

# Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

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Volume 5  
Issue 2 *Ecological Creativity*

Article 9

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January 2013

## Emails to Manila

Graham Kershaw

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### Recommended Citation

Kershaw, G. (2013). Emails to Manila. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 5(2).

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GRAHAM  
KERSHAW

## Emails to Manila

### *I: Monday*

Tropical swelter this morning in the forest after rain  
a sympathetic cloud of breath obscuring bedroom windows.  
Outside, the heady buzz of singular flies seeking each other  
the woodpecker tap of Illya's hammer demolishing his home  
again, a sleepy orchestra's tuning well before the overture.  
The song is on the surface here, tripping between karri crowns,  
high, sweet and confident voices calling across blue spaces.  
I am visiting the birds' realm, sinking below the surface  
of something I hold sacred, while the racket, the clatter, the fret,  
sweat and labour of cataclysmic cities rings like a bell inside  
my head and my heart bangs away at ribs as if at prison doors,  
waiting to be seen, wanting to be let outside.

### *II: Tuesday*

Bed hot as Manila, I've fled to verandah's damp boards,

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***Landscapes*** Vol 5 Issue 2 Summer 2012-13 ***Ecological Creativity***

The Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language  
ISSN 1448-0778

listening for that song you said ran under everything.  
You shouldn't write to me, really. It's Karri to the east,  
too early for rising, heavy limbs fallen into such a dark knot,  
horizon seems more cave than sky, pierced by glowing holes.  
These black arrows darting past might be birds or bats,  
those raucous cries from the shore frog or duck; not much  
can be discerned, least of all colour, forest held to night's  
narrow palette, so tangled in this musculature of limbs  
to the east that it seems anything might yet be born,  
presences more terrible, more monstrous than sun;  
love, for instance, and the loneliness it brings.

*III: Wednesday*

A bright slice of earlier sky, lemon icing over the Nullaki.  
The Denmark air is sweetening from the south, sweeping  
out close, unconsummated days and the tall trees are swaying  
with the grace of innocence, as if the whole world breathed  
easy this way. Your small birds are here, fulfilling  
the necessary rituals to ensure your safe return.  
The very air turns on the principle that you cannot stay away

forever, though ruined cities burn your throat today.  
I would have them lifted – the fire-tails, the robins –  
by a trustworthy gust of buoyancy, I would see them  
catch a good breeze, even at the cost of watching them leave,  
if only they found that air gentle and prevailing.

*IV: Thursday*

Bottle-green air, gravel, bark and branch, filigrees of hazel,  
blanketing roar of ocean, inlet glints of stone. Depths of quiet  
sounded out in ducks' satellite pings, one of our fathers alive.  
There's no ribbon to tie these things neatly in train, no music  
to make it sound okay; just me awake, reading your email,  
as cockatoos swing and chime, high in karri's campanile.  
Wherever we are, there's a time we share, I hope, when the sky  
whitens and glows, lingering, for a moment, no shade of blue;  
when the spectrum of things which divide us – the distance,  
the history, the lies, the fears, the ties – retreat like shadows  
around a firelit forest clearing. And yet... the strange thing is...  
that's when I feel most keenly the happenstance of grieving.

*V: Friday*

I've been beating the dawn since you left, hardly sleeping;  
recipe for hallucinatory moments at Lights Beach, when the world  
seems peaceful, just and free, and everyone ludicrously happy.  
There's a neutrality before sunrise, like dusk's pause between  
blue, red and black, richer for lack of colour, as day promises  
some unknown, first-time quantity. The beach is so deserted,  
I'm tempted to say it has no history, no death, no cultivation,  
but you'd say you must dive in, to see anything at all, and go out  
too far, surrender to the battling whims, scanning the graceful panic  
below, sailing pearly clouds, swirling to rhythms you can only feel,  
not know; ebbs and flows, invasions and retreats, relentlessness  
learnt in the body, the hunger for light of a surfacing soul.

*VI: Saturday*

Our friend told me he had entered his body, and found pleasure  
and comfort there. You're swimming Bataan on a youthful morning,  
to wash away all thought of the world and the pain.  
But how heavy the body can feel after, how steep the rise  
to dry land; how hard to understand why the pleasure

of the moment should carry such gravity. For there is the water,  
and here is your body, knowing it can swim and not harm the sea;  
and yet there's the sign, saying, 'Danger. Men have died here.  
Think of those who may drown saving you.' All places have  
their histories, even as the water befriends our bodies  
so indiscriminately; you swimming there and I swimming here;  
one body of water, receiving the dawn's thoughtless kisses.

*VII: Sunday*

I had the strangest feeling, coming out of the water, as if  
I'd left someone behind, or failed to gather something in my arms.  
White sand gleamed between granite boulders, dunes bled tea,  
sweating down secret cracks to glaze the stone with slime,  
tanning sea and sand. Female wrens hopped dark streams of weed,  
foraging, quick and grey against the cream, yet I felt quite bereft  
stalking back to my towel, empty hands dangling, as if the reason  
for swimming had escaped out there. I was faced with a workaday sea,  
bled of all blue or green, assuming something I was in no mood  
to give. There'd been some treasure on offer, it still seemed,  
something worth saving, yet I was damned if I could remember

where it might have lain or what it might have been.

*VIII: Monday*

To dodge a black wave inside my head, I drove back later  
to a different sea, all teals and metallic blues and greens  
racked on a hard black bed, silver foil floundering in lines  
of brittle foam, under the pewter plate of a shrouded sun,  
slicing through surf overhead, catching light from the sea itself,  
it seemed, lightning cracking off the ocean's jagged skin, kinetically.  
Each bird had their own complaint – indignant oystercatchers,  
surprised plovers, grumpy gulls – as they scampered and started  
and flew away, one by one. Company wasn't expected nor wanted,  
and yet I felt the slack of empty space from dune to hill, rock to sea,  
and it came to me that this was some kind of rendezvous, after all.  
I had come to meet some absence I could not live without.