

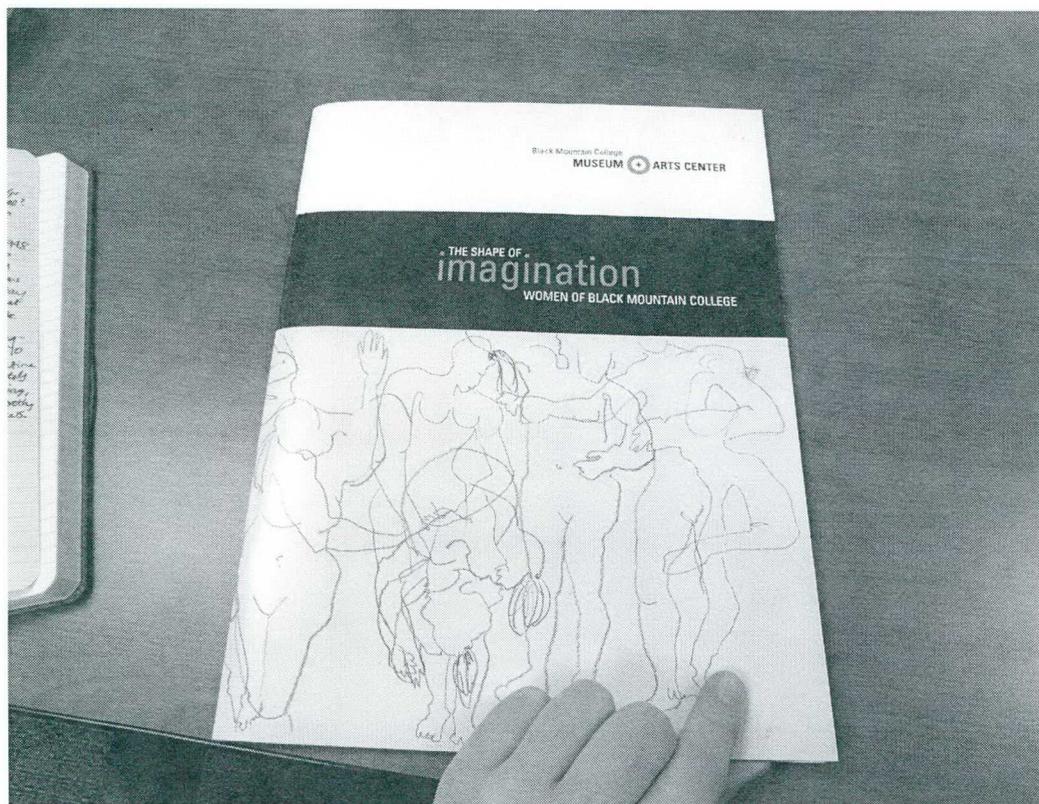
“A New Kind of Stillness”: Hilda Morley’s Poetry

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You’ve probably never heard of my favorite Black Mountain poet. I don’t blame you—most people don’t know enough about Hilda Morley. Her 1998 obituary in the *New York Times* describes Morley as “an American poet who gained wider recognition late in life, decades after she first published her imagist free verse” (Saxon). Hilda Morley’s recognition as a talented, insightful poet has been limited and did, in fact, arrive decades after her early poetry publications, such as her 1956 appearance in the *Black Mountain Review*. Even before her death, the few critics that examined her work commented that her poetry went largely unnoticed. In his 1993 essay exploring her poetry, Brian Corniff writes that Morley’s writing was most productive not during her tenure at Black Mountain College from 1952 to 1956, but in the years following the death of her husband Stefan Wolpe (who also taught at Black Mountain College) in 1972. Corniff laments the lack of public acclaim for Morley’s work, writing that “until 1983 her poetry was never noticed by the critical mainstream” (121). In 1983, however, Morley received the Capricorn Award for her collected poems, *To Hold in My Hand*, an award given to “a poet over forty in belated recognition of excellence” (Mullenneaux 88). Although her poetry has arguably still not received enough critical attention, Morley’s work has much to offer and admire. Morley’s poetry—with its imaginative use of shape, form, and imagery—offers readers “a new kind of stillness,” one that examines intimate interactions between human speakers and the natural world (*The Turning*).

I first read Hilda Morley’s poetry at the Western Regional Archives (WRA) in Asheville, North Carolina, where I was conducting research for an independent study designed with my writing teacher and mentor at Wofford College, acclaimed poet, nature writer, and novelist, John Lane. Lane and I called the course “Black Mountain Assemblage” and developed it to fill a four-week January term, with one week in the archives, two weeks writing poetry from archival research, and one week editing and polishing—“assembling” a portfolio of creative

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writing inspired by the vast Black Mountain College collections at WRA. During the archives week of the course, on the afternoon of 6 January 2014, I got my hands on a beautiful publication from the Black Mountain Museum + Arts Center titled *The Shape of Imagination: Women of Black Mountain College*. I still recall how much I enjoyed perusing this catalog—it was such a stark contrast to what I had seen on earlier archival trips researching Black Mountain College. In fact, I spent the entire morning of that very day poring through copies of the *Black Mountain Review*, Black Mountain College’s literary magazine published from 1954 to 1957. I have always enjoyed visiting and revisiting the *Review* as a reader and researcher, but on that particular day, I remember feeling disappointed that the publication is often dominated by the “big,” male names that draw most of the attention to Black Mountain College—Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and others. Therefore, *The Shape of Imagination*, focused solely on the women of Black Mountain, was a welcome surprise and an uplifting shift in energy and voice. Inside, I found Hilda Morley’s poem “After the Moon-Walk.”

Moon, moon
 I want to talk to you
 I want to dance a dance around you
 I want to stand in your light
 There’s noone here but me this night
 Noone is speaking

Noone's listening
 No need for you to stay in hiding tonight.
 Everyone is asleep.
 Moon Come out & show yourself
 You won't lose your secret
 Moon Moon
 I don't believe you've changed
 You're still the watched for
 & the watching
 female,
 my bone's tissue
 The light you make is webbed under my nails,
 breathing behind my skin. (*The Turning* 81)

"After the Moon-Walk" is one of those poems you come across and wish it was your own work. Something about the speaker's command over the moon, demanding it to "Come out & show" itself was appealing to me because it carried such strength. Yet there is also something so peaceful and intimate here between the female speaker and the moon, as the speaker promises the moon, "You won't lose your secret," and identifies the connection between the moon and the physical body of the female speaker: "my bone's tissue / The light you make is webbed under my nails, / breathing behind my skin." I had longed for words to describe how I understood myself in relation to the natural world, and Hilda Morley provided them for me.

I was drawn to "After the Moon-Walk" not only because of its diction, but also because of its form. I remember turning the volume this way and that, watching the shape of the lines mesh into other visible shapes. Turn left for mountains, turn right for beams of light (perhaps moonlight) across a window pane. I still love the way this poem moves about the page, the rhythm of the words in its short lines, and its lines with stops and starts—the cadence of Morley's poetry reminds me of a dance.

Upon finding "After the Moon-Walk," I wrote to my teacher, John Lane, saying "I found a great BMC poet, and she is a she!" Lane and I both ordered copies of Morley's collection *To Hold in My Hand: Collected Poems* and met up a few days later to find that we had dog-eared many of the same poems. In this collection, I found a strong female voice, one so clearly interested in nature, classical mythology, and art history, all topics of interest for myself as well. Morley's poem "Provence" from *To Hold in My Hand* is particularly moving for those interested in Black Mountain College. She describes a Black Mountain of 1955 where "the sun, violet, / gives us that light Cézanne was / thankful for continually" (28). She writes of Black Mountain that "Over again / the earth is beautiful, again and again / and no light dissuades it and everywhere it is / beautiful again and beloved" (28). Each time I visit Black Mountain, and my nearby hometown of Enka-Candler, North Carolina, I am reminded of these words, because if one thing is clear in western North Carolina, it is that "the earth is beautiful."

In the years since the “Black Mountain Assemblage” course and my days at Wofford College, I have continued studying Hilda Morley’s poetry, reading more of her collections and watching scholars shift the framing of her work. Lisa Mullenneaux has emphasized the influence of music on Morley’s poetry, and brings important attention to Morley’s unpublished memoir. In Mark Byers’ essay, “Hilda Morley and the Painters,” he explores the influence of the Abstract Expressionists on Morley’s poetry and thinking. Matilde Martín González describes Morley’s poetry as “an unending revision of the self which dismisses closure altogether,” remarking that Morley conveys “an uncertain and unstable sense of identity,” a depiction of the self that is often examined in contemporary feminist theory (138, 133). Perhaps the most remarkable reexamination surrounding Morley’s poetry and her time at Black Mountain College is the acknowledgement of the biased gender dynamics that prevailed at BMC in the 1950s. In the decades after Black Mountain College, Morley became an astute critic of the gendered differences at the College, highlighting previously unexplored lived experiences. In a review of Martin Duberman’s *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* published in the mid-1970s, Morley writes that “The assumptions concerning women were that they were meant for sex, cooking (and baking organic bread), caring for the kids, and psychological support of their men” (qtd. in Mullenneaux 83-84). Morley even quotes Charles Olson as saying, during her time at BMC, “it’s nice, isn’t it, that we have the women we care about” doing chores “for us—and it’s always been natural for them, too” (qtd. in Mullenneaux 84). I mention these comments not to condemn Olson, but rather to illustrate Morley’s own talents. Her willingness to document the biased conditions at BMC illustrates her own keen skills for insight, detail, and reflection—all habits that serve her poetry well.

As I have continued to study and read all I can about Hilda Morley, my own views on her work have also changed. While I initially admired Morley’s work for its unique shape and flow, after reading a larger body of her poems, I now recognize her as a nature poet, one who values the lessons derived from the natural world and who uses those lessons to alleviate suffering and improve the human condition. Morley’s interest in the natural world and nature poetry first became evident to me as I recognized a recurrent motif in her work—birds. In her 1988 collection, *Cloudless at First*, Morley’s poem “The Hawk” features a hawk and a “Cactus-wren / in the desert” (170). The speaker writes that here among “blossoming plants” and “here where everything / thrives with no sign of it,” where there is no trace of “man’s soiling or / man’s rubbish.... the hawk sees us / with indifference / flying past us / for which we can be grateful” (170). In Morley’s poetry, this indifference in nature is not something to be lamented, but instead something to rejoice in, expressing gratitude for remaining wild places and wild beings.

Hilda Morley’s interest in birds, and what lessons they offer, places her in conversation with another nature-loving female writer, Terry Tempest Williams, whose collection *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on*

Voice, is never far from my hand or my heart. Upon the death of her mother, Williams inherited three bookshelves full of journals, bound volumes her mother made her promise not to open as long as her mother was alive. After her mother's passing, Williams did open the journals, only to find that they were all blank. In the absence of her mother's voice, Williams fills in the silence with her own ruminations on what it means to be a woman, to value nature, and to care for wild places. In *When Women Were Birds*, Williams documents her own appreciation for feathered creatures, alluding to the book's title, as she writes: "My voice rises again and again in beauty within the wonder and awe of the spectacle: an exaltation of larks; the murmuration of starlings; a murder of crows; a parliament of owls" (212). Throughout her published work, Hilda Morley exhibits a similar enchantment with the language of birds.

For both Morley and Williams, birds offer insight into what it means to be a woman. In *When Women Were Birds*, Terry Tempest Williams describes Nushu, an ancient Chinese script from 1600 to 1100 B.C., used by "a women's society that worshipped birds" (170). Not only do the characters of the script itself mirror the imprints of crow's feet left behind in the earth, in this ancient language, the "symbol for a bird's head is the character for a woman's head" (170). In Nushu, Williams writes that "Women and birds were interchangeable, shape-shifting inscriptions carved on bones and the carapaces of turtles, an archetype for the Earth Goddess, who presides over fertility, continuity, and wisdom" (170). Nushu arose from "the language of illiterate women ... who were not allowed to go to school as late as the twentieth century." The language was passed "from mother to daughter and the closest of friends" and "was a way women could speak to themselves outside of the language of men" (171). Williams poignantly writes that Nushu serves a universal female purpose in that "Women have always written in code as a way to protect themselves" (172).

In her collection *The Turning*, Morley offers readers the poem "A Presence, Wild," which vividly describes "that first red-orange / tanager" that "sped away as if pursued by / enemies there in the Smokies, North Carolina" (8). This tanager, fleeing persecution, reminds me of the women using Nushu that Williams writes about, seeking to communicate amongst themselves but wary of the possible consequences. In this poem, the speaker remembers this earlier tanager as she discovers one "close, unfrightened" making the speaker feel like "I am / delivered into a presence, wild, removed from / my living." The speaker is mesmerized that this tanager and his nearby mate offer "no acknowledgement, no sign ... only / acceptance that it is I who am here, / known ... enough to be forgotten" (8-9). "Known enough to be forgotten" could easily apply to the women who spoke Nushu as well. Although we know a bit about their language and have remnants of their writing, many of these women are lost to history. Morley offers such peace about a fleeting, perhaps persecuted existence. The tanager's acknowledgement "that it is I who am here" reminds me of the bond between the women who wrote in Nushu, women looking for kinship amongst other

women in their families and communities. Morley shows us that even if it is fleeting, there is beauty in connecting and in being acknowledged.

For Williams, birds also remind us of the beauty and joy in life. Williams writes in *When Women Were Birds*, “Once upon a time, when women were birds, there was the simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated” (225). Similarly, Hilda Morley illustrates in her poetry how a brief interaction with a cardinal can offer a remedy for the heartache of isolation. In Morley’s poem “The Cardinal,” the speaker’s loneliness is eased upon encountering “the amazing cardinal / outside this house two weeks ago—an oval leaf composed of fire-colors” (166). The speaker who once felt alone and disconnected from the world suddenly sensed “perhaps a magnetic thread” between herself and the cardinal, noticing that as the bird came “closer and closer!” the bird “appearing each time, weightier, denser in substance, his texture protruding each time more, more filled with taste and odor, more convex” (167). Until “I was / imbued with him, he with me, / I could almost / nuzzle him: the glass between us / nothing” (167). Quite literally for the speaker in “The Cardinal,” the bird brought joy to those who needed it.

I admire Morley’s poetry not only for its attention to birds and the perspective they offer us as humans, but also for its beautiful, simple interactions between the speaker and the surrounding landscape. Hilda Morley’s poetry embraces my favorite emerging idea in modern environmental thought—“Everyday Nature.” In his essay “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” Scott Hess makes the case for a revised understanding of the environment—one in which humans do not disconnect themselves from the natural world around them, but instead incorporate a respect and appreciation for the natural world into their daily lives and identities. Hess writes that “Nature in environmental writing and culture today often appears as a form of refuge ... the place where we go, both imaginatively and physically, to escape from this modernity” (85). For Hess, viewing nature as a place of retreat from the stresses of modern life is inherently problematic: “This tendency to locate ‘nature’ apart from ourselves skews our environmental awareness and priorities in ways that blind us to the devastating ecological impact of our own daily lives and incapacitate us from pursuing realistic alternatives” (85). The idea of an “everyday nature” offers a way to restructure our lives “not just individually, but socially, politically, and economically—in order to change the current patterns of environmental destruction” (85). Although Hilda Morley was writing poetry more than half a century before the manifestation of global climate change and decades before the publication of Hess’s essay, her poetry represents what Hess calls “a literature of everyday nature,” one that redefines “‘nature’ to include the everyday and, in so doing, reshaping also the senses of self, work, and society with which our ideas of nature are inextricably and interdependently defined” (85). Hilda Morley’s poetry offers an “everyday nature” in that it offers for readers “a literature of home, work, and community” (Hess 90).

In her poem “Where the Light is Equal,” from *The Turning*, Hilda Morley writes of “that Mediterranean edge of / a coastline where the weight of water/ equals the weight of land. / Where sea & earth feed off / each other. / Bending over the jetty / stretched into the water, / the sea reflects us, / the earth shadows / our movements, / all objects are / alive in distinctness, unfolding/ themselves to the uttermost, / as we open / to them in fullness, / as we are” (174). This poem invokes Scott Hess’s imagined “everyday nature” in that Morley is connecting “all objects,” including both the human speaker and the non-human sea below her, illustrating that each and every part are connected.

Morley’s poem “Young Deer,” from *To Hold in My Hand*, also embraces an “everyday nature.” The speaker describes how the young deer looks at her from the thicket and “How that look pierces us, innocent / (in a sense) / but not ignorant of hurt, of all / baleful cruelties in the world outside” (88). Morley describes “what the deer tells us / is irreparable, never / to be restored, so that his fearfulness/ is more than fear, / is a knowledge / like that which children seem to show, weeping / for the unredeemable, shocking us / into guilt” (88). This deer “sees enough not to / forgive, bounding away, / neck stretched, hind legs bent for / lightness” (89). In this poem, a simple routine interaction with a deer inspires the speaker to reflect on the ways in which humans harm the natural world. This young deer, who “sees enough not to / forgive,” causes the speaker to reflect upon her human identity, a process that, as Hess describes in “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” can “change the current patterns of environmental destruction” (85).

In “The Brisons: A Group of Rocks Off Cornwall,” from *The Turning*, Hilda Morley writes: “I am reminded, / you remind me—rocks, Brisons, in / your Bulk, the outline of / your weight, / of what is / unyielding, what may be / obscured, blotted out, but / never dissolved, / what is there / to be dealt with, / what / sits, presses, bears down / on the chestbone to be uttered, / given / forth, despite and / because of / the weightiness, / what must be given / sound, exchange, gesture” (54-55). This poem illustrates both an “everyday nature” and the connections between the outer landscape surrounding the speaker and the inner landscape of the heart. Just as the rocks remind the speaker of the weightiness and standing presence of stone, the speaker remembers her own sorrow, things left unsaid and the burden of grief. Acclaimed nature writer Barry Lopez discusses this inner and outer landscape and the relationship between the two in his essay “Landscape and Narrative.” Lopez illustrates how the inner workings of the human soul are shaped by the outer workings of the natural world, and coming to understand one helps to understand the other. Lopez describes two landscapes—“one outside the self, the other within” (64). While “the external landscape is the one we see,” the interior landscape is “a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape” (64, 65). For Lopez, the relationship between the two is intricately intertwined: “The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape, the shape of the individual mind is as affected by land as it is genes” (65). In “The Brisons,” the interior landscape of Morley’s speaker is clearly

Morley's reference to Matisse illustrates the influence of painting on her poetry. For me, this "new kind of stillness" came to embody a different meaning, the peace and confidence that comes from reading Morley's poetry. I found her as I was beginning to write poems of my own and quickly found myself emulating her form on the page. I wrote several poems inspired by Morley's style as part of the "Black Mountain Assemblage" course. One of these, "At Black Mountain: *For Max Dehn, Mathematician, 1878-1952*," allowed me to reimagine the life and death of BMC faculty member Max Dehn, a math instructor who was beloved by students for frequently leading them on hikes and outdoor excursions. Dehn died on campus in 1952. According to one legend, he was overseeing the destruction of a field of dogwoods he had planted (creating the crop in the hopes of making extra money for the College) when he was killed by a massive heart attack, or as some have speculated, a massive heartbreak brought about as he watched the destruction of his beloved dogwoods (Sher 54-55). Dehn is buried on the Lake Eden campus, and after visiting his grave in January 2014, I wrote "At Black Mountain," the first poem I ever wrote, which won first place in poetry in the Helmus Contest at Wofford College. I owe much of that success to Hilda Morley because her poetry offers "a new kind of stillness." For some, that stillness may come in the form of an escape from our highly connected and busy lives. For me, that stillness came in the form of the peace and confidence needed to craft poems of my own. While she is often not recognized as a "Black Mountain" poet, incorporating Hilda Morley into the canon would enrich this acclaimed club. I hope this essay will inspire more poets, writers, and scholars to examine Morley's work and explore what her "stillness" has to offer all of us.

At Black Mountain

For Max Dehn, Mathematician, 1878-1952

Standing by your grave,
 beside January's ephemeral light,
 I thought of you.

Roaming these hills,

Disciples following
 like imprinted hatchlings.

As the congregation meanders

youthrill them: mathematic
 calculated
 sermons,

echo through the mixed mesophytic cathedral.

Charisma molds converts
 like supple clay.

No longer clapping mosquitoes,
 or choking chiggers.

Pests become a worthy penance.

A granitic ridge shadows Swannanoa,
 tempting Urbanites
 dangling phalanges
 over the precipice.
 Outspread wings, soldered to the crucifix,
 Dive from the lithosphere.
 A tragic parabola guides streamlined shapes
 to a final perch upon the pines.

 Your weathered heart's reality,
 will not mar your rhododendron rest.

Even without a tale of Ascension
 Pilgrims perpetually migrate
 worshipping at your stone.

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