestress' complicity with a socially expedient code; to invade my own illusions of historical innocence. The proud trees, the proud rocks, the proud sky, the proud fields, the proud poor had been held before my glazed face for centuries. I believed they were reflections. The trees leaned masochistically into my absence of satisfaction. The horizon pulled me close. It was trying to fulfil a space I thought of as my body. Through the bosco a fleecy blackness revealed the nation as its vapid twin. Yet nostalgia can locate those structured faults our embraces also seek. A surface parts. The nasty hours brim with the refinements of felicity. It's obvious now: Liberty was dressed up in the guise of an ambivalent expenditure.

My ancestress would not wait for me. I began to track her among the elegant tissue of echoes, quotations, shadows on the deepening green. Because she bore no verifiable identity, I decided to construct her from kisses: puckers and fissures in use, and also from the flaking traces of her brittle dress. For I needed someone not useful to me, but obnoxious, prosthetic, and irrelevant as my gender. Let's say Nature, like femininity, is obsolete. She's simply a phantom who indolently twists the melancholic mirror of sex. Far into the rural distance, the horizon splays beneath her florid grip. Chosen obsolescence fields her gendered ecology. In deep sleep, my ancestress tells me a story:

"Ontology is the luxury of the landed. Let's pretend you 'had' a land. Then you 'lost' it. Now fondly describe it. That is pastoral. Consider your homeland, like all utopias, obsolete. Your rhetorical nostal-

gia points to frightened obsolescence. The garden gate shut firmly. Yet Liberty must remain throned in her posh gazebo. What can the poor Lady do? Beauty, Pride, Envy, the Bounteous Land, The Romance of Citizenship: these mawkish paradigms flesh out the nation, fard its empty gaze. What if, for your new suit, you chose to parade obsolescence? Make a parallel nation, an anagram of the Land. Annex Liberty, absorb it, and recode it: infuse it with your nasty optics. The anagram will surpass and delete the first world, yet, in all its elements, remain identical. Who can afford sincerity? It's an expensive monocle."

When I awake I find myself in a new world. The buildings, the clothes, the trees are no more or less coy than they were, yet I had been so intent on the dense, lush words that I had not realized a world could be subtracted from her fruiting skin. The old locutions could only lose themselves in that longed-for landscape; but now I pluck for myself "peace in our own time" and the desuetude of nostalgia. It's as if suddenly a pitcher of slim flowers needled that monumental absence of regret. So elegant, so precise, so evil, all the pleasures have become my own.

## COMMENTARY

"Nature is not natural and that is natural enough."

— Gertrude Stein, *Ida*

I wanted a form as obsolete yet necessary as the weather. I begin with the premise that pastoral, as a literary genre, is obsolete — originally obsolete. Once a hokey territory sussed by a hayseed diction, now the mawkish artificiality of the pastoral poem's constructed surface has settled down to a backyard expressivity. In the post-pastoral poem (in evidence since the English Romantics and their Modernist successors), the evocation of "feeling" in poet or reader obeys a parallel planting of "nature" in the poem. Translate backyard utopia as political mythology. Appearing to serve a personally expressive function, the vocabulary of nature screens a symbolic appropriation of the Land. Her cut sublimity grafts onto the Human. I'd call pastoral the nation-making genre: within a hothouse language we force the myth of the Land to act as both political resource and mystic origin. A perversely topical Utopia has always been the duped by-product of the ideology that blindly describes, thus possesses, a landscape in which people are imagined to be at peace with the economics of production and consumption. The dream of Liberty poses itself within the specificity of this utopian landscape. Certainly on this 500th anniversary of the so-called New World, we must acknowledge that the utopian practice of Liberty stands now as a looming representation of degrading and humiliating oppressions to the (pastoral) majority, and that pastoral utopias efficiently aestheticize and naturalize the political practices of genocide, misogyny, and class and race oppression. I consider that now pastoral's obvious obsolescence may offer a hybrid discursive potential to those who have been traditionally excluded from utopia. To begin with, we must recognize utopia as an accretion of nostalgias

with no object other than the historiography of the imaginary. But do not assume the imaginary to be merely the fey playground of children and the doomed. Consider that the imaginary generates landscapes for political futures. To people these landscapes with our own desires and histories, we must implement pastoral as a seedy poetic artifice, and deny it the natural and hegemonic position of a political ideology.

Historically, from Virgil to Spenser to Goldsmith, the pastoral poem narrated the exigencies of land tenure, labour's relation to the state and capital, and the establishment of a sense of place as a ground for philosophical being and discourse. The trajectory of the pastoral poem has prepared a self congratulatory site for the reproduction of power. We can follow this trajectory from Virgil's ambivalently gorgeous justification of the Roman Empire, to the Elizabethan articulation of imperial utopias, Augustan parallels between English and Classical pleasures of enlightenment, and late eighteenth century evocations of nostalgia for agricultural capitalism. "Beauty" clinched Pastoral's edifying function. The quaint archaisms of the language; the dainty evocations of springtime pleasures; the innocent characterization of the indolent shepherd: these niceties etched the pleasures of the genre as irrevocably sensual, masking imperialistic ideologies, or at least couching them in the banalities of conquest and repose. Yet the irony of loss remained the pastoral's central trope. The difficulties and pleasures of maintaining a primary, legal, and productive entitlement to the land provided the pastoral subject since Virgil's first eclogue politicized the Theocratic idyll: "You, Tityrus, lie under your spreading beech's covert, wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed, but we are leaving our country's bounds and sweet fields. We are outcasts from our country; you, Tityrus, at ease beneath the shade, teach the woods to re-echo 'fair Amaryllis.'" (*Eclogue I*, 1-5, Loeb ed)

Certainly, as a fin-de-siècle feminist, I cannot in good conscience perform even the simplest political identification with the pastoral genre. Within its scope women have been reduced to a cipher for the productively harnessed land within a legally sanctioned system of exchange. In pastoral the figure of woman appears as eroticized

worker — the milkmaid or the shepherdess swoons in an unproblematic ecstasy with the land. Moreover, she is pleased to give over her youthful pre-social wildness to the domesticating and enclosed tenure of the marriage contract. This contract often gives occasion to the celebratory epithalamium, one of the many possible moments in the pastoral montage. Pastoral plants the agency of women's desire firmly within the patriarchal frame. And so it is with a masochistic embarrassment that I confess to having been seduced by the lure of archaic pleasures. Prime among these twist the convolute interleavings of those beckoning and luscious tropes, femininity and nature. Yet I shall release them from their boredom.

By femininity and nature I mean the spurious concepts, purposeful misreadings, which have served the specific use of supporting a singular structure of power, and which therefore have been expediently maintained. I prefer to think of both the spuriousness of nature and the spuriousness of femininity as phantom. ● Once assigned a mythic base in biology, they function as cyphers which reproduce but don't enjoy the autonomy of the citizen. Femininity and nature float both as spectres of the state imagination and as symbols for the nation. A defined locale or gendered body is cultivated to produce an image of benign power, discrete abundance, ontological anxiety, and enclosed exchange. Yet, recognized and deployed as ghosts, this pair certainly may haunt the polis, insinuate their horribly reproductive tentacles through its paved courts and closed chambers. It is in this sense that I wish to "go phantom." It is in this sense also that I wish to farm the notion of obsolescence.

A system is ecological when it consumes its own waste products. But within the capitalist narrative, the utopia of the new asserts itself as the only productive teleology. Therefore I find it preferable to choose the dystopia of the obsolete. As a tactically uprooted use, deployment of the obsolete could cut short the feckless plot of productivity. When capital marks women as the abject and monstrous cyphers of both reproduction and consumption, our choice can only be to choke out the project of renovation. We must become history's dystopic ghosts, inserting our inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations, and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives: We shall refuse to be useful.

Nostalgia, like hysteria, once commonly treated as a feminine pathology, must now be claimed as a method of reading or critiquing history — a pointer indicating a potential node of entry. Yet I'm referring to relations within language, looking at both nostalgia and history as functions within, or effects of, language systems. My own nostalgia reaches for an impossibly beautiful and abundant language. Rather than diagnosing this nostalgia as a symptom of loss (which would only buttress the capitalist fiction of possession) I deploy it as an almanack, planning a tentative landscape in which my inappropriate and disgraceful thought may circulate. Nostalgia will locate precisely those gaps or absences in a system which we may now redefine as openings, freshly turned plots. Who is to circumscribe the geography in which thinking may take place? I deplore the enclosure staked out by a poetics of "place" in which the field of "man's" discrete ontological geography stands as a willful displacement, an emptying of a specifically peopled history. Descartes' new world, in which the "annoying" and unproductive contingencies of history are systematically forgotten, leaving the western male thinker in a primary confrontation with his own thought, is emphatically not a world I wish to share. The only way I can begin to understand the potential of a poetics of historical responsibility is by shoring up the marks of history's excesses and elisions. The solipsist's position of singular innocence and sincerity erases all relations of historical difference, and with these, the tactical confrontations and crafty invasions language may deploy.

My intention is to slip into the narrative as a hybrid ghost and steal the solipsist's monocle as he sleeps and dreams of the rational future. What would the dreamland look like seen through at least two eyes simultaneously? What would the utopian land look like if it were not fenced by the violence of Liberty and the nation? How would my desire for a homeland read if I were to represent it with the moral promiscuity of any plant? These spores and seeds and bits of invasive root are the treasures I fling backwards, over my shoulder, into the hokey loam of an old genre.

Citation: Virgil, *Vol. 1. Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. Loeb Classical Library, London and Cambridge, Mass. 1986.

## Eclogue One: Honour (from *XEclogue*)

I have felt regret but turn now to the immensity of a rhythm which in the midst of her own mettle was invisible — I'll describe the latinate happiness that appears to me as small tufted syllables in the half-light, greenish and quivering as grasses. Ah, the tidy press of the catalogue, the knotted plantlettes of a foiled age, the looming test of our grim diaphany, let me embrace these as the lost term *honour* as I lace this high pink boot I call Felicity.

*Lady M finds her thoughts a little agitated: her sight wanders and is fed by an artificial rudeness whose particular odour fills her mind. It's as if she were dreaming on a bus.*

Watered patterns sway lit beneath the air or beneath the movement of air. Fine grey pigments cling so pungently with such rich spread that it's all dainty and silken as the fickle-stench of the syncopate and caressed name Nancy. The teen-aged multitude drifts off to a grainy and torpid horizon; they stroke the crude till it compels or decadently blooms. Banality stokes their punctual lust for the familiar; branches, courage, obligation stalk as cathartic yellow splays among roots. Weeds often seem sardonic as the measured tactics of a cold strut; yet if leisure were conquered this landscape would gauntly bud and split into the cold texture embroidered on the lurid skin of a leaf.



Or careful field quincuncial as the exhaustive and private happiness spilt from a necklace of januaries. Knots, compartments and grottos cannot compare to a field's livid frisk; neither to the ridgie factions near the pompous arch. Yet the sky's tolerably liberal and apt to supplement a bitchy little tapestry, in the way the light in a painting seems fringed or redolent as a pimp, in the way a teenager will flagrantly caress a name with paint. Read this orchard as the Roaring Boys who course the town at night: tawdry, flecked and billowing behind their silky fluted pricks — their short lines syncopate as ripe fruits shake the lawn.

Or she's in the landscape without ambiguity and it's a trim cloister she lends her tender support. Wind preens or lustres the elegant weeds; obligation splices cold and keeps darkening and brooding. The weedy ruffling of Nancy's sheathed hips absorbs a thought quicker than the lagging wind. Everything patterns a differing lag — the flanked and massy sky turns decorative as it clusters or nearly punctuates her torpor. The Roaring Boys fan back; they coil pungently beneath the moral clusters of their blue groves. The roaring angels are alert as nets and their sly pricks nudge the cold.

Lady M: I feel hapless when I think of the buttery and peculiar flowers we dub the monikers of our malaise.

Nancy: Yet it's so plucky and slightly ruffled . . .

Lady M: As this dim foliage we stride through. Nancy, what of "paradise" or "harmony"? Its so *leather-like* in unreality —

Nancy: We're professionals. I see your face in the rain.

Lady M: Like a grim violet.

Nancy: I push you away  
I fall to the floor  
It's a mixed up world  
With shook up love.

Lady M: My back's to the wall. How can such slim felicity so bruise the trees?

Nancy: You call this filial conduct? Stop here. I hear the Boys:

*Hey Blushing Berries, You've got us curious. Groves  
Nodding can't masque your emotion's curious  
Fretwork. We need consolement. We're no strangers  
To the quick whirls of russet-wrapt or bluish  
Emotion, pendant, typical, sultry, fringed  
Like a bump on the horizon. Our reddened silks  
Rustle with profession. Imitation cramps  
Such rudeness: But those games just aren't interesting.  
Take this hint — we're typical Boys, our fickle emotion  
Wanders and is fed, yet we choose  
To dedicate our follies to you. Shall we syncopate  
The several beauties known by the name of the Purling  
Stream? This tumult's meant to tilt  
All grammar. We're just those that  
Want you to feel . . .*

Quietly, evil as a concept's disappeared and I'm not sorry to judge the smoothed over garden dangerous. I've indulged my curiosity in all the horrid graces, thought swelling or swollen, conscious anyway that the motive seemed creepy — but it seemed natural. Their diction's pleasure unwound me, though I knew it doggerel, and they mere poetasters. They've not advanced from the flimsy past — it's just the tumult of a pendant usage, it's just the sultry horror of that fake forest. Choric swains who call me Berry miss the point — dirty little swains playing at the mouth of the gemmy cave, fraying my nerves with their meticulous blossoms. So I'll loosen up to describe their limbs as botanical manifestations of small irksome enjambments styleless as numbered doors. Yet silk and cotton and solid some bird or some robin flew through the somewhat florid expansion once named as my heart. It was noonish and the pinch held out to a person anyone would name trouble — a girl whose instinct for trend was marginalized and pointless. But I wanted something new, something way past the florid radicalism of the Marxist cashbar. I wanted the stuff that joyriders run on, that queer touched-up light that transmits over the air; miming a tension, living on the crux of a regime which could slide to the coy illusion of Liberty.

Typical girls whose liberty leaches and fans from a porous border, who fold like fans, who trick the eating class, typical girls explain to me the use of the word Liberty. I'd fall to the floor for their smooth gesture, their opaque and viscous oil-like drag, their porous border, their controlled iridescence, their drag and tooth, the gnarled yet polished scent of evil. When I'm trying to think about the word Russet I use fan-like tactics borrowed from the girls, though vagueness signals, almost breaks my purple spite. It's not easy to define my feeling of a reddened peace of mind, a ruffled, shattered, mixed-up world. How can silence or expression stop? All these sluttish thickets and rivulets of green, all these bitchy, syncopate, flickers of leaf, only stimulate my technical and carminine thirst for the smooth sensation offelicity. A spilt necklace makes a curious fretwork; yet I've indulged my curiosity within a knot, judging the drag and density viscous and gaunt. Maybe it wasn't the girl, maybe the boys took a smile from their package — it was raining, they weren't looking at me — maybe they've wreathed their instinct for thought.

There's no need for crying. Honour nor emotion's not so  
squalid and swindled as all that, though I feel the grim vibrations of  
the darkening air; I feel the horrid crackling transmit through my skin  
and hair. It's so reptilian like those weird things that scuttle underfoot,  
lend their frenzied rhythm to my thought  
those peculiar monikers  
those russet quivering stalks  
those lags  
those plantlettes  
those elegant and massy coils  
Nancy, how can these be thought?