

*'All we
like sheep'*

Do sheep feel at home in their wool? Is it too extreme to think of them itching, or desperately hot, clutching for air, frantic for the shearer? Or a feeling they might have for style or some sense of renewal in a new look, freshness of air against the skin?

I drove across the Sacramento Delta on an errand for a Berkeley-based restoration nursery to fetch six thousand native grass plugs from greenhouses east of Stockton. The plants will be planted on slopes scooped out of hillsides to make parking areas for an Alameda County juvenile detention facility. ("Planting plants", as if they only fully become plants when we put them in the ground.) Corrections, consequences, and corrections: this is *our* revolving door. Perhaps in pieces some progress or retreat seems apparent, but collected, what? Is there a direction to progress at a larger scale?

My drive across the delta was forty-five minutes of astonishment. Though nothing I saw was new to me, it was one of those days when recognition seems to sit on everything. Like the effect of lightly moving mist, among things and the causes of things a sense of coherence emerged, and I in that throw of time a part of it.

What I recognized was a landscape of power and extraction. The expanse of delta sculpted and perforated, a web – no, unguent, a poultice of generative technologies: windmills, farms, refineries, dikes, roads, high-voltage lines, canals, everything a channel of energy funneled toward humans. And me in an ancient Toyota van, faded green paint and headlights held in with matching-colored tape. I feel touched by the brutality apparent in this place; I feel also as its mentor and customer, encourager and cause, enjoying a wonderful warm Ceylon tea from my Japanese thermos, hurrying to the grower for the plants that will patch up the injuries elsewhere.

The light was hazy and gold, a fresh cold fall moving across the levees. The road bent left and right according to a negotiation unknown to me, worked out at a much larger scale of time, sedimentation, snowmelt, markets for gold and vegetables. Water through a windbreak to the left, and across the water small buildings and docks; to my right twenty or thirty feet lower, dry land: a field of crops, another with grazing sheep.

¹ Charles Jennens quoting Isaiah 53:6 from libretto for Handel's Messiah referenced in Lowig, Kenneth R., "Performing on the Landscape versus Doing Landscape: Perambulatory Practice, Sight and the Sense of Belonging" in Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot, Ingold and Vergunst Eds., Ashgate, 2008.

The van heat is working. I am cozy and wonder what its like for the sheep. They cannot pull their collars up or enjoy a hat. We do, using wool from the sheep, sheep from the field, and fields excavated from the water, twining wool to yarn, fleece re-shaped to our own contours, shaping earth to levees, roadways, waterways and fields, running herds, harvesting crops. I'm not cold. Rather, I feel myself disoriented, no longer on an errand to buy grass. Still driving, I am absorbed within this place as its cause.

Sometimes too there are reflections in water or dark shapes in the sky, groups of birds or single birds appear, flooded fields and fallen logs, processes too wild to wear or know. These things that slip, glide autonomously in process, fracturing the orbit of experience. Exactly here, in that autonomy, emerges an invitation to consideration, to live together below the stars.

I don't feel cold but I have been deeply disturbed. Rilke wrote that 'we are set down in life as in the element to which we best correspond'.² Perhaps that's so. And all these landscape calisthenics are working out this deep enthusiasm. Yet the weirdness of the results indicate another mood: that conventional wisdom is a kind of madness so normalized its pretense is hidden. Driving the van along the levee edge, thirty feet above the sheep at fifty miles an hour, these viewpoints curl, vine-like, toward each other. I'll pick up the grass plugs, they'll get into the ground at the detention facility parking area, set seed and sprout, nourishing and sheltering a patch of life no less complicated than this delta. We'll congratulate ourselves about the restoration, and shake our heads over what a mess things are in.

² "...and over and above this we have through thousands of years of accommodation become so like this life that when we hold still we are, thought a happy mimicry scarcely to be distinguished from all that surrounds us." (source)