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Travelling into the Quotidian:

Some notes on Allison Funk's 'Heartland' poems

JOHN BURNSIDE

In this memory, it's a warm, late October afternoon in East Kansas. I'm maybe twenty or thirty miles west of Emporia, near the Cottonwood River, when I come across a little road that looks like it might need investigating, a road I just know, at a glance, will peter out somewhere in gravel and dirt next to an old wooden farm shack and a dead tractor, or at the edge of a yard where a fat, gun-shy dog sits dreaming on a broken porch, next to a plot of jimsonweed and pumpkins. This is Osage country, the gnarled, bitter fruits of the Osage orange scattered along the banks of the rivers and gullies like live green rubble in the one section of Kansas that isn't pancake flat, right at the edge of the Flint Hills; and even if the old prairie is gone, a few oases of bluegrass remain, not blue now, but rust-red and coppery and golden in the autumn light, last tatters of the real Midwest preserved by government decree to remind the casual visitor – me, for example – of what made this land so magical in our great-great-grandfathers' time.

So I make a detour – a detour within a detour, really – and turn off the highway, knowing I will see nobody for miles, and glad of the fact, wanting to imagine myself alone in the world for a while, travelling in *splendid isolation*, that singular luxury that a place like the Midwest still sometimes affords. There is nothing remarkable about this road and it leads to what is usually called nowhere – which is why the rest of my day is so pleasant. I don't want local colour; I don't want the picturesque; I do not, under any circumstances, want anything recognisable as history. I want the here and now, the divine quotidian, the subtler beauty of the unremarkable. As I drive, I see no real landmarks, other than the occasional cottonwood, nestled into a gully, turning water into shade, and the odd stretch of fence – wood, not wire – around what looks like a derelict farm, but may well be somebody's entire life. To a casual visitor, this is one of those magical places where nothing happens; which is why, when I return a few days later, I cannot find it: no cottonwoods, no dark farms, not even the turning where I first entered this hinterland. I drive for miles and I watch for it all the way, but I never see it. It was an illusion, a phantom, the Kansas version of *Brigadoon*. Later still, when I get back to my borrowed porch and study the map, I can't find anything that corresponds with the road I had driven, on that now already mythical afternoon. Mythical – yes, for me, at least, it was,

and is: a chapter in the narrative of real-self that has no particular significance (or not, that is, when it is recounted at second-hand); not even a chapter, really, but a fleeting idea, an image, a metaphor.

“*Il y a un autre monde, mais il est dans celui-là,*” says Paul Eluard. To speak of another world has, historically, been to commit to an essentially mystical or religious agenda, and so to a province of wishful thinking normally inhabited by children and the simple-minded, as opposed to the real, factual, *less deceived* world of grown-ups and rationalists. A good deal of argument has gone into the (re)definition of terms like ‘mystical’, ‘religious’ and ‘rational’, but Eluard’s remark points us in another direction altogether: the other world is *here, now*, but we pass it every day, we miss it, we see what we expect to see and we think of it as we (are) expect(ed) to think. Eluard’s entirely secular programme was to uncover that *autremonde* – that non-factual truth of being: the missed world and, by extension, the *missed self* who sees and imagines and is fully alive outside the bounds of socially-engineered expectations – not by some rational process (or not as the term is usually understood) but by a kind of radical illumination, a re-attunement to the continuum of objects and weather and other lives that we inhabit. We might say, if we could strip away the accretions of dogma and prejudice that have attached to the gospels over centuries, that Jesus’s argument – the Kingdom of Heaven is *at hand* – differs very little from Eluard’s, and that he too was demanding of his listeners the spiritual and political discipline to bring forth their true selves, in order to see the world in its fullness (or, as *The Gospel of Thomas* puts it, “His followers said to him, ‘When will the Kingdom come?’ ‘It will not come by watching for it,’ he said. ‘It will not be said, *Look, here it is*, or, *Look, there it is*. Rather the Father’s Kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people do not see it”). Yet it makes as much sense to call this a philosophical or political enterprise as to label it ‘religious’, for this discipline of the imagination is the central human concern and, without it, there can be no compassion, no good judgement, no justice. Without it, we are lost, in a world we do not know but try vainly to control, according to a set of self-imposed limitations and inherited fears; without it, we are exactly where the powers-that-be want us: malleable, predictable and slavishly in thrall to the hydra-headed monsters of entertainment and consumption. Without it, we live as mere persons, not as spirits, guided through life by road maps prepared for us, not by others *per se*, but by a machinery of hellish otherness in which we, as persons, are hopelessly entangled.



Enough of this. If I return to that mythical road in Kansas, I realise that my usual entry to Eluard's otherworld is to stumble upon it, on those rare occasions when I am not distracted by the usual business of existing: work, worry, being among others (*among*, that is, as opposed to *with*: Heidegger's distinction). I can pick out moments – lasting a few seconds at a time, to an hour, to a whole afternoon or night – when I have entered into that immediate otherworld and, though there is no narrative attached to such incidents that allows for a retelling, I find myself returning, again and again, to memories that I cannot share with others, or fully pin down for myself. Which, in one sense, is a perfect description of the lyric poem: another point of entry to the quotidian, another source of that clarity of being that alchemists call *pleroma*. At its best, the lyric opens a door in the everyday and allows me to pass into the otherworld behind the taken-for-granted; this art is not therapeutic as such, yet it is an attempt – on the part of the poet and possibly, at the moment of composition, purely for his or her own sake – to heal the imagination. “Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about,” says Hannah Arendt; and healing could fairly be described as an attempt at oneness, a renewal of the connection to the continuum of the real, a discipline for happiness.

Assume that the most common malady of contemporary life (in the ‘developed’ world, at least) is the sensation that the self is stolen away on a daily basis, that we are always struggling to win it back and, with it, to win back the perspective by which the quotidian may be experienced in its fullness. Meanwhile, what – if anything – is *visible* of the subject is a false self, a public construct resulting from a process of invention with which, to a greater or lesser extent, we ourselves collaborate. (“The light of the public darkens everything,” Heidegger says.) If this is so, the task is to break that false self and move into Eluard's otherworld, the *true* Kingdom of Heaven. The reading of a lyric poem thus becomes a magical rite that re-enacts the process of being lost on the road, a radical illumination of the real world and a revelation of the living self, for a moment made visible in its true substance. I am not talking about analogy here: stumbling out of the engineered mundane into the (God-)given quotidian may be a matter of luck or chance, while the making of a poem is at least partly a matter of skill and discipline; but, at its best, the lyric offers the same radical illumination that chance affords us when we wander off the map. For poetry works where maps are useless: like a passport, the lyric allows us to enter the otherworld, but it is neither road map nor field guide. Upon arrival in Eluard's Kingdom, all we have is imagination and the difficult leap of trusting our own (many) senses; over there, we are not who we are in our public lives, but being there is how we come to be revealed.

The question of visibility is crucial. Children become distinct persons by being seen; what generates attention is repeated, refined, prized. By the same token, to deny someone his or her visibility is to deny them existence: they continue to be, at least for a time, but *not being attended to*, not being seen and heard, leads to a form of sadness only otherwise observed in domestic animals. Obviously, this is not a question of *actual* (in)visibility; it is a matter of the radical self who *sees* the illumined world being systematically excluded from social discourse. It takes the patience – or the perversity – of a saint to live alone in a state of grace; the rest of us want to speak about that bourne from which we have, miraculously, returned. Or rather, not to speak, but to sing. It will seem, more often than not, that our off-map experiences are utterly private and beyond communication. But this is the paradox of poetry: the private event that illumines the poet's world is recreated and re-navigated, privately, by the reader; but the medium by which that event must be conveyed is a public one. In order to make a poem, we must subvert, not language itself, but the way language is used to consolidate social convention, just as, in order to become visible as we truly are, we must surrender our visibility as public – and so authorised – persons, in a world that is entirely of our own making.

This is all theory, of course. All abstraction. What I really want to talk about is the Midwest, where radical change can happen at any moment. The Midwest is a land of storms and floods, a land of big rivers and hurricanes and earthquakes (no wonder the Old Testament is so popular there). The Midwest is so open to the sky that everything under that wide roof seems provisional. Houses are built, not to withstand nature, but for ease of re-assembly, after they have been blown, or washed, or shaken to pieces. This is reflected in the stories that this land tells: in the English heartland's classic fantasy of entering *l'autremonde*, Alice falls, rather gently, out of the Oxford landscape and lands, quite softly, in an otherworld that, like Hades, is entirely underground (she is, in fact, a modern Proserpine, or – given Carroll's marriage fantasies – Eurydice). In *The Wizard of Oz*, however, Dorothy is literally blown away: entry to the other world is only vouchsafed by an act of violence, and the intense stillness that comes thereafter.

The two stories have many parallels: both the Alice and Oz books have a central, *active* female character; both introduce us to a world where the normal rules do not apply, a world whose characters are (like the girls themselves) wilful and unpredictable – natural forces, rather than persons as such. In both stories, there are moments of extraordinary stillness; both heroines are granted insights that cannot be obtained by reason, in spite of the fact that both try, doggedly, to apply the logic of the mundane world to situations that are beyond comprehension. The one significant difference (other than the more obvious moral content of the Oz books) is that Alice

falls into her otherworld as if falling into a sleep (and, returning from that world, she is quick to dismiss it as a dream), whereas Dorothy is not so easily convinced that the otherworld is insubstantial, perhaps because the event that took her there was so very powerful and the forces with which she had to contend were so very perverse. Dorothy recognises that entry to such a world is an immense gift: it is also a means by which she can renew the landscape that Aunt Em and Uncle Henry inhabit. In the closing pages, rather than being dismissed as a dream, the cyclone is seen as the (re-)entry point to a fuller appreciation of the quotidian:

“The Silver Shoes,” said The Good Witch, “have wonderful powers. And one of the most curious things about them is that they can carry you to any place in the world in three steps, and each step will be made in the wink of an eye. All you have to do is knock the heels together three times and command the shoes to carry you wherever you wish to go.”

“If that is so,” said the child, joyfully, “I will ask them to carry me back to Kansas at once.”

Naturally, her wish is granted, but there is enough in the detail of her return for the reader to guess that her perspective has changed:

Instantly she was whirling through the air, so swiftly that all she could see or feel was the wind whistling past her ears. The Silver Shoes took but three steps, and then she stopped so suddenly that she rolled over on the grass several times before she knew where she was. At length, however, she sat up and looked about her.

“Good gracious!” she cried. For she was sitting on the broad Kansas prairie, and just before her was the new farmhouse Uncle Henry had built after the cyclone had carried away the old one.

At which point Aunt Em comes out to water the cabbages and sees Dorothy “running towards her”. All these details – the cows, the cabbages, Dorothy rolling on the grass – are ordinary and familiar, yet they are transformed by the child’s experiences in Oz, of which she speaks “gravely” (an echo, perhaps, of the “gray” that was so prevalent in the first chapter, but also a transformation from that Gradgrindly existence to a first glimmer of joyful sagacity). What matters, here, is not Dorothy’s sojourn in Oz, so much as the manner of her return, a journey into the quotidian that, like the fairy stories Baum invokes in his introduction, *renews* the familiar, as much as it offers

‘escape’ from the restrictions imposed by convention. The otherworld is seen to exist, but it isn’t Oz, it’s here, enfolded in *celui-là*.



Let us précis. For now, I am using the term *the quotidian* to mean the actual unfolding of the world around us, the ‘out-there’ of it, the kingdom-at-hand. Set against that is *the banal*. The banal is what we make of the quotidian when imagination fails: a condition that can arise from fatigue, dislocation, need, or simply as the result of ‘socialisation’. The quotidian is the lyric poet’s grail: the otherworld so carefully folded within the taken-for-granted as to be almost invisible. One glimpse of that otherworld can be the making of a lyric poem – and, by extension, another step towards *pleroma*.

In the Midwest, it seems to me, the *celui-là* is very thin. The earth is open to the sky, the land is wide and self-similar for hundreds of miles and there are moments when the world seems empty, or as the American poet Allison Funk puts it, in the final section of her third book, *The Knot Garden*:

Nothing. Nothing again.
Its dominion.

This closing section, entitled *In the Heartland*, distils into eleven beautiful lyric poems the argument about Midwestern poetry that I am pursuing here; and I want to linger over them for a moment. As it happens, Allison Funk is not *from* the Midwest: she was born in Delaware and her early work reflects those origins; yet, from her second collection, *Living at the Epicenter*, onwards, she has consistently engaged, not only with a Midwestern landscape (she now lives near St Louis) but also with the drama of entry – often by way of some violent or traumatic event – into the stillness of Eluard’s *autremonde*. Other poets have explored that drama, but Funk’s perspective is highly individual and her work – clear, unshowy, questioning – is as fine as anything being written now in its invocation of the quiet after the storm, where the kingdom-at-hand shines through, sometimes overwhelming in its immediacy, sometimes only just hinted at, a fleeting clue to the possibility of a fuller self in a wider world – as in another *Heartland* poem, ‘Appearance at Dusk’, where the speaker encounters a deer that

disturbed the equilibrium
of dusk so little as she passed,
I doubted the murky air

had moved at all.

Yet, when the animal sees her, she is amazed by what happens:

This time fixing me
with a gaze that left me fallow.

I don't know how she put to rest
everything that eddied within me, how
as long as we kept one another in sight

windfall could have given way
to snowfall beyond us.

The animal encounter is a common enough phenomenon in American poetry, but I can think of no other poet whose *dramatis personae* display such tenderness towards the natural world, even when they find it threatening or unsettling. The delicacy of the handling here, along with the deftness of the conclusion, mark 'Appearance at Dusk' as something extraordinary, reconciling, as it does, the sense of personal difficulty with fleeting entry into the otherworld (which belongs, so perfectly, to the deer):

Delicious – summer, summer again

amid the terror, evenings and mornings
when I'd scare, when I would have bolted
if love hadn't held me there.

Everything works beautifully here, in an understated way: the surprise of the word "terror", the ambiguity written into "scare", the reversal implied in "bolted" and the sudden, disconcerting appearance of that unexpected "love" in the last line (love for what? for whom?).

Yet this is an everyday encounter, common enough in any landscape. A more specifically Midwestern example of the sudden revelation of a divine, yet troubling, quotidian appears a few pages later, in 'On the Prairie', whose subject is the fine haze of cottonwood down that blows across the land in late summer:

Look down at your feet
or straight ahead
as you walk
and you easily miss them,

the poem begins; and to begin with it is hard to see where this will go, other

than in some conventional ‘nature poem’ direction. The revelation – the giddy fall into the otherworld – only comes towards the end, when the poet has misled us into thinking we really have taken up residence in the picturesque:

looking up now I’m having trouble

distinguishing them
from the clouds on an updraft
they’re floating towards.
I cannot trust my sight.

This has happened before,
hasn’t it? Is always always

happening. If only I heard a tintinnabulum,
the smallest tinkling bell

ringing when something’s real
so I would know;
if I could hold, just for a moment,
what spirits this close –

but caught,
and in my damp palm,
what was like unto a breeze,
what-I-would-be

sticks,
even when I say go,
sally forth, it stays, will not, little soul
of mine, ghost.

In one sense, nothing could be slighter than this haze of cottonweed seed, yet it is not the event so much as the fact of noticing it, and discovering in the noticing that, not only has it happened before, but it is always happening – this kingdom-at-hand, this otherworld – and the self that goes with it, the “what-I would-be” is always there, even if it is marked by the poignancy of that wish to be alerted to the real that it keeps missing, and by the fact that it cannot “sally forth” (a sly touch, that hint of willow) but “sticks”.

The stillest moment and the most direct experience of *l'autremonde* in

the *Heartland* series comes, however, in the brief and deceptively simple-seeming ‘Afterward’:

Amid the debris,
the wreckage of events,
it was somehow as unbroken
in its way
as the egg found in the rubble
of a leveled house
or, under the dust
that was someone’s good china
once, the teacup
rimmed in gold leaf,
a baby unearthed
alive, or most surprising perhaps,
in working order
the chimes of the quarter hour
a man heard standing atop a staircase
leading nowhere:
amid the debris, a little melody
rung against something bigger,
louder, the megaphone of the twister,
the line she would sing to herself.

Here, in a poem that links back to the beautiful, hushed title sequence of Funk’s *Living at the Epicenter* (an “afterward” to that book, as well as to the events it now describes) the poet brings together the essential ingredients of the *autremonde* encounter: the violent event, in this case “the twister”; the breakdown of the given order; the miraculous quiet of *afterward*, where the music of what happens in the other world – a melody, a line – suggests itself to the persona (note that, in spite of that “in working order”, the clock itself is not mentioned, only “the chimes of the quarter hour”); the staircase that leads nowhere; the sense one has that everything, not just space but also time, has changed, but that this change, an acknowledged catastrophe in *the banal*, is a potentially mind-changing revelation in the quotidian. In this sense, ‘Afterward’ can be seen as a template of how to read Funk’s *Heartland* poems, each of which is an encounter with the quotidian that leads both persona and reader, if not always to the abandonment, at least to a reconsideration, of the banal.

Perhaps the most powerful of Funk’s considerations of cataclysmic events, however, is that central title sequence in *Living at the Epicenter*. This sequence of five short lyrics takes its cue from Eliza Bryan “of New Madrid,

Missouri, [who] wrote one of the few surviving accounts of the series of earthquakes that shook the region in late 1811 and 1812". The first of these is a fractured, impressionistic telling of the earthquake itself:

Oaks thrusting at one another,
the houses come unfastened.
Heaved from their nests

birds land
on her shoulders and head.
Wings in her face.
Odor of sulfur.

Here is the cataclysmic event, recalled in language that, while neither archaic nor overly Biblical, recalls the vocabulary of Eliza Bryan's time, with its references to "a babel of trees", the brutish sexuality of the "Mississippi / like an animal in heat" and that satanic hint of sulphur noted above. Here, and in the second poem (where the river runs backwards), we are in the world of conventional order, though only for long enough to watch that order being torn apart. Yet already, even in that second lyric, there is a glimpse of something more, a fleeting yet telling hint of the quotidian:

a lady and six children
all lost.
Flatboat, raft, all the tenuous breaths,
the young cottonwoods
broken with such regularity

from a distance
they might look like a work of art.

This poem closes with its protagonist able to see, though only "as if underwater"; soon, however, the third poem has her "stumbling miles / waist deep in blood warm water" – the shattering of her world is not yet finished, and she will not be ready to enter an *autremonde* that is as terrifying as it is miraculous until everything she knows and trusts, everything she has taken for granted, is broken:

When she holds out her arms
to the children

silt runs through her fingers.
Borderless,
nothing's familiar.
Yard, road.
Others, self.

It is a terrible moment, yet this is the point at which she enters the continuum of the quotidian, the point at which the mapped world fails her and she cannot tell herself apart, quite, from what surrounds her. It has, it seems, taken this cataclysm for her – and for us – to see that the logic by which we live, day to day, is only a subset of a wider, more mysterious order. In the fourth poem, the woman recovers her memory “like a fever” and begins looking back, searching for the signs that should have warned her of the impending disaster, remembering blighted crops, hailstones,

passenger pigeons
arriving suddenly

like the Pharaoh’s locusts, swarming
in the fields, hundreds in a single tree.

With hindsight, she sees that the signs were there: the animals knew and, had she but known how to read the world about her, she would have guessed what was coming from the “grey squirrels in thousands / drowned trying to cross the river”. Finally, in a moment that echoes Casca’s “civil strife in heaven” speech in *Julius Caesar*, she upbraids herself for being so out of tune with the auguries:

How was it she didn’t see it coming,
she asks herself,
remembering the eclipse
of the moon, autumn’s comet
and the monster born between its legs.

The final poem opens with another animal image, as:

A great blue heron
starts up out of the wetlands slowly,
looking broken at first,
long legs trailing
before, heavy winged, it flies.

“Another sign, she thinks”, but of what? After such upheaval, the world can never be the same again: or rather, she, this woman, can never go back to the world-taken-for-granted where she once lived. All she can do now is write, trying to make sense of events and, in so doing,

tell
what she's learned:

how in the middle of one night
the world we've known
can open up without warning,
all of nature
begin speaking in tongues.

Here the poem ends, quietly, with both protagonist and poet setting pen to paper, each determined to “tell / what she's learned”, the former from the event itself, the latter from bringing together a reading of Eliza Bryan's account of the earthquake with the unspecified private events that have brought her to the contemplation of a new self, born from the wreckage of given expectations into a world that is both more dangerous and, at the same time (with that image of the broken heron mending itself in flight and that frightening, yet liberating idea of nature “speaking in tongues”), more miraculous than she could ever have imagined – till now.



Some time after that drive in the Flint Hills, on another highway, a thousand miles from Kansas, I came across the same turning, the same country road, the same glimmers of cottonwood down drifting across the fields. I noticed it immediately and, turning off the highway, I drove for twenty miles or so till the track fizzled out in a sandy wash, a line of willows, a silence broken now and then by the call of a red-winged blackbird, crouched amongst the reeds. It was a warm, egg-blue and straw-coloured afternoon, and I was nowhere in particular; but that's the thing about *l'autremonde*: it turns up in the most unlikely places, and when you least expect it, looking just like the *celui-là*.