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The gravid ground: stories of bed and street

Entangled with the complexity of Jennifer Bloomer's creative/theoretical ideas on chickens, beds, eggs, birth, and time, this essay is a 'poetic/politic'[1] dialogue between interior and exterior, private and public, health and illness. As gendered, cultural and personal, the place of illness is politically controversial to Western culture — taboo even — with ill bodies absented from public life. The essay illuminates this absenting. If health crises, rather than passively intersecting racial or gender inequalities, develop in a cycle of 'co-constitution', their unravelling necessitates identifying threads through both personal and political storytelling.[2] This essay asserts that who or what stories make present, then, has valence. I present three poetic/politic threads. The first, 'insides', from experiences of being confined during the Covid-19 pandemic, tells the backstory of the bed, entering a playful journal dialogue with Bloomer, chickens and ill health. The second story, 'outsides', moves out into the street where ground is bed and, overhearing the stories of others, considers the story as a potential delicate, minor resistance and restoration in public space or the urban landscape. The third story, 'inside out', rather than a conclusion, offers a composting of material for new beginnings.

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Retreats, woods, hatcheries*, plots, chickens;*[3] *disease; pregnant with ideas, no ideas, no idea. Beds. To bed. In bed.* Sorry, *she said,* I had no idea you were not well.

I am still lying — lying still — in bed when I come across writer/poet Lisa Robertson: 'Some say the city is a loom, some say it is a boat. I would rather not choose. But in the long history of cities, many worthy sentences have

[1]Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 190–233 (p. 198), first publ. in 1985.

[2]Tithi Bhattacharya, 'Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory', in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. by Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp. 1–20 (p. 17).

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been unfurled from the loom of the bed.'[4] *I think I can write a story of city from here in bed*.

Inspired (*breathe in*) by the writing of Jennifer Bloomer — whose work has nested in the back of my mind since the 1990s when I first wondered whether writing could be architecture — this essay grapples with the absenting of illness in public space and discourse. Bloomer withdrew from public life in 2001 due to myalgic encephalomyelitis, also called chronic fatigue syndrome, ME or CFS. Now bedridden, she continues to speak actively to the world through the social media platform Twitter.[5] She tweets many times a day into the public ether on a wide range of topics: social justice, climate crisis, US Republican hegemony, inequality, suicide prevention, illness and ME, and the delightful particularities of animals we share this earth with.

sickbed flowerbed deathbed bunkbed cotbed bedhead bedstead bedside bedpost double bed twin bed waterbed raised bed vegetable bed

There are many women whose illnesses have put them to bed yet given rise to their writings.[6] In 1926, Virginia Woolf wrote of her frequent hallucinatory, otherworldly bouts of illness. Despite taking her mind to strange places, she was physically forced to occupy her bed in solitary 'rest cures', away from social and public life.[7] In Western culture, the marginalising of women with illnesses continues. Health is unequal. The personal made political. Rather than merely intersecting with race, gender, climate and class inequalities, health inequality is what Tithi Bhattacharya and others identify as particularly 'co-constitutive'.[8] Inequalities create, are created by, and continue to co-create each other. The paradox is that, in some cases, poor health gives rise to potent new imaginaries. The bed launches the story.

Following Bloomer's use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'minor literature' where 'the distinction between personal and political dissolves', and Carolyn Steedman's use of 'microhistory' which traces detail of material as cultural history, this essay proposes a minor storytelling, a poetic/politic that has power to both present and disrupt.[9] The stories I present are hatched around pieces of my journal written during the eighteen months of restriction or lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. I am ill during much of this time. Inserting the auto-journal entries into the scholarly essay risks the shame of writing in the first person. As Annie Ernaux says: 'By choosing to write in the first person, I am laying myself open to criticism […] The third person — he/she — is always someone else, free to do whatever they choose. "I" refers to oneself, the reader […] "I" shames the reader.'[10] Alongside illness, the journal tracks our keeping of hens whose home is the deck and the raised vegetable and flower beds of our first-floor terrace garden in central London.[11] Private like a letter, it is constructed from intimacy and interiority. In offering it to you here, it both opens me and becomes an exterior.

Bloomer — an excellent storyteller well-known for folding the personal into the political — structures her 1993 essay '… and "venustas"', as sequential

stories. I explicitly borrow that structure to tell three stories.[12] The first, 'insides', is borne from the history of the bed — the ultimate interior, private space — and being confined to it during illness. Set during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a non-linear story asking the question: 'Why is the human bed so untheorised in the history of architecture?' The second, 'outsides', suggests that the ground or urban landscape, through the history of urban public health, is also a bed. The story takes up position in the street and, overhearing the stories of others, considers storytelling as a delicate, minor yet powerful resistance during illness. Public places or landscapes, once gravid with unease, become laden with possibility. The essay ends with 'inside out' which brings the outside back to the beginning and urges us, like compost, to meld and press together, and pay attention to the fertility of each other's stories. Bloomer's prolific writing on beds, eggs, birth, and time threads through.

First story: insides

October 2021, journal
Hatching stories. Storytelling my way along.

I started with Jennifer Bloomer's:

> THIS is the Hatchery. It is a place of production, flow, desire, signifiers on the cheep. It is chaotic, dynamic, dirty. There is no authority. It is the place of hatching — hatching lines of poché — and the place of hatches — small doors opening into dark places. The gesture of hatching a drawing is also a kitchen gesture: the French verb hacher denotes these things, as well as the act of hacking something to bits. The hatchery bears the trace of architectural terrorism, "as sure as herself pits hen to paper and there's scribings scrawled on eggs" [FW 615. 09–10] Here, in this smooth space, plots are hatched.[13]

I am always writing. Lines of text making spaces. Wondering what the plot is. A story of eighteen months of confinement and restoration. A time in which we find ourselves living with two then one then three then four hens on our first-floor terraced garden. My favourite hen is called Nora (yes, after Nora Barnacle, James Joyce's wife). Her three hen friends are Antoinette, Audre (Lorde) and Gertrude (Stein).

The day is dipping and, as I step around the garden sweeping up the autumn leaves, Nora tiptoes with me, snacking on the last seeds and bugs in the nooks and crannies of the deck boards. The others have gone to roost in their beds. As the light wanes, I stand and look inside the house, all aglow. Each morning, early, Nora crouches warm in her nesting box, patiently awaiting the lay of her egg. Her sisters, a silkie and beautifully flecked bantams, produce eggs only when the conditions are just so. Did you know that there are more chickens in the world than any other bird?[14]

I am writing this from bed, thinking about the others doing the same.

Our marital bed is the same one in which babies were conceived (eggs!) and nursed, where their little bodies slept shoehorned between us.

I think of bed as intimacy, comfort, privacy, rest, sleep, a sanctuary to disappear into, and the ultimate interior. Anthropologically, human beds are found in all communities. The first beds, around 200,000 years old, are in South Africa, dug into the ground of cave sites and filled with leaves and straw. These were spaces not just for sleep but for preparing meals and eating, for making tools and conversation.[15] The bed has been a complex space of power and wealth across history and cultures. English (men) were prone to govern from bed from Henry VIII to Winston Churchill. In seventeenth-century France, Louis XIV also ruled court from bed. His *levée* (getting up ritual), taking several hours and requiring the work of numerous courtiers, was intertwined with the making of major political decisions.[16] With a fine bed in the Middle Ages costing the equivalent of a small house, the bed was an architecture, maybe one of the original architectures, along with the cave, the *gunya* and the nest.

The bed remained culturally significant over the twentieth century. Hugh Hefner's circular bed in the London Playboy Club, for example, was a pornographic heterotopia, both infantile and pathological.[17] Buckminster Fuller criticised that 'our beds are empty two-thirds of the time' and suggested a 'Dymaxion sleep' solution of napping for just two hours a day.[18] His ideas not only point to modernism's reductive attitude to the objects of the home, but are part of a political narrative relegating the bed to a place of weakness and inferiority. Although still intersecting with sex and power, the bed is now denoted domestic, feminine, maternal, secret, of illness/weakness/disobedience. Today our politicians govern upright from the dais, the street, the doorway, or, insidiously, from the internet.

In the opening of 'Abodes of Theory and Flesh: Tabbles of Bower' (1992), Jennifer Bloomer, in her characteristic way of introducing the critical through the personal, leads us to her and her husband's marital bed. She does not, though, let us into it; instead, she seats us in the old rocker adjacent, our feet on a low stool waiting for her first child to be born. The rocker, an heirloom known as 'Miss Eleanor's Rocker', is 'swollen'. The stool, normally on her husband's side, has a 'recessed pad, cased in a rather overly sat-upon, tanned and oiled hide of a cow'.[19] It 'is solid, rectilinear, and sturdy, while the rocker is airy, curvaceous, and lacy'.[20] For Bloomer, these objects start her unpicking of the thorny binary between the oh so uneasy bedfellows of ornament/structure (masculine/feminine) in western canonical architectural history. Yet the marital bed that sits between these allegoric items remains curiously unanimated. Does it represent the pregnancy itself?

> Gravity comes from the Latin *gravis*, meaning heavy or serious. *Gravis* also begat the English word gravid, and thus, gravidity, which refers to the condition of pregnancy. Gravity is a force [or attraction] between two bodies, between aggregations of matter.[21]

Is bed ornament or structure? Or is it a space of combination and ambiguity in between?

April 2020, journal
Is the bed of 'Tabbles of Bower' the same bed that Bloomer sits or lies in now? I wonder what her view from that bed might be — the Appalachian Mountains she retreated to? I lie in my bed looking at the pond in the courtyard.

The first two chickens are beautiful silkies — one grey, one white — their feathers soft enough for a pillow. If Bloomer knew then what she knows now, would she have paid more attention to the role of the bed? Or was she paying attention but couldn't let on?

To me, the bed always seems to be a gap, an interval in time, an indeterminate place or space. It feels gravid — full of meaning and breath, (birth), yet uneasy, of loss and death — as intimated by James Joyce, Bloomer's confidante and inspirer:

> My great blue bedroom, the air so quiet, scarce a cloud. In peace and silence.
>
> I could have stayed up there for always only.
>
> It's something fails us.
>
> First we feel.
>
> Then we fall.[22]

I trace elsewhere a history of the spaces of birth (and death).[23] As Joyce knew, loss is never far from life. His wife Nora had a miscarriage in 1908, and Lucia, their daughter, born the year before, was diagnosed with violent episodic schizophrenia in 1930. 'It's something fails us […] Then we fall'.

September 2020, journal
Through a very warm British summer the global pandemic becomes almost normalised. At home a domestic tragedy strikes. Marie, the smaller, grey silkie, becomes listless. The large white one, Antoinette, has been brooding and uncompanionable. We think the little one is depressed and give her extra treats and cuddles but one morning she collapses and dies. Chickens are social animals and do not like to live alone, so a week later two new chickens, of different breeds arrive. The new chickens befriend Antoinette and lay white and brown eggs in the nesting boxes.

In 2020, a year now infamous, not long after Hélène and I conceived of this special issue, all three of our children happened to be living at home: the youngest still a schoolchild, the other two in gap years, intervals. I caught COVID-19 early on in March and with my strange immune system for several months spent much time in bed. Illness continued to shadow me over the next two years. 'Long Covid' as it is commonly known is now being likened to ME/CFS and linked to the menopause.[24] As I got better then worse the sun shone through a summer that turned its back on the havoc being wreaked all over the world by this debilitating disease. Like many UK and European citizens, we stayed at home, all working at stations newly planted around the house. We were amongst the lucky ones with a big

enough home to accommodate the five of us and the means to make it work. In the first-floor terrace garden, a space nine metres wide and six metres deep, we added a raised vegetable bed, and built a chicken coop. It was our micro farm.

The hens loved the raised bed of marigolds, spinach, beans, radishes and dahlias. It spanned inside and out, from us to them, domestic to landscape. Between human and non-human, the micro farm was a spatial entanglement 'hatched' between illness and hope.

The farm, a plot, was an interval in an interval; an interval like the night that passes while half-asleep-half-awake in illness in bed. As Bloomer writes in 'Interval' (1985), the interval 'suggests a place that might be occupied, that is, a void or space'.[25] Building the coop and the raised vegetable bed occupied the pandemic's putting of time into abeyance. The tonne of soil delivered to the front of the house waited expectantly. We raised beds, hatching plots for the nesting box. It will, though, be no bed of roses.

December 2020, journal
The grey and long winter months. December, a funny thing happens. A neighbour knocks at the door and asks if we will take in another chicken, left over from a photo shoot. The fourth chicken we name Nora.

Why is the human bed now so out of sight, so untheorised in the history of architecture? The bed's repositioning as a symbol of the domestic interior has both privatised and made commerce of it. Much has been made of Shakespeare leaving only his second-best bed to Anne Hathaway. Despite the suspicious implications of his long absences from Stratford, it is likely that the second-best bed, although less expensive, was the marriage bed — a gift of comfort and intimacy.[26] With the Victorians and Sigmund Freud, the bed has increasingly become a female symbol: of hysteria, the wantonness of illness; of anti-capital: 'get out of bed, you're wasting time!' (Fuller's Dymaxion again); or childlike: 'go to bed now!' The bed is also the site of long-term chronic illness, a topic made taboo through the same capitalist, gendered lens. Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, Florence Nightingale and Harriet Martineau are but a few of the exceedingly clever women who were bedridden and marginalised due to 'the daily drama of the body'.[27]

June 2021, journal
The dark of evening falls, the chickens file into the coop one by one. Their bed is a narrow timber roost on which they line up top to tail, gripping their toes around the 3 cm width. By day they eat all the marigolds, cornflowers, sunflowers and dahlias filling the raised bed; they scratch in scattered bark and bathe in dust. They are partial to seeds and corn, banana and herbs; they like apples but not carrots. They love watermelon but not cabbage. When a hen hops onto your hand she grips your fingers with her warm human-like toes.

March 2020, I have COVID-19. I lie heavy in bed for weeks and am exhausted and sporadically bedridden for months afterwards, with the swollen joints, pain and fatigue of an autoimmune condition. I take little time off, working from bed. The bed becomes a sanatorium for my mind as much as a comfort to my aching

body. Both 'sanity' and 'sanitary' come from the Latin *sanitas* meaning health. I try to imagine the weight — insanity — of a long-term chronic illness that takes one to bed indefinitely and away from the outside world.

Today I am well, but my bed remains a space where I toss and turn, awake in the shapeless night hours tortured by nameless repetitive anxieties. These bungled or hashed plots are borne by perimenopausal drops in oestrogen — the cycle that leads to no more eggs. Is the hatchery — 'a place of production, flow, desire, signifiers on the cheep. It is chaotic, dynamic, dirty' — a clue to Bloomer's bed?[28]

The farm becomes more than just something to fill the void; the void in my head caused by ongoing Covid symptoms; the void in my life as I cease to work inside a university building yet continue to teach architecture from home, in bed; the void in my heart as I do not see friends, family, or colleagues for months except via the flickering screen; the void in my ovaries as my eggs run out. Filling the void becomes the plot — both the place (site) and the storyline. The site (void) is hatched as the story.

With life in abeyance, small, shrunk down to the immediate environs, we construct. The chicken coop is made from an existing wooden garden shed, approximately 1 m wide, 1.5 m tall and 0.5 m deep. Rearranging the existing shelves, and trawling the streets for leftover pieces of timber, we install a roost and two nesting boxes on the upper floor and a place to scratch on the ground. The two chickens we buy have been hatched in a farm in Kent. The raised bed is 1.8 m square and 45 mm high and placed in the centre of the garden. We fill it with the soil and scatter seeds. We wait patiently for the arrival of chickens and vegetables. I order some flowers, dahlias. I hear from several colleagues and friends who are ill in hospital, still coughing, unable to walk, in bed, sick.

This is the story of 2020 ongoing. The ongoing hatching of the garden as the micro farm.

June 2021, journal
It is summer again. I realise I feel better. We sit outside in our garden with the chickens pecking about for insects. I think of birth. Bloomer describes that in the 'pain and suffering of childbirth, there is an indescribably delicious and cherished beauty'.[29] *I think of eggs (we take them every day and eat them — do they mind? I sometimes scramble a few and give them back to them topped with garlic and mint). Gravity (plop goes the egg, plop goes hen shit as it falls). 'What holds these chickens down? their feathery downs of fluff?' says Bloomer.*[30] *Flightless, lighter than air, the ground is their place: they bathe in the soil in the raised bed, shuffling their feathers into the dirt*.

The garden and shed-coop were home at first to two little silkies, the fluffiest and softest of chicken species. They learn to peck for little creatures and leaves. But silkies cannot roost, their legs being short and further apart than other chicken breeds, so they sleep huddled together on the floor. We buy instead a fine, green 'urban' coop, an expensive, smooth space cast from recycled plastic, which can be dismantled and hygienically hosed down weekly. The

wooden hatchery remains for nesting, with a storage space for straw, wood-chips and gardening tools.

The vegetables flourish — we eat cucumbers, courgettes, spinach and lettuce in abundance all summer long. The silkies grow and by August begin to lay beautiful elongated white eggs under bushes and in corners.

July 2021, journal
Chicken eggs have thin but sturdy shells created over a 26-hour period in the bird's uterine system, layers of calcium accruing. The eggshell makes me think of the material layers of the deck, a timber surface of vascular woody tissues that over the following year rots under the acrid chicken poo which I sweep and sluice away with soapy water each day.

My eggs are waning. Like the bed, menopause is also untheorised. The sweats, dry skin, decreased libido, anxiety, short temper, memory loss and insomnia all pushed away by our desire for daily intellectual labour. I wonder what has changed since Bloomer was writing in the 1990s. Despite the waves of feminism, we could not show any weakness then; we were competing with the boys who ruled from the schools, the crit panels, the architectural history texts, and the other platforms they inherited and reproduced over and over. Women colleagues and I now discuss menopause quietly. In safe spaces we mention lack of sleep, brain fog, flooding, anxiety. I would not dream of making it more public. I do not know why.

For Woolf the bed is a penitentiary solitude. Harriet Martineau — the first woman sociologist — was bedridden for five years in 1839 with misdiagnosed uterine cancer. She claimed that the 'sick room' was a space from which women could re-exert control, be independent, even during illness.[31] This was disparaged by those who thought that ill people, especially women, should completely submit to the knowledge of their (male) doctors. Martineau was labelled insane as well as ill, yet maintained that the bed was a space of solidarity and publicity. For Martineau the sick room was her career. Her bed suggests a potential interior-to-exterior spatial uprising.

Second story: outsides

July 2021, journal
Lisa Robertson writes: 'And then we rise from OUR LOOM-LIKE BEDS to dress ourselves. If thread communicates meaning, it's because its structure twists. These bedclothes and garments are mobile theses on the corporality of time.'[32] *Stories weave from inside to out. As the pandemic abates, we are allowed outside once more. I wonder if the journal form is limiting. As Annie Ernaux suggests, 'you can learn more about yourself by embracing the outside world than taking refuge in the intimacy of a journal.'*[33]

bedroom bedchamber to bed featherbed bedclothes bedspread bedfellow bedspring bedridden bed frame bed sheets embedded bedsore sofa bed bedgown bed pan bedsit hot bed bedbug abed daybed

The chicken is a creature of the ground. Submerged in her soil bed she is a motif connecting the ground of the urban interior to that of the urban exterior. Once wild her ancestors survived the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs.

seabed riverbed seedbed bedrock bedlam

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes that landscape is neither 'natural' nor 'wild', neither pure nor other; it instead marks the interaction between culture and nature, 'tying together geography, history, and natural history'.[34] To me landscape is also biography — it gives birth to species and contributes to their destruction, bearing witness to their stories. Landscapes and species are entangled, traced into each other. Bloomer's retreat to a wild remote area of North Georgia suggests that the interspecies complexity of landscape might — in the time of illness — write (*biograph*) the curative or therapeutic.[35]

In 'Big Jugs' (1991), Bloomer's first 'jug' is the wet, pocketed, geological landscape of Alachua, Florida, providing an uncertain ground for the humans it hosts.[36] This metaphor of the unstable ground is emblematic of our current global health and climate catastrophes: the stability of our cities and certainty of our relations was fundamentally shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet we continue to sleepwalk through the disasters rising health poverty, inequality and the climate crisis, and accept the infrastructural sexism/racism they expose. Where I am lucky to have been well since 2021 — vaccinated and on high doses of expensive supplements and vitamins — for many people, illness, the urban landscape, and poverty are co-constitutive. Contemporary and historic crip scholars articulate the difficulties faced by those with chronic illness, and Black care scholars the way that climate breakdown first and foremost affects people of colour.[37]

The ground is our bed on this earth: bedrock is the fundament beneath the soil or alluvium washed or silted onto it. Deposits of time. These deposits encompass both the biographies of individual species and bodies, and the breadth of their wider culture. The biographical bed/ground is political. Historical public health reform in Britain, for example Edwin Chadwick's sanitary and Poor law reform, set the tenets for our conception of public health today.[38] In the 1830s, Chadwick asserted that disease did not arise from poverty alone and that the filth of the city was a key contributory factor. The impoverished/improper body symbolised and intersected the state of the city; the filth was deemed to be created not just by industrial factories but by the human body itself spilling its effluence onto the ground.[39]

It is no surprise that the word 'proper' comes from the French *propre* for clean. Across the nineteenth century, improper bodies were brought to order in proper places — public bathhouses, workhouses, prisons and hospitals. These institutions were harsh. They operated to control, separate, and remove anomalous bodies from visibility, yet, along with squalid shared lodging-houses, pubs, or beer-houses (all preferable to the rigours of the workhouse), they at least provided a place to sleep. A bed, even if rented nightly and

shared, was seen as a public necessity.[40] Despite these institutions, Chadwick's urban theories were initially refuted so the ground itself remained improper until diseases like cholera were proven to be due to human effluence leaking into the open water supplies.[41] Chadwick's work resurfaced in the 1850s with a sanitation programme of water distribution above ground and new egg-shaped sewers below, like the invisible, wet jugs beneath Alachua's landscape. These sewers streamed human/animal waste to fields to manure crops, interrelating the ground — urban to rural — with the health of humans and the development of their foodstuffs.[42]

Historic British Victorian public sanitation and social reform, though paternalistic, is rightly lauded. Yet with constant erosion and underinvestment over the last fifty years, recently heightened with the pandemic, we now find ourselves in a crisis of urban public health on a scale as great as the 1800s.[43] Today a bed is a luxury for the homeless. Conversely, the privileged may own a home yet be too frail to negotiate the city, only to retreat to their bed. Crip writers posit the bed as a critique of the productive imperative of capitalism, yet are frequently dismissed as being lazy and wanting. Even for Chadwick, disease prevention was a necessary social reform to maintain the productivity of working individuals. Reducing loss of life would also limit spending on the Poor Law.[44] Now, as Alva Gotby puts it: 'The work of caring for people is an essential but disavowed and devalued aspect of capitalist societies. Without the labour of ensuring that most people feel well enough to keep going to work, capitalism could not function.'[45] Now, the impoverished ill too frequently become homeless bodies, left to inhabit the urban landscape without a bed, growing dirty and unkempt. They are unwelcome in the city yet forced to reside there amongst the waste and the dirt on the ground. Now, the bed then signifies a truly entangled public, political space, a co-constituency of rights, deprivations and inequities.

August 2021, journal
Audre Lorde: 'it is not difference which immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.'[46]
Hilary Mantel: '[…] not much to do, is it, leave someone a bed?'[47]
George Orwell: 'Dirt is a great respecter of persons; it lets you alone when you are well dressed, but as soon as your collar is gone it flies towards you from all directions.'[48]

The micro farm in our urban garden now runs itself. I give up trying to grow vegetables — four chickens devour them before they can grow, despite a pyramid of netting. I feel cooped up, almost insane, at home, the repeated lockdowns taking their toll. Life opens up and restrictions slowly lift; the two older children depart for universities once more. Like others I take my 'microbe-laden body' to walk around the streets of North London, sometimes slowly meandering, sometimes marching with purpose.[49] I am struck by the way that nature, especially where the city is neglected or overlooked, makes a productive bed of the urban ground: grass spreading through cracks and edges, moss growing on limestone kerbs, and dank mushroomy carpets springing from loamy soil. Human projects also take advantage of the abeyance, as

improper gardens on interstitial land. People begin to collect in public and I overhear their stories. This springing up is another form of urban story rising up from bedrock. I turn my journal outwards into a field log of these growing resiliencies. It becomes an account of species I see surviving.

Exteriors, Annie Ernaux's slim book of seemingly random but increasingly interconnected journal entries, describes the everyday events she observes whilst living on the outskirts of Paris. Accounts of other people going about their business, interacting or at rest, Ernaux writes, 'reveal our true selves through the interest, anger or the shame they send rippling through us'.[50]

> [C]ommitting to paper the movements, postures and words of the people I meet gives me the illusion that I am close to them. I don't speak to them, I only watch them and listen […] I may also be trying to discover something about myself through them.[51]

With empathy, '(sitting opposite someone on the Métro, I often ask myself, "Why am I not that woman?")', Ernaux is not simply observing people neutrally but identifying with them.[52] She is enfolded within the scene. Further, as well as the people being 'exterior' yet true to her, the exterior built environment — buildings, urban spaces, transportation systems, and institutions — is rendered with the same plain descriptive prose as the people she observes in it: the social and the spatial come under equal scrutiny. Her writing tries to understand the fabric around her — people and places — with her own life entwined into it.

When Martineau wrote that 'I do not believe it is possible for persons in health and action to trace, as we can, the agencies for good that are going on in life and the world', and 'this is our peculiar privilege, of seeing and feeling something of the simultaneous vastness and muteness of providential administration',[53] words were her 'agencies of good'. Bloomer, once a prolific and affective writer, now uses her bed as a site from which to write agencies of good in the form of Twitter. At heart a poetry of 140 (later 280) characters, a tweet can easily be written reclining or lying down. Bloomer's tweets are issued from the bed out into the world. Could my recorded instances of urban life and overheard stories in the street also be agencies of good, moments of resistance, power, or even joy?

September 2021, journal
Moss on the vertical surface of a slightly raised limestone kerb creates a verdant green line between the pavement and the cracked foreground of a row of terraced houses.

> Look at this tiny, upside-down wise-woman: just 2 inches long and weighs approximately zero.
>
> The largest megabit (fruit bat) has a 5 1/2 ft wingspan […] just eats fruit 'n' bugs […] but he will scare u
>
> This little wee, not so much.
>
> 24/09/21 Twitter: Jennifer Bloomer[54]

September 2021, journal
A friend of mine and her husband walking towards me on the same side of the street. Due to the lockdown and the stay-at-home orders that have defined this year, I haven't seen them for a long time. They are deep in conversation. As they near I start to wave, but they clearly don't see me. Prevaricating, I swallow my desire to greet them. Stressed out, so stressed, *she says.* You're stressed out? *he says. Then they've passed me, gone*.

The couple in the cafe. Stooped, she painfully slowly walks to a chair. They have cake and tea. He goes to pay and begins to talk to the girl working there: She has Fibromyalgia you see. She has left her cake, rhubarb. Not because it isn't nice, she just can't eat. I tasted it and it's delicious, just to let you know. We're getting married after ten years together. I asked her daughters if it was ok. She's been ill for four years, used to talk ten to the dozen before that but hardly says a word now. *What would it be like to suffer from what the NHS calls a syndrome with no cure; where treatments are antidepressants, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and 'Lifestyle Changes';*[55] *where very few medical practitioners believe you have a real physical condition?*

September 2021, journal
Rows of buddleia growing from cracks in the concrete edge to the canal dangling their grey-green leaves into the water like miniature urban willow. Opposite, a strip of land by three canal boats is being cultivated. Pots of herbs nestle amongst discarded household appliances. Weedy growth vies for attention with stripes of vegetables.

In the 1980s Dolores Hayden wrote of 'domesticating urban space'.[56] *Where this has failed at a municipal level it is performed as a guerrilla tactic*.

The delicately dressed elderly woman who has found refuge in a high street pharmacy. She is seated on one of the ubiquitous plastic chairs. I have gone in for a flu jab. She has fallen in the street and cut the outside of her lip and chin on the ground and the inside deeply with her tooth. Her cloth mask is still attached under her chin. She has a beautiful face, touched with a little makeup, and wears a slightly faded crocheted green beret. Her lip is horribly swollen and has been bleeding for twenty minutes and she is dizzy. The shop assistant wants her to go to the hospital. She doesn't want to go and looks at me. I try to give a look that says I think she is ok, there really isn't much blood now. But what do I know? She repeats that she doesn't want to go to hospital, and adds, I don't mean to be difficult you know. *I try to smile at her through my mask. The assistant asks,* when were you born? *She rises and wobbles and must sit down again.* April 1928, *she says. I think of the conversation we might have over a cup of tea. She looks at me again,* I don't want to go to hospital, *she says*. I know, *I whisper. I am called into the tiny side room to have my jab. When I emerge, the woman has gone.* What happened, *I ask another bystander.* She went home, *he says. I am relieved; I hope I am right to be. I think about refuge, what is it, where can it take place*.

> Lace knitting must be for the next life … as current project is at last digging my crochet hook into a lovely cloud of Angora brought a quarter-century ago from an advertised-as-ethical roadside Roturan rabbit lady.
>
> Who knows where the time goes … ☹
>
> 22/09/21 Twitter: Jennifer Bloomer

> Unprintable, unprintable - - potato, potahto …
>
> 24/09/21 Twitter: Jennifer Bloomer

A man in a suit walking quickly down the street. He slows and gently places a bright orange grocery bag next to a sleeping homeless man, who is slumped awkwardly in a seated position with his chin lolling on his chest. The tender act of leaving decent food moves me. It contains care: the selection of sandwich and a particular drink have been made, the bag has been purchased for five pence.

October 2021, journal

Tufts of dandelion and grass mixed with autumn leaves creating a soft frill at the edge of the tarmac path from which a black steel fence rises.

An open carport next to a housing estate, its roof an unintended mass of growing plants.

A collection of people gathering. How are you? *says a middle-aged man to a younger man*, I'm often thinking of you. — Oh well I couldn't be better, *says the younger,* I'm fine; I ran a half marathon. *They sit down. Cakes and coffees are brought to the table. The young man looks grey-pale, and thin.* Had to go for my MRI and CT scans yesterday. *The conversation turns to the quality of the cakes and the coffees. An October sun is shining*.

> Nowhere is the Monarch migration more evocatively described, or put to complex rhetorical use, than in Barbara Kingsolver's gorgeous climate-cautionary 2012 novel 'Flight Behaviour'.
>
> 22/09/21 Twitter: Jennifer Bloomer

Until reading this Tweet, I had sometimes wondered whether, or hoped that Bloomer was actually Kingsolver. Someone told me that they thought Bloomer might be writing novels, in secret, and with Kingsolver's books located in the Appalachians; speaking of species lost and intertwined with lives challenged by poverty, climate change, and ill health, there are many overlapping resonances. Why did I want Bloomer to become a novelist? I wanted to give her back a continued and full writing life. Despite the rich archive of writings she has left us from the 1990s, the continued beauty of her prose is lost to us. I feel angry that such brilliance was stopped prematurely. Yet her Tweets, a proliferation, a capacious bag of thoughts and responses, should be, are good enough. Many, on local and national politics, are somewhat difficult to follow. Others are fierce — 'the macabre Strangler Fig' (6/04/2022); tender — 'a baby elephant takes its first steps' (05/04/2022); astute — 'Ukraine has alarmingly high numbers of people living with H.I.V. and hepatitis C, and dangerously

low levels of vaccination against measles, polio and COVID-19. Overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions for refugees are breeding grounds … ' (26/03/2022). Confined to bed she remains connected to the world's abundancies, crises, inequities, inadequacies, and conflicts. Each of her Tweets is launched to us as a poetic/politic minor story from the inside to out.

October 2021, journal

A Black man living on a side street, against the blank wall of the pound shop for months and months. He has created an elaborate house: a bed from several mattresses, blankets and sleeping bags, a blue tarpaulin stretched over one end, tied up somehow onto the wall. Numerous cardboard boxes piled up around the bed and along the wall, and several shopping trolleys parked nearby contain numerous plastic bags all full of unidentifiable items. He is always to be found sitting on the bed, sometimes playing music from an old music player, or singing loudly solo. He never asks for money but speaks to himself or sometimes to passersby, although it is never clear whether he is addressing you or not. One day he is no longer there — there remains no trace of his home or bed. And I can no longer picture his face.

Urban space can be a place of growth and tenderness as well as havoc, excitement, fear, or danger. We may find pockets in it, familiar repetitious rituals, little places to hide, moments of hospitality and kindness. For those with nothing it is their only space, their ground, their bed.

October 2021, journal

A triangle of almost invisible land with mature trees between the railway line to St Pancras Station and a higher-level path for pedestrians and cyclists. 'Leo' has painted a crude sign on its forbidding fence 'Camley Garden, Do Not Trespass'. He has left his phone number and I wonder who calls it. He has been working daily on this land for 18 months, digging, sifting through the soil, bagging it, redistributing. Piles of compost can be seen at the far end. Tables almost hidden from view are covered with used water bottles, and tools, and outer layers of clothing. At one end he digs an enormous trench and fills it with new soil.

> Mass incarceration is a policy choice. Insulin rationing is a policy choice. Climate disintegration is a policy choice. Billionaire tax loopholes are a policy choice.
>
> 01/03/2023 Twitter: Jennifer Bloomer
>
> Retweet of Robert Reich @RBReich

Third story: inside out

Martineau prefaced *Life in the Sick-Room*:

> As I write this, I cannot but wonder when and how you will read it, and whether it will cause a single throb at the idea that it may be meant for you. You have been in my mind during the passage of almost all the thoughts that are found in this book. But for your sympathy — confidently reckoned on, though never asked — I do not

> know that I should have had courage to mark their procession, and record their order. I have felt that if I spoke of these things at all, it must be to some fellow-sufferer — to some one who had attained these experiences before me or with me; and, having you for my companion throughout (however unconsciously to yourself), I have uttered many things that I could hardly otherwise have spoke.[57]

And it as though she is talking straight to Bloomer, as am I.

This essay is a story of threads, beginnings, musings. Instead of a conventional conclusion that neatly argues an end point, I am thinking about compost. Like this essay, compost entwines and melds a range of materials. The materials, thought of as waste in one context, are a careful balance of plant and animal ingredients which, activated through the liveliness of air, warmth, moisture, and non-human critters such as earthworms and bacterium, produce new fertile soil. Hen poo is an ideal additive.

October 2021, journal

There is chicken mess all over the deck (plop goes hen shit as it falls) which I scoop up and put on the compost heap. Chicken poo helps create an excellent nitrogen-rich fertiliser. The days are shortening. The flowers have finished and leaves are falling. Mice venture out into the crepuscular light. Nora is still laying every other day, but the others have stopped for winter — chickens rely on long days of sunlight to create eggs. When I gave birth, breathe*, I was ashamed of the faecal matter that was simultaneously pushed out. Shit on the bed is matter out of place. This works as a metaphor on all sorts of levels for the relationship of unruly bodies to urban spaces: homeless, sick bodies, their dirt and shit, as well as the presence of wayside plants and disobedient critters; all are resisted by the matter of the built environment. As Bloomer argues:*

> The history of architecture is a history of the avoidance of shame by covering things up. From Vitruvius to Alberti to Laugier to Perrault to the moderns to "deconstructivism", one can find an ever thickening entanglement of propriety centred on the body of beauty, a flight from the voluptuous: from the irrational, from the irregular, from the ornamental/supplemental, from the unrefined, from the uncut. It is a history of bodily analogies that constitute a history of skin and bones, but not of flesh.[58]

Everywhere urban architectures cover up flesh. Yet the lived experience of unruly, fleshy bodies pushes through.

Compost. Fertility. Resilience. Growth. Bloomer writes that:

> The soil in my Iowa garden is black, fertile, and breathtaking in its possibilities. Fertile soil is the only reliable philosopher's stone I know of, the vessel where death and life become each other, in a never-ending recipe. It is sensuous and precious in its dark, loamy emergence from its rock-hard winter state. The odour is indescribably horrifying yet irresistible like the smell of other places we associate with damp and dirt. Improper places.[59]

Donna Haraway calls the humanities the 'humusities', composty, combinatory discourses interacting spatially together: 'Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles'.[60] Compost loves variety, dead leaves, and grasses between each layer of food waste and chicken poo. It requires a melding, a pressing together of the right ingredients, an embracing of damp, dirty, unruly, non-human life. The melding process is aided by gravity, an attractive 'force between two bodies, between aggregations of matter'.[61] Composting is care, a 'maintenance and reparation of *our bodies*, our selves, and *our environment* […] in a complex life-sustaining web', as Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto write.[62] Compost takes time. The weight of slowly heating material is threaded by earthworms and other bugs, bodies of life and death interacting. As more layers are pressed to the top, perfect, life-sustaining, fertile soil is extracted from the base, the ground of the heap. Circular. Chronic illness, it strikes me, often has no beginning, middle or end. It is circular. The pandemic is unended. Life is now. Humusities, the only reliable philosophy, is full of fertile matters. Rather than offering temporary, unreliable solutions or futures, the humusities stories rich, relational landscapes or recipes for resistance, repair and care now in the present.

In our cities we need to embrace the irrational, the irregular, the soft, disobedient fleshes of ourselves, our critters, and our anomalies. We need to press together — pay attention to all our experiences, our illnesses, to our bodies our shit our eggs our stories our beds.

Just listen.

sickbed flowerbed bedrock seedbed put to bed

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