Our Plight

This chapter is an attempt, and perhaps a failed one, to think about depression as a shared creative endeavor, as a transcorporeal blue (and blues) ecology\(^1\) that would bind humans, nonhumans, and stormy weather together in what Tim Ingold has called a meshwork, where “beings do not propel themselves across a ready-made world but rather issue forth through a world-in-formation, along the lines of their relationships.”\(^2\) In this enmeshment of the “strange strangers” of Timothy Morton’s dark ecology, “the only way out is down” and art’s “ambiguous, vague qualities will help us to think things that remain difficult to put into words.”\(^3\) It may be, as Morton has also argued, that while “personhood” is real, nevertheless, “both the surface and the depth of our being are ambiguous and illusory.” And “still weirder, this illusion might have actual effects.”\(^4\) I want to see if it might be possible to cultivate this paradoxical interface (lit. “between faces”) between illusion and effects,\(^5\) especially with regard to feeling blue, a condition I believe is a form of a deeply empathic enmeshment with a world that suffers its own sea changes and that can never be seen as separate from the so-called individuals who supposedly only populate (“people”) it. I want to ask further, with Spencer Reece, “Weather. Weather. How’s the weather? / When [we] speak of the weather is it because [we] cannot speak of [our] days spent in the / nuthouse?”\(^6\)

Is depression, sadness, melancholy—feeling blue—always only taking place within the interior spaces of individually bounded forms of sentience
and physiology, or is it in the world somehow, a type of weather or atmosphere, with the becoming-mad of the human mind only one of its many effects (a form of attunement to the world’s melancholy)? Could a more heightened and consciously attuned sense of the emanations and radio signals of blue sensations, feelings, and climates enable constructive interpersonal, social, and other blue collaborations that might lead to valuable modes of better advancing “into / the sense of the weather, the lesson of / the weather”? Here there is no environment, only fluid space (from tears to rain to oceans and everything in between), and in Ingold’s formulation (following Andy Clark) everything leaks. Themes of exile, and of moving through and inhabiting furnished and unfurnished worlds (where life is played out on the either hostile or hospitable surfaces of the earth’s crust), although powerfully attractive in Western cultural narratives, break down under the pressure of the fact that everything is always already an “intimate register of wind and weather.” As Phreddy Wischusen writes, in a letter to his estranged mother, who when he was a child loved him with such a desperate and frightening neediness that he felt almost destroyed by it, I hope even if you can’t feel it, even if it tastes too different, even if you can’t live in it, you will enjoy knowing that far from your shores your love is falling like rain on empty streets, on forests and green fields, on friends of mine with silly hair-dos and filthy skirts. And though I sometimes fear the waves, I will always look for myself and all that is good beyond my terrestrial frontiers.

As Ingold argues, and Wischusen intuits in a more poetic register, wherever “there is life and habitation, the interfacial separation of substance and medium is disrupted to give way to mutual permeability and binding.” We must risk drowning ourselves in these watery temperaments of the world, and as Steve Mentz urges, when we resurface “back to air and light, we [will] sing what we can and sell the rest, remembering what we can’t salvage.”

The weather I concern myself with here will be stormy, postapocalyptic, riven with the rime of hail and frost, cold and frozen, but also sunbleached and lit by fires along the shoreline . . . and the persons, fictional, lost at sea, shipwrecked, cast adrift, drowning, beached, going mad with
melancholy and grief, all enmeshed together on a blue planet that is itself adrift in space which is also always drifting, always expanding. Through brief readings of two Old English elegies, *Seafarer* and *Wanderer*, and the novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* by David Markson, this chapter attempts to trace the affective relations between the “strange strangers” of postapocalyptic, oceanic landscapes in order to think (and write) my way toward a blue ecological aesthetic that might take better account of our world as both empty (void) and full (intimately crowded), and more bearably sad. This will also be to take seriously Lisa Robertson’s plea for poetics as a “delusional space” par excellence, where the weather becomes our “wild fantasy. It seizes us. Together our faces tilt upwards.” And if “each forecast is a fiction,” then we “prefer to add to that fiction alternate delusions—a delusional politics that describes current conditions as it poses futurities.”14 Thus we must go weathering and also deterritorialize ourselves, seeing each other and the world as an atmospheric multiplicity, just as Rhoda does in Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, looking “far away” over the heads of her friends “to a hollow where the many-backed steep hills come down like the birds’ wings folded. There on the short, firm turf, are bushes, dark leaved, and against their darkness . . . a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive. But it is not you, it is not you, it is not you; not Perceval, Susan, Jinny, Neville or Louis,” yet “these pilgrimages, these moments of departure, start always in your presence.”15 Here we also see the “lines” of which Ingold has become such a sensitive cartographer: “Life will not be confined within bounded forms but rather threads its way through the world along the myriad lines of its relations. . . . Thus wherever anything lives the infrastructure of the occupied world is taking up or wearing away, ceaselessly eroded by the disorderly groping of inhabitants, both human and non-human, as they reincorporate and rearrange its crumbling fragments into their own ways of life.”16 It is to crumbling, especially—crumbling persons, crumbling worlds—that I want to attend to here.

But first, a caution: I do not approach the subject of depression blithely or without a deep understanding of the ravages that depression has wrought in individual persons (and families), who will possibly gain no hope or remedy from the poetry and other art of catastrophe, or from the idea of a creative collective endeavor to share in their oceanic sorrows. I am not a
psychiatrist, or a psychologist, or even a skilled practitioner of psychoanalytic critique. I also grew up in a family ravaged by mental illness, which was a source of deep shame, strife, general anxieties that went on for years, and ultimately, a willful forgetting and disavowal of our shared suffering. There is a sense (or a reality) in which the person who is depressed, manic, and suicidal is in a place beyond affection and beyond assistance—everyone gropes around in the dark, and in the case of my family, where those who were ill refused to stick with the professional (and pharmaceutical) help they needed, there are ongoing events of encroaching blackness, breakdowns, and rescue attempts, and then everyone drifts away from each other and enters, by months and years, into long-distance telephonic relationships that devolve into empty, detached politeness with occasional bursts of rampant, spontaneous affection. There is still love and co-implication, but the reality of the persons, once intimate and close, fades into the remote distance. It all feels like a failure of love wrought by an inscrutable family chemistry, or to put it more poetically by way of Edward Mullany’s poem, “A Suicide in the Family”: “The doorbell rings. Or a mountain / speaks to a mountain // in a language only mountains understand.”

But all ecology commences from family and home, or the oikos.

This is not to be maudlin or confessional for confession’s sake, but to say, again, that I do not offer in this chapter either a diagnosis or a remedy for clinical depression in human subjects; rather, as a literary scholar, I want to think about certain sites in literary texts that are saturated or charged with lonely, watery, and blue affects that also, paradoxically, offer openings toward more capacious modes of interlinear ecological entanglements (reading and writing, with salt in our eyes, between the lines of our enmeshment with everything), where we might allow ourselves to be traversed by others’ emotions, by the weather, which traversals might then become a valuable form of aesthetic (if sad) solidarity. And our shared uncertainty will figure, “not as terror, but as erotic collective being.” I consider this thought (and feeling) experiment important because I am increasingly appalled by the political discourses so predominant today, especially on the conservative right, where everyone is made to feel as if everything that happens to them is simply their, and not our, predicament, not our concern, and where becoming an individual, as Zygmunt Bauman
has argued, is not a choice, or even a communal endeavor, but a fate. Here we might turn premodernist-etymologist and remind ourselves that the word *plight*, from the Old Frisian, Middle Dutch, and Middle Low German *plicht*, means “care” or “responsibility,” also “community” and “obligation,” and is also related to the Old English *pleoh* (“danger,” “hurt,” “risk”) and *pleon* (“to risk the loss of;” “expose to danger”), which is also related to the Latin *pliter* (from which we get “plait”): “to fold,” “to pleat,” which is to say, again, that everyone else’s plight, which is to say their “danger,” is also our danger.

The world can be insane sometimes, places can be insane, and some people are more sensitive to that fact—think of the heroine of Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1964 film *Red Desert*, Giuliana (played by Monica Vitti), who wanders aimlessly through the polluted landscapes of Ravenna, Italy, where her husband manages the petrochemical plant, and where only she, suffering from feelings of anxiety and dreams of drowning in quicksand, seems to understand how sick the landscape is, and wants to flee from it, saying at one point, “I can’t look at the sea for long or I lose interest in what’s happening on land.” Although Antonioni claimed that he was not necessarily making a film about one woman’s neurosis induced by an inhuman industrial landscape—indeed, he claimed that “the line and curves of factories and their chimneys can be more beautiful than the outline of trees,” and there are some people who just “can’t manage, perhaps because they are too tied to ways of life that are now out of date”—nevertheless, similar to Carol White (played by Julianne Moore), the protagonist of Todd Haynes’s enviro-horror film *Safe* (1995), who is hypersensitive to the chemicals that are rampant throughout the suburbs of Los Angeles and who feels as if she is going insane when no one will believe that she is really sick, we might say Giuliana is allergic to the twentieth century. To style a new collectivity out of such melancholic allergies, we will need to “hazard an improvisation” and “venture from home [together] on the thread of a tune,” and this will be a blue song: rising ocean-blue and melting glacier ice-blue, blue like the stones in Virginia Woolf’s overcoat, blue like Nina Simone’s lilac wine that helps us to see what we want to see, blue like valium, because sometimes we need to cultivate historical forgetting, because we want to feel good, even when we feel bad. This will also be the blue-grey-green of the medieval Irish sea—*glas*, a word also associated in medieval
Irish law with the outcasts and the exiles. As Ralph Ellison observes of the American blues, we will need to “finger the jagged grain” of the world’s stormy weather, not to transcend it “by the consolation of a philosophy,” but to get deeper into it and to “squeeze” something out of it (part tragic, part comic) that would give us the ability to “really exercise fate with extremely normal things such as our mind(s).” So let’s get fated and outcast together. Not as an experiment in reckless fatalism or as a collective abandonment of our hopes, but as the crafting of a more heightened sense of the co-melancholic implication of pretty much everything, of the world as a “dynamic reservoir of estrangement and enchantment”—of what, quite literally, has “already been spoken” (Latin fatum). This is a civic project. And it is a hopeful one.

On the Beach

“Somebody is living on this beach.” So ends the last line of David Markson’s novel Wittgenstein’s Mistress, about a middle-aged woman named Kate who may be insane, or once was, and who may or may not be the last living woman on earth (what happened to everyone else is left unexplained). At one point, quite late in the novel, after having painted a rather stark narrative of herself as a “last survivor” for over ten years (or more?), Kate wonders what it might mean if she were to write a novel “about somebody who woke up one Wednesday or Thursday to discover that there was apparently not one other person left in the world,” and also about how the “entire situation” of her novel’s “autobiographical” heroine “might certainly often seem like an illusion on her part,” so that “soon enough she would be quite mad, naturally.” And following these musings she realizes “she had paradoxically been practically as alone before all of this had happened as she was now.” Whether she is truly alone in the world or only alone in her mind is up for grabs, but what is certain is that Kate more than ably performs the role of the “last survivor,” which may also serve as an aesthetic hedge against her always encroaching sadness—over and over again she mentions slipping into depression, especially when thinking of “Long Ago”: an era that includes visiting the grave of a “little boy” she lost (her only child), the death of her parents, and failed love relationships. After traveling around the world futilely looking for other persons and visiting various cultural sites, she is spending all her time in an
abandoned house on the beach banging out on a typewriter the longest “someone was here” message anyone ever left, in between bouts of feeling too sad to type.

Kate’s message is a manic and associative catalog-style dumping of every piece of random cultural information from the Western canon she can recall (lit. call to mind), from the swirls in Vincent van Gogh’s paintings to Friedrich Nietzsche crying over someone beating a horse to Maria Callas singing as Medea to Leonardo da Vinci writing from left to right in his notebooks to Spinoza’s excommunication to the name of Helen of Troy’s daughter, Hermione. Her narrative is not just a “someone was here” message but the world was here. At more than one point, she confuses herself with Helen of Troy, and when she is not obsessively recounting the great cultural icons of the Western canon, she is also burning artifacts in museums and planks from the other houses on the beach to keep herself warm. In the end, there is only writing, about which we might remind ourselves the real Wittgenstein had his concerns, in terms of language’s ability to describe reality. We might also reflect on the novel’s title, partly a bleak joke, as the real Wittgenstein was homosexual, and given Kate’s confused account of the world and of her own past and present, she is a terrible mistress to his ideas. In Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the epigrammatic structure of which Markson’s novel imitates, Wittgenstein attempted to craft a theory of a mathematically precise language that would accurately “picture” the world, but according to Kate, “most of the things I write often seem to become equidistant from themselves, somehow. Whatever in heaven’s name I might mean by that, however.” Kate confuses details of her own narrative and will say things like she feels too tired to type and maybe she should stop typing and in fact she stopped typing three hours ago; her dead son’s name is Adam, no, it is Simon, or was it her husband who was named Simon, or Terry, or Adam? Many of her recollections of cultural “facts” are useless because they are bit-sized and lacking ample context: she knows Martin Heidegger said something important about *Dasein*, but nothing else, for example, but “what do any of us ever truly know, however?” She frequently hallucinates: that she saw a cat perched on the Roman Coliseum, that another cat is scratching at her windowpane, that a piece of ash falling on the beach is a seagull, and so on. Nevertheless, Kate emphatically writes her way through the catastrophe,
imagined or real or both. “Boneyard of names, heads never empty,” as Maurice Blanchot once remarked in *The Writing of Disaster.*

Regardless of whether Kate’s words signify properly or even accurately describe her or the larger world’s history and reality, and even though there may be absolutely no one who will ever read her manuscript or “novel,” she emphatically invests herself in the project of writing her way into the wreck and detritus of the world’s memory; instead of insisting on a narrative that would “make sense,” she engages in what Ingold calls a “tissue of lines”—not so much inventing a *text* as a *texture* of loose ends, all radiating from the multiple center(s) of her itinerant and stuttering syntax. This is not to say that, in all of Kate’s narrative waywardness, that there are not some threads tying things together: there are continual returns to certain subjects: her dead son, for example, the imaginary cats, her previous (or is it her present?) “madness,” and her former life as a painter, but perhaps the one subject she returns to most often is Helen of Troy, someone who shares her status as a woman left stranded on a beach after her world has ended.

When the world ends in Markson’s novel, one of the first trips Kate takes is to Turkey to see the site of ancient Troy (now Hisarlik), and “it was Helen I mostly thought about, when I was at Troy.” And at the end of the novel, when she recounts the fires she likes to build on the beach after sunsets, she shares that,

> Now and again, too, looking at them from a distance, what I have done is to make believe for a little while that I am back at Hisarlik. By which I mean when Hisarlik was Troy, of course, and all of those years and years ago. So that what I am more truthfully making believe is that the fires are Greek watchfires, where they have been lighted along the shore.

At many points throughout her narrative, Kate identifies with Helen and defends her against the charges that she caused the Trojan War, and she also recalls that she once wished to paint Helen standing at “one of the burned-out boats along the strand, when the siege was finally ended, being kept prisoner. But with that splendid dignity, even so.” In a sad (and perhaps
narcissistic) yet daring act of co-melancholic identification, Kate inter-leaves herself with Helen and stands beside (and folded within) her on the shoreline, watch- and house-fires burning beside them, thus losing the battle against the “bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language” that Wittgenstein worried about so much,\(^41\) but at the same time demonstrating the important permeability of the self-as-atmosphere in a gesture, not of canceling her loneliness by merging with, or binding herself to, Helen, but actually doubling and thereby thickening that loneliness, making it ample and sensual and more livable. And the very “tem-perament” (in Ingold’s formulation)\(^42\) that gives rise to this atmospheric multiplicity (Helen–Kate) is the beach itself where both women are intimate with, and registers of, the winds and storm clouds of postapocalypse.

**Adrift/Drowning**

There is a lot of sea and beach in Markson’s novel, which are also intimate registers of the weather. At the end of the world, it is always about the weather, it turns out, and the sea and the beach, the shoreline you are stuck on—like in Denis Johnson’s *Fiskadoro*, where the end of the world by atomic disaster leaves only the Florida Keys intact, with its “sand . . . like shattered ivory” and its “fields of cane popping in the wind”\(^43\)—or the shoreline that is always receding from you as the ocean swallows you whole, like Shakespeare’s Alonso, with pearls where his eyes used to be, who in Ariel’s Song “suffer[s] a sea-change / Into something rich and strange.”\(^44\)

“The world is repeating itself. The story of the world is happening again,” one of the characters in Johnson’s novel says, foreshadowing the novel’s end, when Grandmother Wright, the oldest woman alive, is trapped in a state of nonverbal catatonia, retreating into the memory of herself as a young Vietnamese girl escaping from Saigon during the Vietnam War, when the overloaded helicopter she had bribed her way onto crashes into the sea, and she spends two days bobbing among the waves, drifting in and out of consciousness:

By sunset she was only a baby, thinking nothing, absolutely adrift, waking to cough and begin crying, drifting and weeping, sleeping and sinking, waking up to choke the water from her mouth and whimper, indistinguishable from what she saw, which was the grey
sky that held no interest, identity, or thought. This was the point when she reached the bottom of everything, when she had no idea either what she’d reached or who had reached it, or even that it had been reached.45

She is eventually saved by a passing boat, and she lives to see another “end of the world.” And as her grandson Mr. Cheung puts it at the end of the novel, when everyone has gathered on the shoreline expecting the arrival of some sort of rescue operation, and Mr. Cheung is looking out over the ocean, upon which a haze has settled, making it “seem the beach led down to the end of all thought”:

Everything we have, all we are, will meet its end, will be overcome, taken up, washed away. But everything came to an end before. Now it will happen again. Many times. Again and again. Something is coming and something is going—but that isn’t the issue. The issue is that I failed to recognize myself in these seagulls.46

Both Grandmother Wright and Mr. Cheung touch “bottom” and sense the end of identity and thought in the ocean, which is also always the “coming” of something else, but the larger issue in Mr. Cheung’s case is that he laments a life in which he has neglected to connect his plight, his own end(s), with the strange strangers of his lifeworld—the seagulls—and as Timothy Morton writes, “intimacy is never so obvious as when we’re depressed,” yet the seagulls will always be beyond Mr. Cheung’s ontology, flowing underneath (or flying above) his materialism,47 which is why the beach also represents the end of all thought: the seagulls, and whatever might be looming on the horizon (the future?), are beyond thought, but they are not beyond feeling.

Consider the nameless Wanderer (“eardstapa,” or “earth-stepper,” and also “anhaga,” or “lone shield-bearer”) of the Old English elegy who likewise fails to recognize himself in the seagulls, bathing and “spreading [their] feathers” (“brædan feþra”) and seemingly indifferent to him, rowing his boat, alone, over the ice-cold sea after various catastrophes, especially war (“wælsleahta” and “wig”), have laid waste to the once-noisy dwellings of men (“Ýpde swa þisne eargeard ælæ Scyppend / òþþæt, burgwara
The Wanderer is a soldier-turned-rower, temporarily bereft of his comitatus (band of warriors), and wending his way over the waves as a “last survivor.” His song is suffused with desolate thoughts at the “daily failing and falling of this middle-earth” (“swa þes middangeard / ealra dogra gewham dreoseð ond fealleþ”) and his melancholic memories of having buried his lord and lost his native country, which event has set him on his current course of exile. The Wanderer simultaneously mourns and dreams of his former life, when he embraced and kissed his lord and laid his head and hands on his lord’s knees, and when he awakens from this dream he sees before himself “the dark waves” (“fealwe wægas”), and “the fall of snow and frost mingled with hail” (“hreosan hrim ond snaw hagle gemenged”), causing the wounds of his heart to feel heavier and his sorrows to be renewed. Consider also the “frost-bound” and “cold-clasped” (“forste gebunden / caldum clommum”) Seafarer of Old English elegy, who likewise “dwells in winter, care-scarred, on the ice-cold sea along the exile-track, bereft of his kinsmen” (“hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ /winter wunade wræccan lastum / winemægum bidroren”), and who claims that the joys of the Lord are “hotter” to him than this “dead life / loaned on the land” (“deade lif, / læne on londe”). He endures in his boat the terrible welling of the waves (“atol yþa gewealc”) and claims to hear nothing but the roaring sea (“hlimman sæ”).

It is a commonplace of scholarship on these two poems to liken their two lonely (and at times, terrifyingly inhuman) sea voyages to Christian pilgrimages and eremitic spiritual quests, and to also identify in the poems themes of cultural dislocation and isolation, as well as poetic registers appositionally split between a so-called Heroic Age fatalism and a Christian homiletic “wisdom” that looks more hopefully beyond and also has contempt for the always fallen world. The poems, both included in the tenth-century compilatio of Old English works known as the Exeter Book, are seen as being bound to the belief systems of an Anglo-Saxon England that admired heroic stoicism as well as absorbed and accepted Christian consolation. The Wanderer and the Seafarer are also often assumed to be figures of extreme oblivion and alienation, wherein both the narrators and the poets who gave voice to them are ultimately, as Roy Liuzza has written in the case of the Wanderer poem, “beacon[s]” of “the lost oral world the Anglo-Saxons had left behind, glimpsed from the textual world to which
they had journeyed; ... [they are] ungepeode [un-languaged, un-voiced, un-peopled], alienated from speech, nation, and history.\textsuperscript{56}

The Wanderer and Seafarer are depressed, and maybe even lost, but they are also poets who sing while sinking,\textsuperscript{57} and while they may, indeed, be alienated from a very particular human history (and human-built environments, including textual culture), they are tightly bound nevertheless to a watery world and its strange strangers within the lines of the verses that “speak” the fluid scenes of their conjoined movement and “weathering.” Someone, very human someones (Anglo-Saxons), sang, spoke, and/or wrote these elegies—actual seafarers, or poets hacking into the consciousness of real and fictional seafarers, appropriating and adapting their songs. Nevertheless, for all of their teary-eyed and frost-covered remonstrations of remorse at the loss of human comradeship and an all-too-human world (while also, perhaps reluctantly, bidding that human world good riddance), the song-lines of these two poems bind together men, boats, oceans, salt waves, grains of ice, cawing sea birds, sea cliffs, eagles, hail showers, and wintery postapocalyptic affects into a meshwork where everything is literally “swept up together in the generative currents of the world.”\textsuperscript{58} The poetry itself indicates this cogeneration, which at times is even tender and affective, if also terrifying. At the outset of his lament, the Wanderer indicates he is rowing over the ice-cold sea (which is how the opening is usually translated: \textit{rowing . . . over the sea}), but the exact words that the poet employs give us an image of the Wanderer using his own hands to stir the ocean to move his boat forward (“hreran mid hondum hrimcealde s.”),\textsuperscript{59} thereby offering a picture (even while likely intended as a metaphor for “rowing”) of a man who is not moving in impersonal fashion \textit{over} the waves (and thus, the world), but rather is always immersed in and part of the waves’ waving, their weathering; in this sense, he is not just a boater, but a swimmer. Further, whereas the lines 23b–24, “ond ic hean þonan /wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind,” are typically translated as “and I then went, abject [or, wretched], winter-weary [or, winter-oppressed], bound \textit{over} the waves [or, over the \textit{bound} of the waves],”\textsuperscript{60} indicating a man skimming \textit{across} (or just \textit{above}) a watery \textit{surface} or \textit{mass}, we might instead render the lines, “and then I went, depressed, winter-worried, \textit{through} the \textit{binding} of the waves.” In this translation, we can glimpse a more active co-implicate (lit. enfolded) life-form (a rower?
a rower-boat-ocean assemblage?) that moves and comes into being as a binding-with (and not bound-against) the world. This world is a cold and lethal and sad one, but it is not one in which our two rowers are ever really alone or apart from the sea and its creatures that texturize the “sound” (the “hlimman”) of their verses. Indeed, in the case of the Seafarer, we have the admission that, at times, the swan’s song serves him for “pleasure” (“gomene”), and the crying of a gannet reminds him of the laughter of men. He also notes that he has heard the icy-feathered sea-swallows “answer” (“oncwæð”) to the storms that pound the sea cliffs, and therefore, his song actually calls to and materializes that event by “ringing” the strange strangers of this ocean-scape, thus making the swallows and cliffs and storms intimate with him in a vocative circuit of speech. Although the Seafarer will conclude his song by urging his listeners to forget the world and hasten over it quickly, as he plans to do (at one point, he hopefully imagines his soul twisting out of his breast and soaring high above the waterways), while “hanging” and weighing down everything in this ocean-world with a deadly ice and frost, he, too, is “bound by frost” (“forste gebunden”) and “behung with icicles” “bihongen hrimgicelum”); he, too, like the Wanderer, is intimate with and bound to the weather of which he is one of many “registers.”

**A Minor Key**

We might reflect that in the writing of these two Old English elegies, as well as in Markson’s novel, we have acts of making (of poesis) that advance into the wreck and weather of supposedly “fallen” worlds in order to engage a romance of melancholic intersubjectivities that emerge within, and not over, that world, from which no flight is really possible, or even desirable. In the case of the Old English poems, no matter how much the Anglo-Saxon rowers’ souls may strive to be loosened from their bodies, those bodies inhere nevertheless in the blue oceanic lines and inky materiality of the poet’s “rustling tenses,” which, similar to Lisa Robertson’s poetry, “write through spaces that are utterly delusional,” and the reader is invited to share in that delusion, which nevertheless thickens the world’s very real enfolded spatiality and weblike lines of relations, performing a civic erotics, because being blue together—engaging in acts of feeling weighted down, collectively, whether under the frost and hail of an oceanic
winter or the sun-bleached shoreline at the end of human time—means leaving our caves and becoming more intimate with our worlding, advancing into the sense of the weather and its sea changes, which is to say, our sea changes, which, if felt more deeply, might make us more rich even as we grow more strange.

As Aranye Fradenburg argues, "It is difficult to understand other minds; but if it is difficult to understand the meanings of their transmissions, it is also a species of arrogance to think we could stop them from changing us." As Fradenburg also argues, art and its mobile signifiers enable an intersubjective shared attention, a form of companionship across time, and even a type of therapeutic care, all of which are critical for important psychic transformations that might help us to undo the isolation and detachment that has become such a defining feature of modernity and to also become more permeable to each other. This will entail a willingness to draw close to the sadnesses of others, to seek out shipwrecks as well as gardens.

Like the Wanderer, we might “awaken again” (“onwæcneð eft”) from our dreams and also see before ourselves the dark waves and the frost and snow mingled with hail, but instead of seeing this only as the site of one’s ultimate alienation from one’s only ever human comrades, who endlessly “float away” from us (“swimmað eft onweg”), we might bind ourselves to these waves as the only way down together. And like Kate in Markson’s novel, we might renew our energies, even while drowning, to leave messages in the streets in “huge block letters, at intersections, where anybody coming or going would see.” This is how we experience the sadnesses of a blue world: as an ongoing project, as poetry, as temporary acts of copoesis, as “brief discontinuous remarks / designed to fall apart / When read aloud.” I end then, via these just-quoted lines of the poet Ben Lerner’s “Doppler Elegies” for a deceased friend. On the receding sound waves of a minor key.

Notes
This chapter is dedicated to Steve Mentz and to his book *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009), which deeply inspired all of my thinking here, especially his call for a “blue cultural studies” that would look “at our world through the deathly, inhuman, magical lens of the sea,” so that we can
begin “rebuilding narrative and interpretive practices to respond to an uncertain future” (xii–xiii). This chapter is also dedicated to Carol Braun Pasternack, whose study of the Old English Wanderer, which takes into account the “polyphony” of this “disjunctive, authorless text,” sets an important critical framework for my readings of Old English poetry here (see Carol Braun Pasternack, “The Polyphony of The Wanderer,” in The Textuality of Old English Poetry [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 33–59).

1. My thinking on a transcorporeal blue ecology is indebted to the thinking of Stacy Alaimo, who has argued that human corporeality is always a “transcorporeality, in which “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010], 2).


5. Following Jane Bennett, I am willing to risk some anthropomorphism in my thinking about relations between human and nonhuman agents and forces, as it might be “worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divination of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a ‘nonhuman’ environment” (Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010], 120).


7. Lisa Robertson, The Weather (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001), 24. Robertson, an experimental avant-garde poet and essayist, is an apt partner in my project here, as she has long been concerned with setting aside the “puppets” of pronouns and self-referentiality in favor of a more civic and communal style of writing and what she calls “rhetorical sincerity,” where the “truly utopian act is to manifest current conditions and dialects” and to “practice description” (Lisa Robertson, “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto,” in Occasional Work and Seven


11. Phreddy Wischusen, [estuaries] (Detroit: [sic], 2012), 16.


13. Mentz, At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean, 34.


17. I would like to note here that we do have a long critical tradition that calls into question the supposed etiology of mental illness as inhering only in individual minds and bodies, such as the entire oeuvre of the psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (see, e.g., The Manufacture of Madness [New York: Dell, 1970]), the work of Michel Foucault (especially in Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Random House, 1965]), and other more recent studies, such as Ian Hacking, Mad Travellers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illnesses (London: Free Association Books, 1999).


20. See Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 34. It has not been uncommon to hear discussions on the political right, for example, of health care as a personal and not a national responsibility. Here I also agree with Mark Fisher that, in the face of a capitalist “realism” that seemingly swallows up all possible alternatives, we might “convert widespread mental health problems frommedicalized conditions into effective antagonisms” (Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? [Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009], 80).

21. Red Desert, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1964; New York: Criterion Collection, 2010), DVD.


27. Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, ix.

28. I take my cue here, also, from Robertson’s argument that “the most pleasing civic object would be erotic hope” (“Spatial Synthetics,” 68).

29. Beaches are prominent in end-of-the-world narratives, whether medieval or modern: think of the classic of the contemporary genre, Neville Shute’s 1957 novel *On the Beach*, which derived its title from these lines of T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men”: “In this last of meeting places / We grope together / And avoid speech / Gathered on this beach of the tumid river” (“The Hollow Men,” in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963], 81).


31. Ibid., 230.

32. Ibid., 230, 231.

33. As David Foster Wallace has written about Kate, “She, no less than Wittgenstein, or Kant, or Descartes, or Herodotus, is writing a world” (“The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*,” in Markson, *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, 273).


39. Ibid., 239.
40. Ibid., 25.
46. Ibid., 219.
48. T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, eds., *The Wanderer* (London: Methuen, 1969), 1, 6a; l. 47b; ll. 7a, 80b; ll. 85–86. All translations are mine.
49. Ibid., ll. 62b–63.
50. Ibid., ll. 19–29a.
51. Ibid., ll. 39–43a.
52. Ibid., l. 46b, l. 48, ll. 49–50.
54. *Seafarer*, l. 6a; l. 18b.


57. The Seafarer begins by invoking his ability to “work truth-songs” (“soþgied wrecan,” l. 1b).


59. *Wanderer*, l. 4.

60. To cite just a few examples, Robert E. Diamond translates the lines “I, abject, winter-grieving (i.e. in a mood as dreary as winter? oppressed by advancing years?) went from there over the surface (lit. binding) of the waves” (*Old English Grammar and Reader* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970], 153). Burton Raffel’s more modern poetic translation gives us, “Weary with winter I wandered out / On the frozen waves” (in *Poems and Prose from the Old English*, ed. Burton Raffel and Alexandra H. Olsen [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998], 8). In one of the first translations, Benjamin Thorpe offers, “I abject thence / went, stricken with years, / over the billowy mass” (*Codex Exoniensis: A Collection of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* [London: William Pickering, 1842], 287–88). In most cases, the sea is a mass, or a “bound” (a well-demarcated extension in space) to be prepositionally traveled over, although Diamond’s parenthetical note hints at the more active co-implication I argue for here.

61. *Seafarer*, l. 20, ll. 20–21.

62. Ibid., ll. 23–24a.

63. On the subject of the poet’s close attention to the rich variety of birds that populate the winter seaside in early medieval northern landscapes, see Margaret E. Goldsmith, “*The Seafarer* and the Birds,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 5 (1954): 225–35.


65. Ibid., l. 9, l. 17.


70. In *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, Steve Mentz urges us to let go of “certain happy fictions” and replace them with “less comforting narratives. Fewer gardens, and more shipwrecks” (98).

71. *Wanderer*, l. 45, l. 53.


73. Lerner, “Doppler Elegies.”