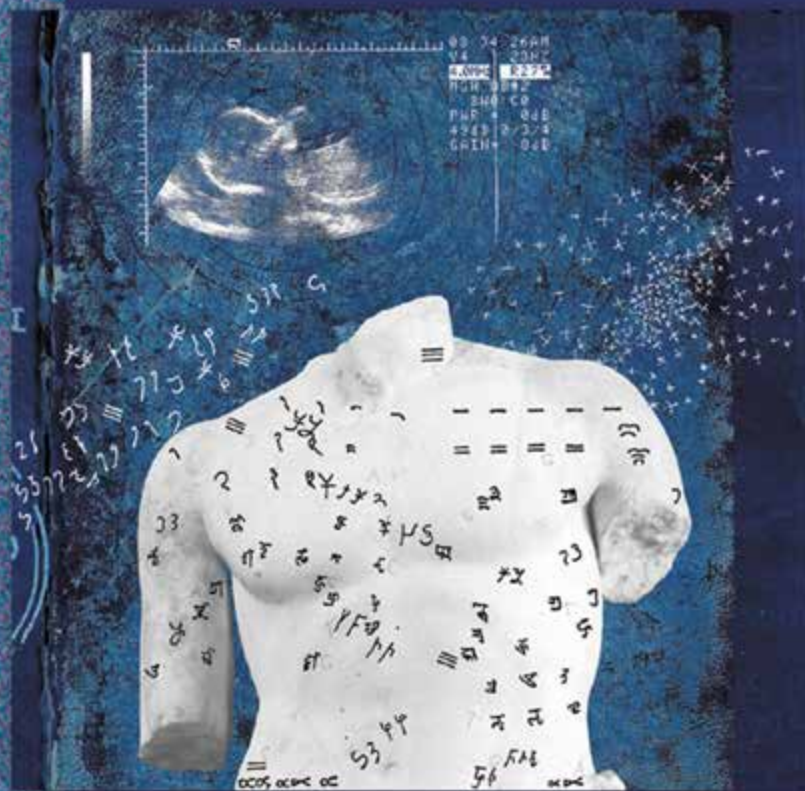


HUMAN CARTOGRAPHY



POEMS BY
JAMES
GURLEY

WINNER
OF THE
2002
T. S. ELIOT
PRIZE

Human Cartography

HUMAN CARTOGRAPHY

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GURLEY



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For Neile

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Litrag: “Voyage of the *Lucky Dragon*”

Luna: “Helen Keller on the Vaudeville Circuit,” and “The Life of Objects”

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The following poems are dedicated: “The Impossible Task of Ivan Pavlov” to Sylvia Skelton, “Household Trust” to Gail Dubrow, “Out Walking” to Robin Skelton, “The Life of Objects” to Neile Graham, “Biophilia” to Jim Clark, “Lady Franklin’s Lament” to Shelagh Graham, and “Music For The Gods” to Art Liestman.

In memoriam: Marie Gurley, Richard Hugo, Robin and Sylvia Skelton.

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We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our tastes or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps.

—Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

The land we come to is the land we are.

—John Barton, *Hypothesis*

The Beauty of Physics

Weighing the Planets

— at the Instruments of Science Exhibit, National History
Museum of Scotland

With one touch I set the heavens
in motion, on a wire of time
curved within a glass.
The solar symmetries of our lives

themselves in the turning
orrery, the orbit gears safely
threading the planets in a whirl
through an artificial sphere.

Who held these instruments, whose palm
warmed a polished copper cylinder,
who drew his measure
with this theodolite in India,

parceling out the wilderness for God
and Queen? These useless
devices from a ghost-world—
all that's left of the unconquerable—

now mythical under glass: the sextant,
the air pump's glass bowl—
there are so many lives' work
in these tools; how it was to explore

and discover, to subdue the unknown.
Their stories all but vanished,
the land surveyor hiking up
a mountain in India

who ignores the ache
in his left leg as he hums
a hymn for fortitude—
these adventures and the earth

his, with what amazing ease
he goes on, mastering
these instruments that are
immortal even if our lives are not.

Biophilia

—at the conservation reserve outside London, Ontario,
after E. O. Wilson

The fox came upon us unexpectedly.
He froze and our world narrowed to a span
meters wide. I heard your words
break into fragments. So uneasy—
something so extraordinary
stood close to where we stood. His diaphragm
rising and falling, eyes searching
for any movement that might
betray us. The smell of water, the directional
bend of a plant stalk
mattered. I turned my head
and he vanished. Melted
into abstract description,
that's just a metaphor for slyness,
malevolence, the implicit threat.
All these qualities he channels
into his ability to stay alert.
Alive. It's nearly dusk; the trees
suffused with dimming light.
We stop by a pond fringed with larch—
rest, still craving a sense
of the mysterious. Your words pour
in and around me, and I want to know the touch
of everything. Described this way,
it's nothing but a glimpse
of one small animal.
Say it's only myth: say he looks
at us from his own world. In the end
it's enough to just believe.

A Temporal Bestiary

Beautiful is the silence of the night.

— Georg Trakl, 1887–1914

We're held by the rhythms of light,
like the fruit bats who fly out to feed

at dusk, rising from the trees
in a gray-brown fury of wings.

Somehow we carry these time signals
through our bloodstream, the body's own

clock predicting that behind our house
tonight fireflies will swarm,

their lunar mating rituals triggered
by the synchrony inside each flash,

each insect seeking the harmony
of others, instinct telling them

just this moment of light is all.



I sit beside you on the damp grass.
It's late, we should be asleep

but a whippoorwill starts up, a dark
portal as his calling grows near.



What we look upon we take into ourselves,
the pollen-drenched blossoms shut

for business; our cat prowls
the flower beds, her curious chattering

at her prey. My trance is broken
by the whirl of moths

around the patio lights,
by your voice as you tell me

office gossip, jokes, that our car
needs a tune-up, how your plans

for the weekend include sleeping in.



What of those creatures like us
who take their bearing from the sun,

emerging at dawn from pupa stage,
cousins of the darkness and light,

birds who migrate to subtle
changes in the seasons?

We are bordered by the earth's
steady pull, cool breezes

so you long for a sweater,
and wonder why we are out here.

The fireflies? The summer night sky?



We walk back to the lit house.
Muffled suburban noises engulf us

until our voices are mere echoes
of what we've seen, satellite headlines

of war. Disaster. Our lives
flare up in these earthbound days,

the early hours when I can't sleep,
can't stop the great curve of light,

its strange powers, its radiance
edging through our bedroom window.

The Nature of Colors

—Isaac Newton, 1672

The sun draws a beam
of light through my room
to the bowl of fruit on the table—
apple, plum, apricot, each
take on a new color.
Thus the visible spectrum
reveals itself

in a perpetual tremor. Every object
shimmers with a halo of atoms
pulsing out into space.
When I pass a prism through the beam
invisible threads untangle
like strands of yarn

shaking out the last flames
of the sun. You have to love colors
to see what's beautiful
in this world, to name them
as they appear

on the screen,
from violet to red; the reflection
opens new mysteries
that the eye brings together,
the spectrum a coherent
language.

Through a series of prisms
and lens, we learn
fundamental truths: how

light falls
from the heavens, conveys
to us a broken image

and we reconstruct
the world, these topsy-turvy
images from our own
blindness,
from what shines forth.

The Radius of Metaphor

A stereo blares country western
two houses away, the world's weariness
distilled to a twangy guitar
that embroiders the baseline.
Briefly transformed by the tempo
I listen to the spaces
music opens and can't close.
The singer who holds onto one note,
his doorway to a place
from which he's been banished.

I tell myself it's intentional,
that the earthworm I dig up in my garden
converts into these words. My knees
bent to damp soil, the circle
I clear, filling a bucket with weeds.
Colorful blossoms, the outlines
of buds and branches,
surge of sunlight
against my back when I—

Here I stop, half dreaming
the girl who wheels her bicycle past me.
She yells for sheer joy I suppose.
I'm thirsty and standing up
tip over the bucket,
tendrils covering my sneakers.

Inside our house, the woman
I've loved these long years—
how easy it is to say.
I walk into the cool half-light.
Her voice as she pours water

into the blue glass I hold.
I lean against the fridge and we talk.
Of my sister's illness, a friend's divorce.

Or maybe it's my hand's slow movement
on her back, lifting up her blouse
and rubbing her spine, easing
whatever tension remains between us.
Shh.... Listen. I close her eyes,
then mine. Are words enough?
What happens next? Daylight fades
on our furniture, sudden quiet.

Notes

“West of New England” is based upon the poet Robert Frost’s decision in 1912 to finally leave his New Hampshire farm and either transplant his family to Vancouver B.C., where he had friends, or to cross the ocean and seek literary fame in England (the alternative strongly favored by his wife, Elinor). This poem imagines the future not taken.

The “Beauty of Physics”: Berenice Abbott was the first photographer to capture in a visual form basic physical laws, such as magnetism or gravity. In the 1930s she documented the changing face of New York City. In the 1940s and 1950s she worked alone, inventing many of the devices she needed to capture these phenomena.

The “Red Shawl”: Sophia Schliemann was the second wife of Heinrich Schliemann, the archeologist who discovered the site of Homer’s Troy. Well into his fifties, Heinrich decided to pursue his lifelong goal of finding this legendary city, using only Homer’s words as his guide. A biography of their lives, *One Passion, Two Lives*, describes their first meeting in a Greek classroom, where Sophia recites aloud to her fellow students Helen’s lament over the death of Hector. Hearing these words, Heinrich believed he had found his soulmate, and he married Sophia, then an eighteen-year-old Greek schoolgirl. Together they set out for Turkey and began excavating.

“Watcher at the Nest”: Margaret Morse Nice was an amateur ornithologist and the first to make a comprehensive study of the common song sparrow. Her experiences and observation are recorded in her book from which this poem draws its title.

“The Life of Objects”: During the Nazi occupation, Czechoslovakia’s most gifted photographer, Josef Sudek, began a photographic study of his backyard garden seen through his window. After the war, he took on an assistant, Sonja Bullaty, a concentration camp survivor. Bullaty later left Europe for America and became a champion of Sudek’s work. Sudek’s obsession was to capture the beauty of his beloved Prague.

“Voyage of the *Lucky Dragon*”: Aikichi Kuboyama died on September 23, 1954, from exposure to radioactive ash. This account of his journey is based

primarily on the book *The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon: The True Story of the Japanese Fishermen Who Were the First Victims of the H-Bomb* (1958), by atomic scientist Ralph E. Lapp. Several section titles and images are taken directly from paintings and line drawings made by Ben Shahn, who illustrated the account of Kuboyama's life in *Kuboyama and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon* (1965).

"Tableau Vivant" is an imagined scenario which brings together several unrelated historical events and characters. While no evidence exists that Dorothy and William Wordsworth actually witnessed George Catlin's exhibition, it is not impossible that given their keen devotion to nature they might have been drawn to this display.

"The World, or Instability": Now largely forgotten, Constantine Rafinesque was an Italian botanist who immigrated to America as a young man. Leaving behind his family in Europe, he explored the new country in hopes of discovering a vast number of species. Unfortunately, his enthusiastic finds were often discredited. Throughout his life he was a voluminous writer and his work foreshadows in part the notion of adaptation in nature later crucial to Darwin. Rafinesque also composed a three-hundred-page poem in which he tried to explain the philosophical and scientific basis for his theories on the mutability of species.

About the Author

James Gurley has published two poetry chapbooks, *Radiant Measures*, and *Transformations*. His poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Crab Orchard Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, and *Poetry*. He is the recipient of various writing grants, most recently a 2001 literary fellowship from Artist Trust/Washington State Arts Commission. He lives in Seattle.