

# Black Mountain College

## MUSEUM ARTS CENTER

### **Selections from *Listening to a Field through the Window of a Truck***

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## **Selections from *Listening to a Field through the Window of a Truck***

Austen Camille

It is very possible that the following poems have been written in the way that they are written *because the Black Mountain Poets existed*. I had never thought to categorize my poetry as anything other than ‘poetry’, perhaps assuming that it was something loosely related to ‘free verse’, but in fact the work is far more in line with the ‘projective verse’ that Charles Olson wrote about in 1950 and that the other Black Mountain Poets continued to expand upon and bring into being in the years thereafter.

The poems and essays in *Listening to a Field through the Window of Truck* are generated in this way: I meet with a land steward (a farmer, a conservationist, a birder, an agricultural extension agent, a hunter, amongst many others) on the ground of their choosing and ask them about their relationship to soil. Then, we have a conversation where I don’t record a single thing – instead, I just listen very very closely. Later, the impressions of this conversation and the essence of the land steward’s work and the way we move across the soil eventually become a poem. In other words, the poems are instinctively and intentionally derived from the landscape of their content. The poems happen because I am living, breathing, amongst that which is being written about.

And indeed, these poems physically exist on the page in a very deliberate manner. There is motion between lines in the way that there is motion in a conversation: a back and forth, and pauses of consideration, of chewing over one another’s words with care. The words are physical in the way that breath is physical (*particularly breath in a body that is in direct contact with the topographical bones of a landscape*). In Black Mountain poet Denise Levertov’s 1965 essay, *Some Notes on Organic Form*, she writes, “In organic poetry the metric movement, the measure, is the direct expression of the movement of perception. And the sounds [...] imitate not the sounds of an experience (which may well be soundless, or to which sounds contribute only incidentally), but the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture.” This is precisely it. The following poems are textures of experiences. And the following artworks are textures of the poems.

In the same way that the Black Mountain College encouraged multiple forms of knowledge-making and -sharing, the broader project that holds *Listening to a Field through the Window of Truck* is a sprawling one. It makes no hierarchical distinction between manuscript or exhibition or conversation or workshop or a dinner shared amongst the land stewards. *All* are defined by mutual nourishment, and all of its forms are an extension of a tangled, interreliant, breathing content.

***We are shaped by our landscapes / we shape our landscapes***

As I learn how to read the landscape here, I can see that  
the Chesapeake Bay is a drowned river valley.  
Drowned by prehistoric glacier melt, at a much earlier time when the  
world was warming. Similar to and very different from  
right now.

The Susquehanna River had carved a deep channel down  
the middle, and formed silty floodplains at its edges: the  
yielding land that this town is built upon.

I am waiting for T in the coffee shop, most of the tables around me  
full of older men in dark blue coveralls. Everyone is talking about the  
weather, its changes, the unusual patterns of heavy rain, too much  
clay in the soil or too much sand,

addictions in the family, the Lord, the price of fertilizer, the funeral  
they'd all gone to last week,

and while there is very little said about how anyone feels  
about anything, there is a deep sensation of what I would  
call *care*:

a holding of one another's  
overwhelming difficulties.

I am unsure of how these two things relate exactly (the geologic history of  
the Bay and the way these men talk to one another), but it feels like they  
do. *We are shaped by our landscapes / we shape our landscapes*. These  
conversations and relationships are facilitated by the weather, by a shared  
working of the land:

The shape of this peninsula has changed dramatically since the land  
was cleared for agriculture,

since the soft floodplain soil began eroding into the waterways and the sandy sediment filled up previously navigable rivers,

since certain cliffs became beaches – created and now covered up again as the sea level rises. *We are shaped by our landscapes / we shape our landscapes.*

One man's voice in particular carries over the chatter:

*I'm not sure how much longer we can do this for.*



*We are shaped by our landscapes / We shape our landscapes.* Variable sizes. Ceramic, aluminum, hardware, stone. 2024.

## ***Birding from the gas station parking lot***

I passed three dead deer this morning, laying on the side of Route 213 heading south. Several feet from impact,  
and what struck me was the achingly elegant backwards arc to all of their necks. As if the last moments were of rapture, rather than of panic.

There are about 230,000 white-tailed deer in the state of Maryland, and their population remains steady so long as there are hunters and collisions. 230,000 is already more deer than the ecosystem and the agricultural lands can support. 230,000 deer browsing the soybeans, the corn, before harvest. 230,000 deer foraging what is left of the native plant species tucked into  
the slim woodlands, making room for nonnative species to assert themselves. We have given them the conditions to thrive.

At the gas station, still thinking about the deer and everything that the deer makes me think of, I face the wide cornfield covered in snow on the other side of the road. *The soft kind of looking while your mind is elsewhere.* Dirty white farm trucks driving by with tarps flapping. Hands tucked into jackets and under armpits to stay warm.

And all at once, the snowy field rises up like shaking a clean sheet. Hundreds of snow geese, almost invisible but for their dark wingtips, lift into the air together and spread out towards the treeline.

The winter fields full of leftover grain can support such a large population of snow geese that their summer stomping grounds – the vast northern tundras far out of sight from this place – are being overgrazed. *We have given them the conditions to thrive.*

All of us filling up our tanks are looking out over the field together. The pumps click off, one by one, and we are still here: taking in the overwhelming abundance.



*Birding from the gas station parking lot (Snow geese)*. 48"x34". Pigment, safflower oil, graphite, aluminum, stainless lag screws. 2025.

## ***A piece of land***

The term *piece of land* feels like a woefully inadequate way to describe a particular area containing land, water, soil, creatures winged and leafed and pawed, my body, your body, the houses we have built and the fences we have erected that attempt to say *This here, this bounded space, is my piece of land*.

*Piece of land* ignores the movability of soil due to wind and gravity, and it ignores the exchange of oxygen between plants and atmosphere. It ignores the way that rain falls from the clouds and moves through the soil; *it ignores the way all water wants to become river*. It ignores the fact that the land on this side of the fence is pretty darn similar to the land on that side of the fence.

If not *piece of land*, what else?

Perhaps:  
this is a place where poets could be helpful?



*Soil is another word for home.* Variable dimensions (approx. 2" tall). Soil from different places I have called home, gathered by friends and family, wood glue, sawdust. 2024-25.