

On Ungrounded Ground: A poet in residence at the dump

John Wedgwood Clarke, University of Hull

Abstract

‘On Ungrounded Ground’ reflects upon a writer’s yearlong ‘residency’ at a landfill site and resource recovery facility. The article explores the significance of contemporary waste management within an archaeological, ecological and geological context. It reflects upon the psychological and aesthetic impact of rubbish, and describes some of the challenges faced by a writer trying to describe an object that contains so much contemporary, ephemeral material culture. How should they begin to decipher this monument constructed from the dark matter of late consumer capitalism? The article suggests that the dump ultimately passes beyond the power of metonymic representation and remains other to the text that tries to represent it. It also asserts that the dump is an intense combination of natural and man-made processes. Referencing Val Plumwood’s concept of the ‘shadow place’, it identifies the dump as a hidden landscape upon which our celebration of natural landscapes and places depends. Quotes from interviews with staff and visitors to the dump are included, and, despite the impossibility of representing the dump, an attempt is made to give a taste of the physical, emotional and intellectual impact of spending time at the site.

Keywords

landscape

poetry

ecology

nature

landfill

waste-management

edgelands

shadow places

One grows to hate these things except on the dump.

(‘The Man on the Dump’, Stevens 1984)

They are closing the last active cell at our landfill site. I make my way on foot towards the action, the ground a scintillating mix of broken mirror and crockery. The leg of a Barbie doll sticks up through the clay. A trainer bares its tread to the sky, as if clay were air, air the earth and whoever’s body it once belonged to were still running upside down on the inside of the mound. Skylarks sing over a barrow crammed with traces of absent bodies. We no longer bury our dead among their things. Little wonder: this place is made of old clothes, bags, nozzles, yellow twine, dishcloths, intimate liners of all kinds, chicken carcasses and on and on. I’m climbing an endless reminder-list of all we’ve lived with, eaten and thrown away. It’s a growing medium as complex in its record of human products as an ancient forest floor is with seeds, tubers, bulbs and fungi. From this earth of our making, topped with a little cosmetic soil, wildflowers at £20/ kilo will spring, attracting, as elsewhere on the dump, bees, butterflies, beetles, grasshoppers, rabbits, cats, bats and on and on.

The dump is a place of beginnings and ends, of unexpected collisions of thought and desire. One of the first poems I tried to write in response to my self-declared residency attempted the literary equivalent of this mingling of material by bringing together the reality of the landfill-site landscape with one of our literary canon’s earliest celebrations of the landscape and its seasons, the Mediaeval English poem, ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’. Why shouldn’t the dump also have its peculiar seasons named?

Sing, summer,

in our plastic bags,
sing tatters
in the shining buds,

a zephyr, tumour,
inflated heart,
snag and fritter
in the May.

The ground farts,
generators start,
merry spin
the cowls,

our leaking sacks,
all simmering black,
mount up, enter
in the May.¹

What I discovered during my time on the dump was that far from being ‘other’ to our so-called ‘natural’ landscapes, it was a place of intense ecological significance and an indivisible part of the human artefacts that are the fields and woods surrounding it. Forget the vista from the front of the country house, or the summit of a hill or mountain, the view from the landfill

mound provides the most revealing perspective if one wants to understand the meaning of contemporary land use.

At the brow of the mound, large white rolls of felt-like fabric sag on top of each other, as if a carpet warehouse had recently vanished from around its stock. A squall has just passed through, intensifying the sense of exposure. But it won't damage this industrial carpet designed to go down on top of polyethylene sheeting to draw away moisture in the topsoil to ditches and wells at the perimeter of the dump. In less than a year, the trucks and bulldozers shoving and spreading the mess and earth in front of me will be gone, their 'remediation work' complete. The only sign of all this out-sized industrial activity will be the network of plastic pipes installed to draw off usable methane gas generated as the waste ferments. This unlikely off-shoot of Romantic landscape gardening, carefully planned to hide the dark matter of consumption, will be as successful as an eighteenth-century ha-ha in its conjoining of our power to consume with an acceptable version of nature.

The closure of the cell comes with a carbon-footprint price-tag. Our waste must now travel 46miles in high-sided containers to the mega-dump at Rufforth on the other side of York. Between collections, it accumulates and festers in the enormous 'transfer shed':

There's no end to this in sight. The stuff
they can't recover waits to be transferred
in drooling bucket-loads. For now,
the work's on hold, all engines off,
just extractors blasting out the *eau*
de us. Swifts speed round the gloom,
measuring the scale of bin-bag heaps,

white buds clustering among the black.
One blooms, rippling into another's
wings lifting another's from the rot
until all are up, wobbling light stacked,
an ascension of herring gulls
making for the gap between hangar doors,
flying out like bats from a cave at dusk.²

In the Odyssey, the dead roost as bats in caves and return to the surface of the earth at dusk. Herring gulls, not bats, are the spirits of the dump. Birds that once followed the boat and the plough now perch on the roofs of sheds awaiting fresh opportunities to rip open the sacks of the living and find out how we've been filling our time.

It feels like everything is going to seed today. Despite the burst of rain, all around me thistles unpack in the breeze, transmitting their rogue genetic information to surrounding mono-cultural fields. Surveying the last of the silvery wheat and the clusters of cattle in lush green fields, I'm standing on 50-odd metres of compacted landfill waste. One cubic metre of the stuff will, if disturbed, 'fluff up' to four times its compressed volume. So that means I'm stood on a 200-metre-deep cyst of concealed and well-managed waste. If ever a patch of ground were a source, this is it. The ground is dense with us, a poem of our place in the ecosystem. It's a boil that might burst and great care is taken to make sure that it doesn't. I'm implicated in this hill, as is everyone in the area where I live. I'm certain I've seen the cat-litter tray I threw away a month ago perched on a mountain of plastics waiting to be carted off for recycling. The view I have of the Vale of Pickering is a testament to our collective ability to gather resources from around the globe and end their contact with us here.

Beside the rolls of industrial textile there's a three-metre-high compost rampart. It's so lush and dark I'd like to burrow my way in there and sleep in its warmth. Crows and jackdaws lift away as a digger launches its shovel into its soft froth. Biodegradable bags, which haven't degraded due to an error in the composition of the plastic mix, flicker from its surface like flames from an ash heap. Signs have been pegged into it, numbering the bays that each digger must work, hollowing it out and transporting it to places where the bulldozers mix it into the metre-deep growing medium or 'veneer'. Careful 'veneer calculations' and surveying ensures that the plastic sheets, white fabric, and the topsoil are positioned accurately. Our past must be sealed in precisely. The engineer responsible for closing the cell tells me they use GPS to ensure there are no mistakes. Opening up a landfill cell to fix a leaky membrane is 'a nightmare' and expensive, for whatever went in fluffs back up to near its original volume: it's chaos beneath, millimetre precision at the surface. Under the soon-to-be-green hill a dragon of excess consumption sleeps, above it, a lucrative, innovative industry casts its magic spell.

To the south there's the non-descript low ground of drained Lake Flixton, with its silos, wind turbines and general agri-business. At the edge of this absent body of water is one of the most important Mesolithic sites in Europe. Archaeological digs at Star Carr, little more than 400m from the edge of the landfill site, have yielded antler headdresses, the timbers of a slipway, and bone fish spears (Milner et al. 2013: 47–53). I've seen these objects in the British Museum and the Yorkshire Museum and they have a luminous quality that comes from the improvised knowledge worked into their surfaces. I've imagined, in failed attempts at shamanic concentration, an antler headdress fusing with my skull so that I can almost imagine crashing like a deer through woodland, fleeing hunters. Almost: it's a compelling fantasy that both draws me in and locks me out. But it is clear that these were precious objects and many of them were kept close to hand and used daily throughout a life or even

lives. Their fabric is haunted by this intimacy and makes my hand long to hold them. By contrast, our everyday objects are a revelation of addictive, wasteful, habitual behaviour. I want to moralize and complain, but they're also made strange as a result of mass collection and processing, acquiring monumental shapes, becoming inadvertent sculptural objects resonant with metaphor:

Flies rise as my shadow passes over
squashed plastic bottles
heaped like the shell middens
at Skara Brae

their dwellings built into waste,
box beds and stone dressers
gathered from the shore,
the stones chosen.

A wagtail drops from a rogue sycamore
and blesses with shit
a two-litre empty

fallen out of the system, inflated
by lemonade and sunlight
greening its interior.³

Opposite the plastic bottles, compressed cubes of cans await collection, glistening in the sunlight. I'd like to take a lorry-load of them, build a temple in an elegant city square and dedicate it to our thirst for anything but water from a tap. Public water fountains would spout from it, dedicated, like the Victorian water-trough up on Scarborough's South Cliff, to All God's Dumb Animals.

The factories and logistics sheds of the town's industrial estates spread out to the east beside a half-finished business park of undeveloped land grown wild in the elongating pause of the credit crunch. New roads complete with street furniture reach into the scrubland like a series of jetties. Plans for air-conditioned offices and identikit hotels collide with the facts of gorse, bramble and wildflower. Walking the business park a month ago, I found a new bus stop with a sofa dumped next to it and sat down to wait for a bus that would never arrive. The mosses growing in its velour seams had raised their sporangia like little golden oars. Clouds processed along the vale and out to the North Sea at Cayton Bay. Butterflies toppled by. Beyond the narrative of progress and destination, things were revealing themselves again. The old landscape rose back into its mute, material solidity bringing with it a brief sense of the timeless presence of things I knew as a child. In the field opposite, an old chest freezer, end on, resembled an entrance to a cold-war bunker, and then became an entrance to the earth itself. Earth barriers, like the rippled landscape of Neolithic dykes up in the Wolds, had been bulldozed into place in an attempt to prevent joy-riders rallying stolen cars and burning them out. This would be a good site, I thought, for a council chamber, a Parliament of Waste for debating our perilous ecological position as a top predator. I rose from the sofa with a wet backside.

As if the fog of unsatisfied desires had been absorbed into the older parts of the landfill mound, wandering around on it brings a peaceful sense of finality and clarity: is man no more than this? But over the brow of the hill and in the vast industrial waste-processing

sheds, it's a bonfire of the brands, brand iconoclasm, the packaging of lifestyle breaking down into common material denominators. Waitrose and Aldi, Apple and Asda, *The World of Interiors* and *Breast Man's Choice*, *The Mail* and *The Guardian*, all mingle in the skips, hoppers and on concrete pads. It's all the same where they're going. In a society shaped by social segregation based on the ability to buy choice, the dump is one of the few remaining places where we might see ourselves together, that is, if we were allowed access. But waste is dangerous, political, levelling. I've visited this place regularly for over a year to create an anti-pastoral record of the changing seasons of rubbish that gather in our ever-fruitful bins and skips: Christmas trees and fairy lights; the lawnmowers and garden furniture that bloom in spring; the barbecues and DIY debris of summer; the pumpkins of Halloween littering the heaps of bin bags with their cracked orange skulls. Our unique, individual impulses and lifestyles appear so obviously predictable that, faced with the seasonal glut of plastic garden furniture, one might begin to question what we're up to. At the dump we can see the triumph of marketing ridding itself of the evidence of its success.

The dump is also a dangerous place in other ways. I've felt psychologically overwhelmed and oppressed by its relentless, mechanical processing of the signs of our dying. The landfill site is a crematorium for the living process, for the immediate erasure of our recent history. It stands in relation to the midden as the crematorium does to the graveyard. It's there that we export disturbing signs of time passing, of things prematurely aged by fashion and innovation. We want to bury the inevitable for as long as possible. Rot is shameful, rubbish, crap, disgusting. During the first few weeks of the project, I had a dream in which I was living in a dilapidated Victorian mansion. I descended the staircase from my bedroom at the top of the house into piles of old papers, bikes without wheels, filing cabinets, stereo-systems, soda-water bottles, souvenirs and other junk. I was drowning in rubbish, the house sinking into the earth under its weight. I passed through a door in the basement and

stepped out into meadow by a cliff. The ground tilted until I was clinging to the grass, gazing at a little plastic cage from which a toilet freshener had melted. I'd been rereading Thomas Hardy. I'd also been told that the bridge over the railway line that ran past the entrance to the dump was a local suicide spot, and of one incident in particular:

He was hanging around the railway bridge
torn between one side and the other.

We thought, here's a jumper. Just a boy really,
distracted, in a world of his own.

He came to the fence like the ghost of a prisoner,
as if saying goodbye to the space
between waste oil and the lighting locker.

We called to him through the chain-link
but he shied off back up the access road,
*past the fly-tipped mattress, the drawers
without a chest, a blister pack's edge
finning through raw clay.* Turned out
it was a dry run. Came back after hours,
laid himself on the line. He was no jumper.⁴

For a couple of months there was a heap of old doors in the wood-reclamation area piled up like a poorly dealt hand of cards. As I looked at them I felt the rooms they once opened into crowding the space with their various shapes. The air was alive. Then they were gone, taking with them their histories of entrances and exits to the incinerator.

At Malham Cove, I've worked hard to experience awe amongst the crowds gazing up at this celebrated natural wonder, but at the dump, awe and awfulness confront the visitor at every turn: the impact is physical, visceral and not a matter of willed defamiliarization. The landfill site must be one of the last refuges of a materialist sublime: I've felt insignificant and shuddered at the enormity of the mess. I've been lost for words in the face of this indecipherable intertextual object, this disjunctive poem of consumption. It's gripping and thrilling, a repetitive, epic, empty performance. The price it exacts for this catharsis is a sense of dislocation and emptiness. There's so little time, when faced by a skip of waste, to restore the stability of narrative to discarded objects. And because the objects discarded are so often generic and ephemeral, reading the history of use on their surfaces is nigh-on impossible. A plastic bottle of Persil, among so many other Persil bottles, becomes strange and empty thing in much the same way as a word repeated over and over will become a curious sound. This reappearance of the materiality of an object from the narratives of branding and marketing may be no bad thing. But the desperate anonymity of stuff shovelled into hoppers and transferred to containers has the equivalent effect on my sense of our culture. Beneath the noise of processing there's a profound silence, which is also the immeasurable hum of daily life: a silent cacophony. The paradox is painful if you're trying to make habitable connections between things. And there's no more chastening place to experience this feeling of disconnection for a writer than the paper-recycling area:

Newsprint falls, winged, saucering down
through gloomy bays to shredders.
Fragments lag girders and motors
with lapidary text, an alphabet
papier-mâché of tragedies, brands,

obituaries, love letters rare as diamonds
among the bills. Strip the cladding
and draw the I-beams gently out:
the shroud of oblivion hangs
in rippled light for the length
of this qwerty's shadowy breath,
listening, footsteps paused in the maze
of letters before delivering terminal
orders swifts slash through into dust.⁵

Near where I'm standing to survey the sheds and wider landscape, something sighs out in the long grass growing on the old landfill cell, as though a large aquatic mammal were surfacing. I wander off in the direction of the sound and find, not the whale of waste, but a concrete inspection chamber. The sigh is the sound the 'leachate' pump makes as it draws up liquid from dark wells sunk into the sump so that it might be processed and made safe rather than find its way out into the water table. This mound is covered in monitors. We might not get to see the extent of the mess we've made, but someone is keeping a close eye on it.

*

It's health and safety gone mad. I used to buy lawnmowers from the men and fix them up to sell – it did everyone some good.

We have all the usual 'resource recovery' facilities neatly arranged around parking bays. It's here that the town comes to lighten its load, downsize, upgrade, de-clutter and generally rid itself of impediments to the new make-over. It's the point of placental exchange between us

and the dump. Here, televisions are stacked on each other in a black-and-grey plastic henge. Computers, hairdryers, X-boxes, toasters, kettles and other weary electricals are tangled and wedged in metal cages. A man dumping a lawnmower tells me he's moving in with his girlfriend: she already has one, they don't need two.

Many feel guilty about dropping stuff into the skips and if asked are prepared to confess the reason they're doing it while bemoaning the lack of other options. A man on the gantry beside the waste-to-landfill skip gestures towards the white goods next to it:

I lived in Bulgaria – everything you see here they'd have repaired and reused. You could buy every part you needed for your Russian Aga. A couple of years ago I helped a man fix an old Russian fridge – it took two of us to lift it. It was six-foot tall and with a massive thing like a motorbike engine sticking out of the back.

Fridges of this description are in the Castle Museum in York. Another man, as he tosses bricks into the freshly emptied skip designated for building materials, tells me how much he enjoys throwing them in and making the scarred steel tank resound: 'it's like everything they ever told you not to do as a child'. Legitimate vandalism is one of the pleasures of the dump: it's ok to put a brick through a window if it's in a skip. People have a spring in their step as they walk back to their empty cars.

Shelled from their invisible positions in our ritual movements around our homes, gas hobs, electric grills and TV remotes become strange human artefacts worthy of wonder, especially as the rain begins to fall. Every child knows how fascinating rubbish is. They haven't learnt the good taste necessary to distinguish between treasure and trash, or lost the

ability to see the play-value of rubbish. I once saw an old TV beside a road in Connemara and on the screen of which someone had drawn a sheep in cherry-red lipstick. Here, cookers by the landfill skip stand in a row, variations on the theme of the domestic altar, things that bear the patina of our absent-minded gaze, as well as the grease of a final fry-up. Find an old Creda or Belling from your student days, your first home, your grandparent's kitchen, and a whole world may return with it:

By the skips, a row of cookers waits
for me to press and twist
as if I might turn up lark song
rising from the rubble,
find the missing spark, blue
boom of gas, cocoa-powder islands
marbling milk beside
a long ago window lost in rain.
The oven rends open
spitting emptiness, sides black-gilded
with flaking, baked-on fat,
smeared grey by final grease.
I touched and went forever,
now walk away through walls.⁶

A henge of televisions and PC monitors is weekly broken up and sent away to continue its life at what Val Plumwood refers to as 'shadow places' (2008). These are the

remote places where the true lifespan and consequence of our consumption is visible in the black toxic smoke of melting plastic and smelted metals. Plumwood asks the question I've tried to answer through my regular visits to the dump: what would it 'mean to acknowledge and honour all the places that support you?' (Plumwood 2008). The North Yorkshire Moors and Yorkshire Wolds depend for their timelessness, cleanliness, bio-diversity and conformity to touristic expectations on the existence of this dump. Our rich tradition of nature and landscape writing needs to include the dump as a significant part of its terrain if it is truly to show us a more complete picture of the human artefact that is our landscape. There should always be a little background noise troubling our communion with nature:

Slabs of glass and weary plastic piled head-high

show the same sun differently grey.

Rain glints on the circlet of an ancient aerial,

dirt haloing push-button and sensor.

It had to go, took up too much space.

The place was strange until I'd hovered through

the square of dust and hair it grew

during the seasons while I'd gazed elsewhere,

then moved a chair and plugged the new one in.

And while I gaze elsewhere, the boxes melt

and stain the blood of those who poke the fires

shadowing our bright and managed dream. ⁷

At the dump, the moment of consumption is clearly not timeless, no matter what the supermarket aisles and brightly lit retail sheds may try to show us with their magically replenishing walls of products. And with this sense of an ending comes a growing awareness of what a thing is, of why we've made it and how we've used it. This sensation intensifies as it teeters on the edge of the skip before falling into rot, recycling and silence.

The edge of the skip is a threshold, an entrance to the underworld, the skip itself the place where we wake our rubbish before it undertakes its final journey. One daily occurrence that never fails to upset Dan, an 'operative' at the recycling facility, is the dumping of family albums after a death: 'It's as if they're blipped out all of a sudden, as if they've never been'. For as long as someone can put a name to a face, the face retains its afterlife in memory, in a family narrative. Without a story, without relationship to other faces in an album, the subject falls into an abyssal silence from which there is no return. Dan witnesses daily the second and final death of the body. I witnessed someone pour out of a suitcase of pictures onto some old catering-sized tins of peaches already in the skip: all their desire to record significant moments standing together before a house, a caravan, a belvedere, was dislocated from their stories and then consigned to the earth forever. Dan used to go into the skips to recover these family histories like a latter-day Orpheus, in case the person dumping them had second thoughts, but now this is forbidden. And anyway, no one ever came back for them.

Talk to someone beside a skip and you'll discover just how filled things are with stories at the death. A late middle-aged man told me:

This Guinea pig cage linked me to another family and my own. My youngest was friends with a boy and their family broke up. So we said we'd take the guinea pigs. And they had babies. And when they died we got more and got the sex

wrong. We ended up with 17 of them – the price of friendship. I've kept the hutch all this time. But we're finally downsizing. It has to go.

Once a skip is full, it's hauled off to the weighbridge so that the amount of landfill tax to be paid can be assessed. It's also a kind of 'psychostasia', a weighing of the soul of a people living in a place, a material reckoning of our worth: will we survive as a species, or disappear into the final phase of another extinction boundary, the dump the equivalent of a vast dinosaur's footprint pressed into the strata or scattered in a thin layer by glaciation?

Another man asked me if I could point him in the direction of someone in charge. He wanted to give them a couple of fishing rods so they might sell them and make a bit of money on the side. Dan explained that they couldn't take gifts. Items of value were kept in a lock-up and collected by the waste-management company once a week. The man was disappointed. I asked him why he was getting rid of two perfectly good rods and he explained that he and his wife were moving back south now that the children had left home. He, too, was downsizing. As we chatted, he told me:

I was out fishing with this rod when my daughter was born. Off Gravesend.

Caught a cod with it that weighed exactly the same as my daughter. But you have to let go, make way for the new.

Make way for the new, make way for the void. People will wash, iron and fold clothes before putting them in the bank, 'even though no one will ever know it was them that done it', says Dan. Everything is placed in order at the brink of ultimate disorder. The shirts of the dead are folded neatly for their final journey. Beside the clothes bank, there's the lighting locker, a long square container filled end-on with fluorescent tubes, so that it resembles a

giant pack of pencils. When I first saw it I wanted to draw them out and smash them up in a big sword fight. And then I imagined crawling through the locker as if it were a grave passage, the skin on my hands and knees shredded with broken glass.

Beyond the skips, and out of bounds to the public, are sheds where the mechanical sorting of waste takes place. With the notable exception of the waste-transfer shed, there is little or no smell at the dump, except for an intense after-rain aroma when the dust suppression sprinklers kick in scattering seeds of mud across the yard until the surface darkens. And then there's the 'cullet pad'. Cullet is waste glass before recycling, and here it's banked up in a three-sided concrete bay. I've had the intense pleasure of witnessing a delivery of glass collected from bottle banks:

The lorry backs away from vacancy,
tailgate open, bright ram
tilting the container until first bottles
trip and tinkle, hollowly un-
bottling loose change over the bank
of jammed silence, a hillside of slurred
syllables giving way, lips, teeth
tongues, breath shelled, bitten
thirst shucked loose in pounding
beyond the imaginable into glittering
splinter showers on the other side
of brightened space, all bottling up
exploded, the silence vinegar-sharp. ⁸

Counterpointing this din are the acoustically ‘dead’ spaces formed by long corridors of waste paper and plastic. Men in fork-lifts whizz down them, lifting and replacing the bales. Entering these anechoic mazes you can barely register the body’s acoustic interaction with its surroundings: it’s a strangely disembodied experience, as if the physical body had been consumed by text. Whenever I visit the paper recycling area, I stop to read scraps of paper. I’ve photographed bales from all sides with the vague plan, at some future date, of transcribing all the visible words into a found poem. On my last visit I found a card-mounted photograph of an aeroplane engine and wing taken from a cabin window in the fuselage. They were silver in that futuristic 1960s style that still gleams with the promise of progress, and beyond them were timeless shapes of alto-cumulus cloud-streets. Behind the photo I found a Sunday supplement with a Saltire filling its front cover. The future, clouds and nationalism: metonymy drowns in this place of random finds and infinite combinations. This was just one moment in a maze of text that regenerates itself weekly while keeping its orderly maze-like shape in the yard; it slowly flows through itself like a standing wave of words and images, an unspeakable stream of cultural consciousness.

But there are some things that refuse to go quietly or gently into oblivion. VHS tape festoons forked shovels, hopper-lips and conveyor belts. The great body of the waste disposal process gets regularly tied-up by brown tape. All that electro-magnetic information, all the images and stories, have come to this: a haphazard web that chokes the flow of recyclables. Hands have to get involved to ease things back into motion. For there *are* hands in this place of great machines; not everything can be sorted by a magnet or the ‘eddy current’ that makes aluminium cans magically leap from the flow of waste. In a shed on the outskirts of Scarborough, there are people from across Europe and the world picking contaminants out of waste conveyed before them in a strange echo of an assembly line. What struck me was the dexterity and concentration with which their hands moved over the never-ending stream of

rubbish, disassembling our lives and rectifying our thoughtless mixing of non-recyclable with recyclable material.

*

We hide these sites away from ourselves at our cost. It's not simply that we need to face up to the politics of waste, of our exportation of the dark matter that counterbalances the visible universe of well-lit shopping, although that is essential too; no, there is a more self-interested psychological argument to be made as to the cost of hiding it away. Dumps and middens have always been psychically important to us. They are places of disturbance in our everyday reality; places of death and haunting; places of danger. The closest most of us get to the dump now is looking into a skip. I wrote the following poem making use of the structure of Ted Hughes poem 'Amulet' to bring out this psychic sense of disturbance:

Under a bedstead a filing cabinet,
under a filing cabinet a wheelbarrow,

over a wheelbarrow a tree in the garden,
under the tree, four crosscut screws

secure the galvanised bucket,
under the bucket a solid red wheel,

around the wheel a perished tire,
down the steps, bouncing, it booms,

inside the bucket water collects,
over the water, leaf-light and jet-sunder,

suspended in water a woodlouse trembles,
above the woodlouse, the child breathes.⁹

After careful negotiation, I was granted access to the mega-dump at Rufforth. My guide for the visit, Emily from North Yorkshire County Council's 'Waste and Countryside Services', was about to go off on maternity leave and so we were driven by the landfill site's manager to the active cell. On our way up we passed a vast hole in the ground with shiny-smooth clay sides and a flat base. It might have been preparation for three or more high-quality football pitches, or a Wimbledon of lawn-tennis courts, such was the precision involved in its making. This was the new cell. Towering over it, the current cell, hemmed in on one side by high fencing to snare fly-away plastic bags, brewed up a storm of birds. There were so many circling above it that it felt like we were ascending towards a feeding frenzy over a shoal of sardines. I was to be allowed out onto the active cell for ten minutes, but Emily was forbidden to leave the Land Rover and set foot on this pregnant mound.

The surface was springy and soggy, like a peat bog. Despite all the opportunities available to recycle plastic bottles, they stuck up everywhere like fish heads from a revolting pie of nappies, plastic bags, carcasses and immense amounts of food packaging. It felt as strange as I imagine it must feel to walk around the edge of a volcano. Here was a profoundly alien place wholly made by us. It was thrilling and sickening to see the refuse trucks shunt out waste while the enormous bulldozers with spiked wheels, known in the waste industry as 'spikey bikes', spread it out and pinned it down. 'I want it to be a second hand baby, if you see what I mean', Emily had said on the way up. I did see what she meant. Not just in the sense that it would have second-hand things, but that so much of what is most precious – our

language, culture, family sayings, ideas, heirlooms – is second hand, and we make these hand-me-downs new for ourselves by wondering over them and by recombination. We carry them with us through our lives unlike so much other stuff that enters our wheelie bins and overflows weekly into refuse trucks, a torrent that ends up in the landfill cell's tarn of waste.

No one wants to live by a tip, but our waste is now so remote that our excesses are invisible, and as a consequence we're able to continue, as my local designer-outlet puts it, 'guilt-free' shopping. Perhaps the hoarder, his house choked with carrier bags, two-legged chairs and jam-jar lids, bears true witness to the impact of contemporary patterns of consumption. The hoarder wakes our rubbish for us, unwilling to overlook the preciousness of our discarded souvenirs and knick-knacks. Perhaps out of a fear of the weight of our own past consumption we make a TV spectacle of them: we cannot bear the shame of looking at desire past its sell-by date loaded onto their beds and crammed into their baths.

*

I leave the 'crown' of the closed cell and stumble through lush grass towards a ditch at the edge of a spur of old landfill. It's filled with plastic bags forming sweaty domes of pond gas. Islands of bright green scum move over the black, nitrogen-rich water, snagging and then breaking apart in the breeze. I could spend forever describing this place, but the loneliness of the process would be overwhelming. Nothing haunts here. Herring gulls rise and eddy down to new loads of refuse entering the transfer shed. I sit down by the ditch to take in the view. At Star Carr there are flint middens left over from the Mesolithic knapping process. Through the painstaking reconstruction of fragments chipped from single stones archaeologists have been able to plot the movement of flint artefacts around the site, either from one flint-worker to the next, or as the maker has carried it to a new place for working (Milner et al. 2013: 21–23):

Each bone-blow alters
flights of fragments

the edge of the arrowhead
appears foreknown

the shape of its maker
in a shadow of stones.¹⁰

A fly lands on my yellow trouser leg. It seems puzzled that such a yellow thing could be so worthless. Watching it pivot and pause, I feel, just for an instant, the dump open into the living spaces that have shed their contents into it. I'm falling into its heart for a microsecond and then it closes back into solid ground. A blue-bottle whips away into the late summer sunshine. I keep thinking I see someone approach from the corner of my eye but it's only a gas pump protruding to waist height from the ground, or a plastic bag trembling in a scrubby bush. On the other side of the ditch, in a heap of rubble, there's an old ceramic fire-place surround, an empty frame for a hearth: here's 'where all the ladders start,/ In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart ' (Yeats 1962: 392).

References

Milner, N., Taylor, B., Conneller, C. and Schadla-Hall, T. (2013), *Starr Carr: Life in Britain after the Ice Age*, York: Council for British Archaeology.

Plumwood, V. (2008), 'Shadow places and the politics of dwelling', *Australian Humanities Review*, 44, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/plumwood.html>. Accessed 17 September 2015.

Stevens, W. (1984), *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, London: Faber and Faber.

Yeats, W. B. (1963), *The Collected Poems*, London: Macmillan & Co.

Contributor details

John Wedgwood Clarke is Lecturer in Creative Writing and Literature.

Contact:

Department of English, University of Hull, 19 Westbourne Park, Scarborough, North Yorkshire, YO12 4AS, UK.

E-mail: John.clarke@hull.ac.uk

Notes

¹ All poem titles will be given as endnotes so that the reading experience of the article will not be interrupted. This poem is 'Dump Song'.

² 'Transfer Shed'.

³ 'Biosphere'.

⁴ 'Waste of Space'.

⁵ 'A Shadow Shed'.

⁶ 'Altar'.

⁷ 'Television Henge'.

⁸ 'Cullet'.

⁹ 'Once it's in the skip they think it disappears'.

¹⁰ 'Debitage'.