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Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands

Stephen S. Collis
Simon Fraser University

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Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands

We were walkers
In a dangerous time
Of storm and thaw
Took damage in our
Stride—the vacant
Air the wildered mind
Ensnared—beat down
And scraped clean
Of the burden
Of overwhelming being— 10
A voice here

Intervenes as if a
Common property of the
Formality of these lines—
The new garden relieves
The overburden of
Merely growing things
Scrapes the earth clean
Of organism—dirty paint
From used palettes scraped— 20
The new garden the voice
Proclaims—*is a desert*
Of ordered destructions
An extraction earth
From which bitumen's ripped
To fuel a mind from which
Finance life has stripped

Wordsworth—I feel you too!
Though there is no mechanism
To nuance this conversation 30
Across the years—so I brought
Your ruined cottages your
Evening walks and Grasmere
Homing here to the Tar Sands
To stroll across northern deserts

Not knowing how well you fit—
The method of our walking
From seeing to contemplating
To remembering—is yours
Though no solitary haunts 40
Are here—no birds that scud
The flood—here we tread
Together the shadowy ground
Bright in the sun round
The darkest pits of vacancy
Scooped out sockets of eyes
Where skeletal holes of earth remain
Waterless and drained

1

The place from which I looked
The plane descending on Fort 50
McMurray or the road we walked
Around the bounds of one dry lake
And if I thought I thought of dying
Of stone and tombs and pits
No profit but one thought
The lot of others could be mined
Yet—aerial—we might business
Halt—tempting notions—wind
Over dead water—I thought of
Clouds where none lay land 60
Grey billows of moneyed dust
Nickel and naught caught up
In tracks of trucks—shadows
Brittle butterflies and the liquid
Depths of dry grass—benzene
And naphthenic acid sands
Without restraints or bounds
Blowing out and over this
Huge sand ensnared world the
Chemical truth extracts its 70

Word—it's simple really—they
 Tore the forest off fast like
 A bandage over wounded earth
 A blister in the sun or a song
 Without use value or intrinsic worth

Walking—we were seeing
 Silvered shunts of sand lakes
 Like salt flats wondering what
 Winkles out in yonder mercury
 Sheen? No ponds pretend to 80
 Lighten belief—air canon and
 Scarecrow miners surround
 These tailings are desolation's
 Dream of crumbling decor
 Whoever it was saw boreal
 Swept it clean in cold accounts
 Before land wastes were
 Fenced former forests of sand
 Thick dark thoughts leaching
 Heavy metal music machines 90
 Or death metal bands screaming
 Unfathomable ruination inside
 A sealed steel cube in space

Dear imagination—lighten up!
 Your part is human protest
 But there are no visionary scenes
 Of lofty beauties uplifting to see
 Even if Burtynsky might
 Shoot them chromatic as
 Abstract patterns of chemical dirt 100
 No matter!—When in service
 Of monetary gain and increasing
 Industries of land liquidation
 This world is anvil entertainment
 Bashed first peoples flat land home
 Still springing up thrust midst the

Fossilized dead on whose ancestral
Heat we strange grammar feed
As strange accumulations folk
Pummel pores and veins of 110
Saturated soils coiled up in the
Barrage we make making roads
And the slow bombardment
Of never ending development

Perhaps I digress—the occasion
Is a public walk—but the aesthetics
Of the place is pure isolation pure
Social and biological negation—
Open maw is no landscape
There is no viewpoint despite 120

The signs and picnic tables of
Doom's treeless playgrounds
No play of light at sunset on
Tumescent swaths of an earth
Heaving its golden breast towards
A slate sky where gawkers careen
In tin cans winged while in utter
Foundries of digital light
Pounding out templates of data
We break to browse disaster porn 130

Look death in its vertiginous eye
One house sized truck after another
Blanket ourselves in perspectival
Air of vanished relations—no
This is just the vast insides
Of machine whose impetus
Money tells—no point from which
To see it whole or unveil its grasp
On brow of yonder hill—just a
Moving power that moves itself 140
And us tempest tossed within it
Sloughing boreal off its bitumen back
The calculus which compels

Its animate limbs for alien power
 Is assembled from our loathing
 And slouches now towards Fort
 McMurray and Fort McKay to
 Deliver a world of dead birds
 And unquenchable thirsts

2

Walking—we were old technology	150
Biotic and slow moving	
Dropped into circuit	
Pilgrims circling on a	
Healing walk walking	
All day beating the bounds	
Of a single tailings pond	
Between still other tailings ponds	
Edge of the largest mine in the	
World—past Syncrude and Suncor	
Refineries and the vast desert	160
Of the Tar Sands stretching	
Beyond where the plants	
One after another were slow	
In their former life and smoke	
Now belches into the sky	
Kites portend silver and bent	
Towards distant seas piped	

<i>This is where we walked</i>	
<i>This is where we swam</i>	
Voice again humming	170
Drum and song to keep us	
Moving beneath bullets of	
Economic praise spraying	
Billboards and the birdless	
Lakes on our left not	
Lakes but pools of poison	
Doing <i>what</i> beneath their beds	

We can only guess leaching
Towards the Athabasca
Flowing wide nearby on 180

To Fort Chip and the toxins
Captured in animal flesh there
Last human tenant imagined
Barren of all future good
Water scarred skin and wooden
Buffalo of Wood Buffalo
Cigar shop life and mines
And ponds where ancestors lie
Don't let the new houses fool you
She said from the ruined cottages 190
Of Fort Chipewyan First Nation
You can't find the map of us
On their financial statements

It doesn't smell as bad
As I thought it would
(though it does smell bad
or at least like a gas station world)
It is surrounded by fencing
And canons and clearly
Owns the police 200
Its money is heaped
In deep black banks
It has broken every treaty with life
Its ceremony is poison
It seems to have eaten the ducks
Or at least their inner feathered lives
Its clime is coming fast
And is difficult to resist

So we circle in the sun
Round a wound thinking healing 210
Circling erasure and watching
As trucks erase erasure
Lingering over layers where

Trees are several destructions gone
 Lines in flame earth—dust of the
 Dead and dying collected and
 Levelled by eager land movers
 The great trucks of nether worlds
 Dropping dead matter on top
 Of dead matter where a lake 220
 Once lay where boreal forest
 And muskeg once stretched
 To the horizon ringing round

This is where we walked
This is where we swam
 And I can only poultice
 The dry pieces of this
 Crack my eyes over
 Dry petrol glands of the
 Land stretching white 230
 Flat bright glare along
 Thrust of bleak road round
 Which trucks never cease
 To turn in a carbon gyre

We are the species
 That walked out of Africa
 Walked everywhere
 Found our fuel in forests
 Then in the ground beneath
 Forests—a widening gyre— 240
 Wrapped animal bone in
 Sweet dry grass offering
 And now stand in grass
 Beside the road offering
 Prayer on this first stop
 First of four directions
 We mark in our circuit
 Round the bitumen mine
 We could still vindicate

A species of limits and relent 250
Still unrelenting old sun
We pry up burning ground
Looking for more and movement
Where we should be less and still

Second stop—drumming and
Singing between two tailings
Ponds edged by sand dunes
The desert where the forest grew
Remembrance that came and went
Like a bird to its grave in the water

Third stop—past the refinery
Smoke and Syncrude tanks
The monster with its long metal
Arms pulling all to hell
Just don't reach—arms—too
Deep into our dreaming
We're not telling where
We're going next nor revealing
The fact we have a where
To go next secret futures across
The shores of utopia we are
Walking to and upon nation
Leading drowsy nation

Fourth stop and fourth
Direction—still drumming
And still singing—just this
Just this—the elders praying
Should earth be wrenched
Throughout or fire wither all
Her pleasant habitations and 280
Dry up ocean left singed
And bare or the waters
Of the deep gather upon us
Fleet waters of the drowning

World—know that kindlings
 Like the morning still
 Foretell—though slow—
 A returning day lodged
 In the frail shrine of us aglow
 Old technology of people together 290
 Holding the line against changing weather

3

Wordsworth—if I on this occasion
 Affirm anything—it is that I will
 Seriously pursue the simple task
 Of walking with those others of my time
 Who also small and failing are trying
 To walk against the traffic spilling
 In out and through our cities
 Out over and across the land—
 The trafficless wastes of which we all 300
 Together variously depend upon
 The queer cool and resistant
 Fields streams lakes and forests
 That linger like old myths we once lived by
 But are in fact facts we still test and try

It's then—tired and hot after the
 Long walk through the burnt land
 Sitting at last having just jumped
 With so many others into the
 Murky waters of Willow Lake 310
 That I suddenly recollected
 The valet at the hotel
 I stayed at this past May
 Asking if I had any poems
 About mountains—recalling
 This here far from hotels
 And far from mountains
 Flat land of aspen and swamp

I had to admit I didn't
Though I had a story 320
Never yet written down
How once young and too
Serious unhappy and searching
For I did not know what
I set out to climb a mountain
I'd passed many times driving
Through a high pass to the
Coast west of Port Alberni
And Sprout Lake—a sharp peak
Jutting through cloud tatter 330

It was evening already
Or at least late afternoon
I threw gear in my car
And westward took my way
Drove three hours intending
To set off in the dark
Camp and make the peak
In the morning hold communion
With the invisible world

It was stupid and compulsive 340
I wanted to hurt myself
Or have something outside
Myself hurt me or somehow
Lift myself up out of myself
Impossible weight of late
Capitalist life in velvet chains
Of individual expectation
And the solitude of consumption

Arriving at the mountain and
Parking on the side of the road 350
Fading light it was raining
And late fall or early spring
I forget but I could see

Through vapours shot tongues
And promontories it was
Snowing up on the peak above

Fuck it I said I took
My gear out got ready
In the rain beside the Volvo
One last check and I 360
Cannot find my keys

Instantly a light fell like
A flash they are in the
Ignition the car is locked

How many signs does one need
How many times do you
Have to fail at failing?

I knew I was beat knew
I'd return to my shitty
Apartment and shitty job 370
Maybe escape another day
Maybe never I turned

In the rain my boots
Crunching gravel stooped
And picked up the biggest
Rock nearby put it through
The car's side window
The shower of small glass
Beads all over the seat
Drove home with the rain 380

Coming in beside me late
Into the night the car's
Headlights fracturing the
Vapour not knowing it
Would be twenty years
Before I'd write a poem
About a mountain—sitting

Exhausted in the Tar Sands
And fulfilling at least one thing
That I had neglected doing 390

It was over reaching
All this desperate over
Reaching made me recall
My own insignificant and
Privileged hubris
Lost amidst the vast over
Reaching of this world
Wide mine tallying
Small drop in the human
Mind that accumulating 400
Feeds its imagined difference
Feeds though finite upon
Infinity only to hunger
Always for more
The world that beckons
Like an open pantry door

4

Dear common—lowest
Denominator—highest right
Lift light of future foliage
Here where bright burnt 410
Sands hinge chemical ponds
Over loosest leaves of boreal—
Burnt brooks and forests for
Fatter fuel in bitumen beds
Beneath everything we see—
Remove everything we see
To reveal it—paucity of
Ideas for making homes
Making lives led as ghosts
Already haunting doomed 420
Earth we split and devour

It's elders brings us back
Living idea elders drumming
Singing and walking indigenous
To all the overburden which
Is no burden but carries
Itself echolocaic through
Leaves of this living and
Wakes while walking still
Breathing in dreamt shade 430

I could almost gather
Intuitive hopes for spring
Heap method of gleaning
Against Google Chrome of
Most expensive trucks
Or cheap flights to Vegas
Or the women who—bare
Commodities—travel here
Or the single yellow bus
Bringing migrants to clean 440
The factories of empty futures

So stop with me here and
Burn out the day
Burn out the night
Then kindle dim mornings
To further this device—
What needs to die is
The refusal to die—it's
Death that feeds life

If the old garden was 450
An aristocratic preserve
Of clockwork geometry
And the Romantic garden
A radical turn in open
Nature as pretend pasture

In an enamoured mind
Now we return to
Constructed enclosures
Open pit and tailings pond
Access road and wire fencing 460
A factory earth of engineered
Extractions to lay commodity
Paths in purchase and ensure
New aristocrats their
Helicopter lives—what we
Need now is a wild swerve
Away from arsenic mercury
And polycyclic hydrocarbons
Downstream in ducks and
Muskrats and moose meat 470
And the people of Fort Chip
Who feed on feeding the land—
A wild swerve out of entropy
To new free energies spooling
In anti-entropic drafts of
What we can't predict
And will not yet foretell
But will imagine not as
Trading futures or deposits
Speculated into asset mills 480

Stopped here near the
Blasted vale or just after
Lift off on gas wing south
Over seeming endless forest
I find I still need a little
Language of the Tar Sands
The knowing by walking
That tells how boreal grew
And gathered animal cohort
And plant polity over bitumen 490
Deposit and didn't once think
Noxious profit gas even when

Bubbling surface bogs leached
 And aspen trembled—even when
 Drinking its life from waters
 Just thin surfaces veiling the
 Pitch coppered tight beneath

What strange adaptors we are!
 That things will grow again
 Is no consolation—the difference 500
 Between *this* situation and
 The situation of the old growth
 On top of bitumen base is the
 Difference between a happen
 And the ecological capacity
 To bear this happening and
 A making and the ecological
 Capacity to bear this human
 Act and choice—what strange
 Adaptors we are—moving 510
 Swifter than old accumulations
 To chemical our hues where we
 Are still that vitality that springs
 A weed beside the poison road
 Banks of the poison pond
 Beneath arch of poison sky
 All remade by our *adaptions*

Will we—delimit—ourselves
 Or—ova storm of digital increase
 Uncap our climate and trade 520
 Mere earth to reach residual heights
 Of the value form and receive—
 A new dispensation of finitude forced
 From the very ground we have removed
 And the sky we have spilt our angers on?

Let me walk a little longer at
 Bodily scale—we have always been here—

Tomorrow—contemplating this
Landscape and letting the flood
Of memories of the future in 530
Recollecting that time to come
When none of us will be disposable waste
That time somewhere near
Where the road turns at the guarded
Edge of the refinery that this
However sketchy poem did become
A poem I will have written
Circumambulating a common to come
Curling towards stillness at all scales
Having walked one amongst many 540
Through a dangerous time and place
The withering land turning towards
Each animal's unrecountable face

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STEPHEN COLLIS is a poet, activist, editor and professor. His many books of poetry include *The Commons* (Talon Books 2008; second edition 2014), *On the Material* (Talon Books 2010—awarded the BC Book Prize for Poetry), *To the Barricades* (Talon Books 2013), and (with Jordan Scott) *DECOMP* (Coach House 2013). He has also written two books of literary criticism, a book of essays on the Occupy Movement, *Dispatches from the Occupation* (Talon Books 2012), and a novel, *The Red Album* (BookThug 2013). In 2014, while involved in anti-pipeline activism, he was sued for \$5.6 million by US energy giant Kinder Morgan, whose lawyers read his writing in court as “evidence.” His forthcoming book is *Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands*. He lives near Vancouver and teaches at Simon Fraser University.