

MEREDITH QUARTERMAIN / George Stanley: The Metaphysics of Place

A writer writes. An eye—an I—opens in language. A locus in bio tissue, in ecological flesh, in human history, planetary history, sound, the storacity of human mutterings and calls. Loquacity. Locacity. Two writers speak—two I's navigate rhumb lines spiraling to planetary poles.

1993–5. Capilano College (as it was then called). I leave a seven-year legal career and return to teaching—find myself sharing an office with George Stanley. “The” world, “a” world, reels with 11% unemployment, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, then NAFTA. Cuts to Employment Insurance and Workers’ Compensation. Threats to health and education. Jobs are outsourced. Foreign ownership by multinationals skyrockets.

Croatians and Serbs slaughter each other. Bombs go off in the basement of the World Trade Centre. The Lorena Bobbitt Trial is comic relief. Black holes do indeed exist. Rwanda becomes another black hole. Quebec votes No. Bombs go off in Oklahoma. The Chunnel opens.

Our students are listening to Nirvana and Madonna, going to raves, piercing and tattooing themselves, watching *Jurassic Park*, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Forrest Gump*, and writing essays about Kurt Cobain’s suicide, the Ebola virus, O.J. Simpson, and the Nancy Kerrigan attack.

The office contains two desks, three chairs, a three-drawer filing cabinet and about four feet of shelving suspended high on one wall. There are no windows. The walls are bright cream and blank except for a calendar. Fluorescent lights scrutinize every mark and dent in the furniture, every blotch and stain in the carpet.

Four and sometimes five instructors share this office, including Jenny Penberthy, Dan Munteanu and, briefly, Miriam Nichols. George has the best desk, the one under the shelves and the calendar. This is only right because George was here first, the year before the rest of us. It’s right too because George is a poet, a senior instructor of many years’ experience, and because George has an air about him of knowing what’s what. I too have a strong sense of territory and whenever possible I claim the other desk, the one beside the filing cabinet which is the only place one can store teaching materials or student papers without having them mixed up or lost in someone else’s.

Most of us are teaching four sections.

Sometimes the office is mayhem, with students from our various classes seeking help from two or three of us at once, standing up, or squirming on borrowed rolling office chairs. We put the matter of desks and chairs, adequate space, on the Department meeting agenda, then the Division meeting agenda. The Chair of the Division tells us that such requests are “embarrassing,” our focus should be solely on the welfare of the students. We hatch schemes for lifting desks and chairs from nearby classrooms and hallways, and finally add a small side-table. This becomes Dan’s territory. “My” desk is also Jenny’s.

It’s peaceful when just George and I are there. Something about the way he responds makes me think twice about what I have just said to him. A hesitation, a pause, before he fills the silence. His speech takes on a certain artifactual quality, the act of speaking is made visible as an act of ordering the world that could have been done otherwise. Speaking is a construction of the real rather than a reactive impulse. Years later I would realize how the triangulation between language, real, and construction of real is central to George’s poetry. One’s relationship to words and “the real” is always at stake. For instance, in *Vancouver: A Poem*, George writes of watching both himself and the city as he rides the bus, imagining “a poem about / Vancouver in which Vancouver never appears” and wondering “what about the subject position? that revealed / coyly, or just blurted out?” (4).

George takes us into the mind observing its own observing (“some voice—not to describe—that / I hear thinking—I overhear” (*Vancouver* 35), the consciousness that writing orders the real the moment a word surfaces, this activity tantalized by an unword—the observing self—mind—soul. An activity circling round a place, a point of view. Plato’s ideal forms hang like shades in the background.

Landmarks. The mountains, the inlet, the trees.
The sun. The soul with their names. Seeks
to be entangled with them—oh, not the names,
the others—says she does, anima. But in truth—
no, in illusion, illusion upon illusion, transparent
like glass doors—plays a private game
with words—they’re *her* words—like a doll’s tea set—
she doesn’t want to be any part of the dollies.
She thinks she’s grown up.

She doesn't want to be any part of the world.
Outside the playroom, outside the house. (*Vancouver* 20)

The landscape described in the poem often slips into the hills and valleys, streets and tower-blocks of being in names—caught in a web of body, viewpoint, language and void that keeps knowing and the knowable at stake. Landscape turns out to be inside the mind (a place in one's head) or outside or both or neither: "I imagine winter— / the city in the mind—the trees, the branches, waving, blowing / all around & the rain blowing, but the city still there, dark, in / the mind. So non-existent, that way. There when you don't see it, / as you wake in it. In a bed, in a room, in the city" (*Vancouver* 36).

George writes, "not to locate myself in a landscape / ... but rather to free the landscape" and to carry out "an excavation of darkness—of self—of poetry" (*Vancouver* 55–56). The locus of speech is at stake, along with the word-beams making some things bright and others dark. We think we are safe because we can say these word-places and place people when they speak: "A place, then any place is safe, if you are there" (*Vancouver* 71). But such places are as fictional and unstable as a gas station at Broadway and Maple appearing in a Gough novel, but now is merely a vacant lot (71). The one place that "stays the same" is the "unnamed." This place outside words "goes on forever" (71).

At Capilano College in 1994 or 95, I remember thinking for a long time that George had come from Prince George—what would it be like to live in and write about a place where your name was royalty? The power in this grew with the fact that Stan Persky liked to drop in and talk to George. They seemed to be buddies, Stan hanging out on the door frame expounding his views particularly on literature, which we English instructors were supposed to know about. What! you haven't read V.S. Naipaul?! He looked at me aghast. I brushed him off but inwardly raged at this slight that seemed to come from "the men." Later I discovered that George too had been intimidated by Stan: "Vancouver—being there—feeling marginalized—out of it. / Stan's cracks about Terrace, & not just that but a feeling of / being a hick or old-fashioned romantic"; "Stan & Scott hip to the new writing—narrative. Stan telling / me, with a bit of an I-told-you-so voice, Bernstein is replacing / Creeley (now retired) at Buffalo" (*Gentle* 64).

At the time, I felt excluded, disconnected from any important writers' group,

scrambling to catch up to a literary world I hadn't paid attention to for several years, uncertain of my own voice—authorship/authority. I had discovered I wanted to write, had even written a collection of stories that had been considered by Anansi. In an era of fragmentation, my fragments didn't fit.

Why don't you write about the world, George said, in response to what I don't know—we must have got on to my writing woes. He had to turn around to face me because his desk looked into the corner away from the door (handy for ignoring distracting passers by), whereas mine looked out toward the door. I left thinking evil thoughts about how men always accuse women of writing the personal instead of the public, thinking evil thoughts about unified rationalist Platonic world views imposed by patriarchal culture. In a mood, I guess, I wrote "The World":

Why don't you write about the world, he said, instead of personal relationships. Whose world, I ask. There is only one world, he retorted, Socrates said the world ceases only when we go to sleep, and he didn't mean physical sleep either. Look, he said, there's a cup on this table. That's the world.

White china, gold, rimmed, roses painted on the side. Surface slightly fluted, spirally elongated, its bloodline to mug, not high-handled tea-chalice. You'd find it in Moe's secondhand on Main Street among the plastic end tables and footprint ashtrays. Part of some bridal set, which she, crystallized, crinolined, had opened at the church basement bash, while her head ached and her feet screamed in their pointed white heels. Smiled, kissed her brother-in-law on both cheeks for the lovely tea set. Wrapped it back in its tissue. Her tissue. His issue. Her flesh welded to his.

Like lignin in cell walls, buttressing the cellulose layered over random network of fibrils. She put the cups with the other gifts in her cupboard, starting her married life. Serving instant coffee and chocolate chip cookies to relatives. Occasionally traveling to the intercellular space near the middle lamellae. Tiny wedges of time not accounted for by husband or children or her part-time job at the bakery.

All but two broken in spills or accidents, these going to a nephew's housekeeping room, when she'd saved enough for the new set in the maple Arborite buffet. The nephew scraping by on occasional teaching jobs, leaving it in the eight-foot windowless cube he shared with four others at the college.

The walls usually do not form an unbroken barrier around the cell but often contain tiny holes through which protoplasmic filaments may communicate with adjacent cells. I see the cup on the fake woodgrain table, the Spanish girl whirling her skirt in last year's calendar, the filing cabinet, the light glaring on the streaked yellow wall behind his fist, for a split second the table and the cup separated by space from its impact.

end had opened
had light skirt glare
had ached only elongated
spirally whirling
a network of broken spills
random filaments the crinolined buttress
for Socrates' sleep near the Spanish cells

I gave the poem to George, feeling bold about the fragmentary lines at the end. After the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers who had taken Vancouver by storm in 1985, grammar and world view had to be blown apart. Case closed. What could he possibly say about it?

Nothing. George remained silent. Or so I thought. And I remained doubtful of someone who could claim one reality—"the world!"—existed. Thinking his world would just erase mine; very well, I would remain outside, till hell froze over. I was still steamed about it when I went to Naropa in July 1996, complaining to Robin Blaser, who said, "Well, George likes to stir the pot; he's a very good poet," and to Norma Cole, who said, "We are *all* writing reality" and then talked about claiming the right to do that—"coming out" as a writer.

Then, lo and behold, in 1997, George asked me for my poem "The World" for an issue of *Tads* he was editing. *Tads* was a little magazine put out by a group of writers who met regularly in a pub, he told me. George Bowering was in the group. *Tads* and *Dads* they called it, because everyone in the group was either a tad (in their 20s) or a dad (in their 60s). There was a distinct non-fit here so far as I was concerned. But a publication was a publication and God knows I wasn't getting much published in "real magazines." I refused to go to the pub for the launch (it sounded so male). I was so insecure. Now, darn it, I've lost the copy George gave me. And wish I had gone to that pub. It was an important and formative group including several young writers, such as Reg Johanson and Ryan Knighton, who grew into significant literary careers.

So insecure I was about "the world," not seeing I too was closing it off in huge generalizations. Somewhere in the '90s, George handed me a copy of his self-published *Gentle Northern Summer* (1993), Gestetnered in typewriter face on 8½ x 11 inch paper with hand-numbered pages and table of contents—human fingers banging levers onto a ribbon, instead of pages stamped by machines. A loaded logging truck

barrels out of the forest on the front cover. Inside was a note in the green ink we marked papers with: "I wanted you to have this copy of my chapbook. George." The same series of poems appears in the 1995 New Star edition, with the addition of "San Francisco's Gone," "San Jose Poem" and the long, major meditation on language, place, knowledge and landscape: "Terrace Landscapes."

Gentle Northern Summer includes a short poem, "*The World is the case*" (8) whose title is the first line of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In my edition, the line reads "The world is everything that is the case"—"the totality of facts not of things" (Wittgenstein 31). This is the book that ends with Wittgenstein's famous statement: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (189). There is a world of statements, but the sense of the world lies outside these and cannot be said (183). Much of George's writing explores this boundary between the factual and sayable and that which is beyond the grasp of words: that which we could agree is "the world" and that which undermines our security in sayable, congealed knowledge. The poem points out that we sicken of putting together a puzzle just exactly when it gives us maximum information. Poetry and life work the same way. The poem "A Sleepwalker" reminds us that humans operate in a matrix of illusions and dreams; when we forget this and try to nail something down in "the truth" we die our own solitary deaths (*Gentle* 58). The poem "Terrace Landscapes" contrasts the "imagination of the land," ("geometric, Platonic... forms into which the people / and animals can fit their dreams") with the "imagination of the town" which "is imposed, a ruled pad" (*Gentle* 65).

In "Raft," George imagines a man made of two men riding the flow of life, one looking back at memories of "boardinghouses, communes, bars, / working in offices & mills, / weddings & funerals & wakes" and the other looking forward: "I thought I knew those places. / They were the world, each one" (*Gentle* 41). "I hold in my mind a map / that is the map of the world," says the forward-looker, while at his back is the dreamer (*Gentle* 42).

The world is in the mind. We dream it together. "The people float in the net, their minds go / on & off, images of other people & places flash, wink, in / their minds, against a picture they all agree is *this place*, / earth" (*Gentle* 69). How long can we "see" anything that we think is out there, the poet muses, and what exactly is the "light" that we're shining, and what is dark? How much can we know of our means of

knowing? “The light shineth, & the darkness is forgotten. And what the / light shines on? And how long does the light shine, before it / goes out again, & the darkness returns?” (*Gentle* 69). “Or is there any darkness? Only a world, our world, located / on a planet, which we are subjecting to extraordinary stress” (*Gentle* 69).

“Terrace Landscapes” imagines a person named H. with many observable features and “many more that could be known—but the person, H., is / not known” (*Gentle* 70). As if to say the locus that is the person—that crossroads of discourses—must always remain beyond pinning down to “the truth,” just as “the world” must. “Is the world H. lives in known?” the poem asks, “Is the world H. lives in the / world H. knows?” The act of knowing is an act of imagination: “Imagine, if you want to, / that the world we know H. to inhabit is the world H. knows / he inhabits. The same world ... located on a planet” (*Gentle* 70).

George told me to write about “the world.” There’s only one world—what could he have meant? Long afterwards I found he had thought about it a great deal. Even more amazing, he had written a response to “The World,” entitled “A Man”:

The cup didn’t break (I prefer to think),
only jumped, jiggled, when his fist hit the fake
woodgrain table, as did a couple of pencils,
a plastic ballpen, a paper clip. ‘Shit,’ he said.
To no one.

Fragments of a thought. Age, experience, destiny.
But strike that last one, for one who believes the universe
has no purpose, he has no purpose, walked
(well, stepped, a foot or two, in an eight-foot cube)
to where the windows ought to be, & stared.
The mountains have some kind of eternal—rejected
several complements, majesty, bare quality, finally
settled on aura, he mused, at least to those
who call them mountains. The earth is as smooth
as an orange, said the devil. He let that one
go by. They were gods, or the habitations of gods,
so we (thinking, men) could crawl between earth
& heaven, at least that.

Sky gods, she said, looking up from the stack of papers
she was marking. So that was out, too, taking refuge
in stories. The whole stratification slipped,
towards the intertidal zone, the female soup.

I could identify with my breath, he thought.
This skin, this lexicon, but a bag, the eternal
pastry tube... (*At Andy's* 16–17)

Works Cited

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