

Walk

(Beauty)

Walk

On *A Tangled Thicket*

by Aislinn Hunter

– something that comes
from the dark
(not
self or not-self)

but something between the two
like the shimmering line
where one form defines another
yet fails to end...'

–John Burnside

If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas.
If you reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks.

—Anne Carson

Walking in Edinburgh one day years before I lived there, I found myself wandering a path along the Water of Leith: the river burbling to my left, lush plants and shrubs ribboning to my right. I'd been reading and writing a lot of poetry, and in this "open" state—which poetry and art induce so wonderfully—the light and depth of the riverside greenery took on a kind of magical property. I remember thinking that there must be whole worlds in the thickets and hedges—that I could easily perceive how this shimmering and shadowy landscape might spark the imaginations of those who lived in such a place, and those, like me, passing through.

On that walk I became aware that I was part of a complex system, both seen and unseen: the particular landscape I was moving through, the city I was visiting, the island it was nestled on, the planet itself, the solar system and universe, and again—far down below—little old me, my own mind holding this

epic swathe of thoughts, these rivers and continents and stars, within it. On that walk I was also carrying a new awareness of my place in time. I had recently been gifted with a stack of papers tracing my Scottish ancestors back to the 1600s. It turns out that I come from a long line of storytellers—the sort who would've looked into the greenery and supposed something there.

This sense I had—and still carry—of the large and small, the whole and the part, the infinite and finite, is something I think about a lot—slippery opposites I try to knit together, but which refuse to be bound easily.

A Tangled Thicket brings together four artists whose work is filled with wonder. Their ways of seeing evoke and enliven the slippery betweenities that have preoccupied me since that walk by the river. In their work things can be both inside and outside, creations and decreations, human and animal...co-minglings that carry qualities we normally think of as contradictory: joy and grief, presence and absence, fullness and emptiness. This work evokes for me both Burnside's notion of "the shimmering line / where one form defines another /yet fails to end" and Carson's "edge of the thinkable, which leaks."

Bedded or nestled within the creations in *A Tangled Thicket* is an ethic of care. Ethics of care are concerned with listening and paying attention, responsive engagement, the building of connections, and the acknowledgement of interdependence. These qualities are in abundance in this exhibit:

the makers creating a space for community and reciprocity around art that attests to the meticulous and honouring work of their eyes, imaginations, and hands.

In her book *On Beauty and Being Just* the philosopher Elaine Scarry begins with the notion that “Beauty brings copies of itself into being” (3). I was reminded of this line when I first saw the collective work of Z-inc—how palpable “beauty” in its original state was (the shimmering maple keys, the departed trees, the valley walk, the forming thicket). I was aware, too, of how the beauty of their art generated in me the desire to make something beautiful back.

Scarry suggests there are four key features of beauty. First, beauty is sacred. Second, beauty is unprecedented. Third, beauty is life-saving. “Beauty,” she writes, “quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living” (23–26). She describes how “the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you—as though the object were designed to ‘fit’ your perception. In its etymology, ‘welcome’ means that one comes with the well-wishes or consent of the person or thing already standing on that ground. It is

as though the welcoming thing has entered into, and consented to, your being in its midst" (25–26).

If, by chance, you walked into this art gallery, looking for these facets of beauty—the sacred, the unprecedented, the enlivening—I believe you would find them here. This finding, however, might require your stillness and your attention—for beauty, Scarry tells us, also has a fourth feature: “it incites deliberation” (28).

The rural roads near Sheepwash, Devon are like something out of a storybook I read as a child: thickets and hedges on both sides of a well-worn track, bright green fields meeting a sheet of perfect blue sky. My walks there last December were bristly. There was no snow but the air had a bite to it; the tree branches were mostly bare and spiky, though the sunlight behind them was peach-hued and lush. I was in England for a writing retreat, and one afternoon, feeling restless, I put on my coat and toque and went out for a long walk. There were other writers staying in the house, but on this day, I was totally alone. An hour in, settled into the rhythm of my thinking, a grouse burst out of a thicket directly in front of me—all flap and bluster, darting across the road and into the opposite thicket with only a quick glance in my direction. I was reminded again of the

depth and breadth of life in the greenery, and of my error: I was not alone, had never been.

In class last week, I asked my writing students to define the age we are living in. In their late teens and early twenties, they are not optimistic. There was a theme across many of the responses: the illusion of connection and the lack of care in a culture that is alienating, "self"-driven, and selfish. The art in *A Tangled Thicket* is an antidote to that—it is collective, communal, and welcoming. It refutes the illusion that we are alone under a static blue sky and the thickets empty as props. Is this why so many of us turn to art? So that it can remind us that the world is fuller than we think? What I especially love about the work in *A Tangled Thicket* is that it is hopeful—joyful, even—qualities that operate in necessary resistance to some of the overarching narratives of these times.

Stand still long enough in front of this art and a kind of synesthetic effect rolls in: a whisper of wind, or the water's currents, birdsong, the pump of blood, the baby's heartbeat, ghostly voices, the bark of a dog, the pulse of veins. Stand still long enough and the refrain of your own breath, your own beating heart chimes in. This is a meeting—much like the one that occurs in Willa Downing's *Connectome* when our brain's own neural flares meet the refractions of light sparked by the mirrors.

Today, another walk. This one in the local woods with my dog Clara. It felt good to be moving, in much the same way that it also feels good, sometimes, to stop. In my head this essay and all that this essay

has tried to carry within it: the wonder of a book turned into beads, of civilizations on their precarious perches, nature's bright red pendulum, creatures who come to light with a breath. All the spaces made for pondering. How particular, how vast.

Notes:

Walk (Beauty) Walk was written on the unceded and ancestral lands of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I am aware that I am a settler on these lands and am learning how to be a good care-taking guest.

Works cited in this essay include:

The first eight lines from John Burnside's *'III: De Libero Arbitrio'* – page 12 in *Gift Songs*, published by Jonathan Cape, London, 2007.

Two lines from Anne Carson's poem *Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988)* by Betty Goodwin (constructed as a series of 'If' propositions) and found on pages 97-101 in *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2005. It was published by Vintage Canada, Toronto, in 2006.

On Beauty and Being Just by Elaine Scarry, originally delivered as a Tanner lecture on human values at Yale University in 1998, and published in print form by Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 1999.

Knowledge of my Scottish ancestry has come to me through two key familial sources: Howard Anderson and Alice Munro, whose book *The View from Castle Rock* describes how our shared ancestor William Laidlaw (b. 1695) was reputed to be the last man in Scotland to see the faeries. This was on my mind on my walk in Edinburgh. *The View from Castle Rock* was published by McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, in 2006.

Lastly, James Joyce, has a moment in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where the young Stephen Dedalus is asked to write down his name in a geography text. He begins with his name, his class, his school, his town, and ends up with

“Ireland / Europe / The World / The Universe,” which also likely influenced my thinking on that walk.

This essay is for Alma Lee (1940–2025)—a stellar human, generous friend, and a Scotswoman through and through.

Aislinn Hunter is a poet, novelist, and essayist. She teaches creative writing at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey. Her work often foregrounds art, museums, galleries and archives. Her most recent books are the novel *The Certainties* (Knopf, 2020) and the poetry collection *Linger, Still* (Gaspereau Press, 2017).

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