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Salt; Genius Loci

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Susan Elizabeth Howe. *Salt*.
Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013.

Lance Larsen. *Genius Loci*.
Tampa, Fla.: University of Tampa Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Tyler Chadwick

Seeing [the earth as it is] requires something more than merely historical or aesthetic lenses. It requires the poet's eye.¹ —George Handley

Our story begins with Adam and Eve and an insatiate snake—or with a variation on the theme. The man's name is Bob. The woman remains nameless. Eve (I'll call her) wrestles with the snake, "Lucy, / short for Lucifer," the couple's "pet python," whom they allow to "slither about [their] bedroom." This isn't the smartest idea, something Eve realizes the night she wakes because Lucy has "wrapped around [her]" like a snake would around live meat. Which the woman is, of course—at least to a hungry snake. Sensing the struggle beside him, Bob wakes and grabs his "Swiss army knife" to take care of the snake; but instead he gets "enmeshed" in the wrestling match, though not so much that he can't grab the phone and call for help.

And that's where Susan Elizabeth Howe's allegorical poem, "Python Killed to Save Woman," leaves our archetypal trio: the serpent trying to wring breath from the couple, the couple struggling for air in Lucifer's tightening squeeze, Bob begging for help, Eve wondering "whose death" will come first (3–4). Little matter, though, because in the end—of the poem as of life—death gets the last word (until Christ speaks up, that is).

Death: the heritage of a temporal world, the proper end of the system's decomposition. This end is where Howe, a poet and playwright

1. In his original statement from *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press [2010], location 2489), Handley refers specifically to "a river." I've expanded his claim to include the earth in general. My alteration of his text is, I think, in keeping with his intention in *Home Waters* to encourage people to attend more closely and carefully to the earth and its processes.

who taught at Brigham Young University, begins her second poetry collection, which is titled simply *Salt*. By opening the collection with a story of life's end, Howe reminds readers of our mortal heritage and opens the way to explore the impact of death on life and language. *Salt's* opening poem, then, is a *memento mori* in a poetry collection that positions itself as a preservative. Salt is, after all, essential to animal life. As such, it's valuable to have around. Hence Christ to his disciples: You are the "salt to the world" (Matt. 5:13)—meaning, your presence here should preserve and thus extend the principles of life to the world and its inhabitants. Hence Paul to early Christians: Let your speech be always with grace, "seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6)—meaning, let your language tend toward sustaining the principles of life. Hence a claim of Howe's collection: "Here are some words," she says, "dear to me as salt. May they preserve you as they have preserved me."

That Howe sees language as a preservative element that can help language-makers sustain and redeem their experiences and relationships (with each other and with the places they inhabit) is clear from the poems collected in *Salt*. Many of them revisit the poet's past, seeking to re-create memory's sweeping vistas as well as its most intimate quarters: the moments of encounter she's had with people and places (big and small) that ground her identity and orient her toward the present. Some people and places have played a more vital role in this process than others, as illustrated by their appearance in multiple poems. Howe's female forebears, for instance, have a notable presence, as do her nieces and nephews; and she sets several poems during time spent abroad, visiting Ireland, England, Mexico. But the place and the person that exert the greatest influence on her language are (respectively) Utah and her husband, Cless, to whom *Salt* is dedicated.

The claims Cless makes on the poet's being are clear in *Salt*. He appears by name in five of the book's poems and is referred to as "my husband" in several others. His influence also frames the entire collection. Howe ends the preface, for instance, by giving special thanks to him, who, she says, "shares everything" (xvii). I take this to mean that he is a generous being, but also that he shares with his wife everything that makes *poiesis*—the process of making—worthwhile to her, especially its function as salt to the world. She confesses that he contributes such a sustaining presence to her life and language; her opening inscription reads, "For Cless, who is dear to me as salt." She reiterates this statement as the title of the collection's closing poem, "Dear to Me as Salt." In the

poem, she catalogues her associations with salt, using its “chemical bond” as an analog for the relationships that bind her to the earth and its creatures. Foremost among these dearly valued bonds is the one she shares with Cless, with whom she labors to till ground and with whom she moves across the earth and through life. The last half of the poem points to the way salt has sustained that relationship, both literally in the sweat and blood stirred by the body at work and metaphorically as desire:

Sweat I want to lick
from the base of your neck. Kisses.

Taste of my own blood.
Desire we float in, the great salt
lake whose water stings and lashes
life to death to life. (107)

This last sentence also points to how deeply connected Howe feels to Utah, something she admits in her preface when she says, “The very geography of this place has shaped me” (x). This connection is evident throughout *Salt*, beginning with the black-and-white image chosen to dress the book’s salt-white cover. Designed by illustrator Ron Stucki, the image reads like a typical Northern Utah mountainscape filled with snow-capped peaks, but with the vital addition of a partial, undraped figure of a woman reclining across the foreground. The image is cropped and positioned so that the woman’s body discreetly mirrors the landscape.

Or rather: her body *becomes* the landscape.

Howe explores the inseparable union between flesh and earth in her poem, “My True Country,” which begins “How I belong in the red desert.” In the lines that follow, she shows how entangled she is in the geography she inhabits by entangling descriptions of desert flora with descriptions of her body:

morning hair like spiny Brigham tea, evening hair
like the straw of rice grass,
veins in my wrists the blue-green of a buffalo berry bush.
As juniper twists and survives,
one breast hangs lower and my hip protrudes,
my left eyebrow rises,
its question answered by my right. (92)

Nine pages before this, Howe shows how all of us are entangled. She does so in a poem that celebrates religious rituals as things that bring humans together in shared pursuit of the sacred even as these acts of worship—which require our bodily presence and physical touch—ground us in the realities of life in this world. Having gathered with family and friends to witness the Mormon ritual by which an infant is given a name and a blessing, the poet watches the child get passed from Dad to Mom “just as [the baby] dirties her diaper.” The emergence of something so earthy during a sacred religious service reminds the poet that this child—like everyone else—“belongs to this soiled earth” (83). The earth is ours, God tells us, and will sustain and preserve us so long as we sustain and preserve it. As Howe illustrates with *Salt*, this stewardship to be salt to the world includes using language to flesh out and to cultivate our species’ inherent connection to, dependence on, and responsibility for the earth.

Mormon theology demands that in all we do—language-making included—we attend closely to the environments we inhabit. “Consider the lilies of the field,” Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount, then again in his sermon at the Nephite temple and to Joseph Smith in Kirtland.² His utterance, reiterated across dispensations, calls his disciples to rely on his grace as they seek to build Zion: “You’re worried about where you’ll get your next meal?” he seems to ask. “How you’ll quench your thirst and clothe your nakedness? Well, look closely at the lilies. See how their relationship with the earth sustains their growth? They root in rich soil. They withhold their presence and their beauty from no one. They consume only as their needs demand and what they produce contributes—even in death—to the health and constant renewal of their environment, to which the species readily adapts. Can human institutions, which are prone to excess, say the same of themselves?

“Live, rather, like the lilies.”

Howe, it seems, has taken this imperative to heart (though perhaps not directly via Christ’s statement), using her *poiesis* as a way to sustain the world and to draw out her presence—as well as her readers’ presence—therein. Poet and professor Lance Larsen, who (like Howe) teaches at BYU, seems to have responded likewise, although the places he inhabits in his fourth poetry collection, *Genius Loci*, are more directly mobile than those Howe inhabits in *Salt*. *Salt*’s geographies and the people and creatures who populate them are essentially in motion. But a

2. See Matthew 6:28, 3 Nephi 13:28, and Doctrine and Covenants 84:82.

persistent concern in *Genius Loci* is what it means to live in a world that doesn't hold still—scratch that: not just *to live* in a world that doesn't hold still, but *to be fully present* in that world.

The book foregrounds the postindustrial world's lack of stillness in its movement among places and images and its repeated references to public transportation. In a conversation I recently had with a colleague regarding *Genius Loci*, she mentioned that the collection's movement among so many places and things made it feel like it had ADHD—like the poet couldn't sit still long enough to settle on a unifying theme or focus. The poems jump between past and present; the subject matter moves from trout fishing to big city living to life in the suburbs, from interactions between parent and child, between lovers, or among strangers; and the imagery points to something beyond this world even as it remains deeply rooted in life on Earth. Ultimately, even though the collection's subject matter may seem unwieldy because its poems range widely, the poet's main concern is with experiencing the earth more deeply and invoking that experience for others.

Larsen draws readers into this poetic re-vision of the world from the first lines of “Chancellor of Shadows,” which is the collection's first poem: “Horses are praying the old fashioned way, trotting / a fenced field at twilight under a towel of moon” (1). Calling upon the grace and power of equine movement, this invocation does at least two things:

First, it pairs movement and prayer and suggests that the body in motion is a primitive mode of communion—by which I mean that, on an evolutionary timescale, physical movement would precede the language-making ritual we call prayer as a way of articulating desire, reaching beyond the self, and connecting with others and the world. Larsen's horses represent this primal sense of kinship: the acknowledgement that a place's inhabitants are inherently interdependent and that by accepting each other's presence and moving through the world together, those inhabitants can have a dramatic influence on each other, on observers, and on their environment. This influence is manifest, in one sense, as the horses trot through their pasture, running for no apparent reason other than their mutual response to the species' instinct to run together, and, in another sense, as their movement through the field moves the poet to make language that honors their shared presence in the world and that recognizes and is influenced by the grace revealed in animal consciousness.

Second, recognizing what animals can teach about shared movement as communion and grace, the poet uses the invocation to call readers to consider the presence of other beings and creatures in their

own lives. He does this from the poem's first lines, where the mixture of poetic feet mimics the horses' movements through the field. As I read it, line one consists of two dactyls (a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables), a third epitrite (two stressed syllables followed by an unstressed then a stressed syllable), and a trochee (an unstressed then stressed syllable); and the second line consists of two bacchii (an unstressed syllable followed by two stressed syllables), a dactyl, and a choriamb (a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables then another stressed). This complex rhythm structure moves the language beyond everyday speech and taps into the varied rhythms of life on Earth, a process that—as happens with poetic language in general—seeks to draw readers beyond everyday concerns and to (re)connect them with the world at their feet.

So connected, we become more aware of who and what we share places with and how our interdependence shapes those places and the ways we inhabit them. Hence the reason Larsen “keep[s] putting animals in [his] poems”—or so he claims in the collection's second entry: “I open windows to catch a glimpse of *grace* / on the horizon,” he says,

and in they sneak, coyotes and crows,
pikas and the scholarly vole, dragging scoured skies
I can see myself in. Much cheaper than booking
a flight to the Galápagos. And they teach me.

Badgers rarely invent stories to make them sad
about their bodies. And the wrinkliest of Shar Pei
never dreams of ironing its face. My happiness
is like a flock of sparrows that scatters when a bus
drives by, then re-strings itself two blocks away,

a necklace of chirps festooning a caved-in barn. (2)

By comparing his well-being to a flock of sparrows that disbands at the noise of a passing bus then reconnects down the road, he reiterates the idea that shared movement through a place is an act of communion—of coming and being together—and an expression of grace. Just as the necklace of birds embellishes the neighborhood, our attempts to move, to commune, to connect, to be fully present with others enhance our experience of the places we occupy together.

The collection's opening poems establish its preoccupation with movement, which further manifests in the repeated references to vehicles. In “Man in a Suit, Twelve Crickets in His Pocket,” for instance, the poet occupies a car with a dozen feeder crickets chirring in his coat

pocket. Because, by his own admission, he's "a man who hates to make an extra trip," he picked up the insects on his way to a "wedding reception" and stuffed them in his pocket so they wouldn't freeze in the cold car while he made his way through the reception. Vulnerable to the influence of other beings and creatures on himself and his perception of his surroundings, driving home after the event he wills the crickets' "dark voices to sing away the dark" as he listens "for his name" in their chorus "and the electric hush that follows" (24–25).

The "electric hush" of modern modes of transportation plays backup to many poems in the collection, including the six that refer to buses. The most prominent of these, "Elegy, with City Bus and Blue-haired Girl," places an undisclosed number of passengers and a driver at a bus stop where, from their seats, they watch a confrontation unfold just outside the door between the eponymous girl and "a boy with a shaved head." Made voyeurs by the rising tension in the young lovers' dispute, the onlookers are content to watch and wait for the quarrel to pass—until the spat rises to violence, that is, she shoulder-butting him and he shoving her. Forced from complacency by the increased threat to the girl's well-being, the observers spring to action: as the poet says, the act "made three of us stand up, / and two of us / reach for our cells"; and it compelled the bus driver to reach out with language:

"Miss, do you need some help?

Hey, Miss."

The driver punctuated his offer with tenderness:

he knelt the bus. Yes, knelt it. In a whoosh
of hydraulics,
that behemoth dinosaured to its knees. (8–11)

While the girl turns away from the safe place offered by the bus and runs "back the way she had come" with the boy close behind, the bus gives the people who occupy it the chance to share experience, to share breath. Larsen reiterates the theme in one of the book's many odes: "Ode to Breath":

schlubs
like me spend weekends learning
to share you with a dying stranger on a bus.
An intimacy resembling a kiss
but closer to confession. (60)

To draw breath is life-giving movement. To share breath is an act of intimacy and communion: it's to move together, to make language

together, to mutually draw in the air—the spirit—of a place, and in so doing to commune with those who also inhabit the place and to take responsibility for our neighbors' well-being and for the place's well-being. Hence the title of Larsen's book: *Genius Loci*, which means the spirit of (a) place. For the Romans, who originated the concept, a place's genius was its guardian spirit, a singular influence that breathed life into each aspect of the place—its environment, its people, its happenings.

Drawing from this conception in their role as stewards of place, landscape architects seek to bring natural and constructed environments into harmony with each place's particular geniuses. And poets who likewise take their place on Earth seriously follow suit, making language (which is itself a dynamic, adaptive product of human biology and interaction with the natural world) that mirrors, rethinks, and remakes the being of Earth and its inhabitants. In this light, both *Salt* and *Genius Loci* can be productively read by those interested in poetry of high literary value and also by those interested in the impact our presence and our language have on the earth and who seek to be fully present in that world.

Tyler Chadwick received his MA in English from National University in San Diego, California, and is a doctoral candidate in English at Idaho State University. He is an active essayist and poet and has published widely in literary venues.