A letter to the land.

I have written more letters to the absent and the dead than I have sent to living people.

Like these letters to no one, law and land and love share the character of ghostliness. They exceed us and slip from the grasp of words and memory. Read separately, law, land, and love can contain their own distinct sense of unity. But taken together, law and land and love become mirrors of loss for each other – figures of haunting that defy the logic of how we have conventionally told these stories.

Between and above and beneath what we see as the land, there is also air, water and earth, all the way down to the core. These have, more or less, been non-domains in history – spaces outside the reach of the law and spaces outside the concept of property. This tells us that law takes place on the surface and that property is a collection of surface relations concerning the division of two-dimensional spaces upon maps. The land that we see in law is reduced to this surface tension whilst the currents of atmosphere, ocean and molten rock circulate wildly around it and whilst many lives live and die within the land without acknowledgement. There is always tension in property because law is always an argument.

Our concept of land is thin.

This thinness leads to a tendency to see the land and our relation to it as primarily being about ownership, division and use. The law has no room for beauty when its face is turned towards rights to exploitation. The true measure of the land is always absent in law and the best approximation is the map.

A map is already form of haunting – neat lines dropped from nowhere to mark out jagged space; a ghost of an idea of land laid over the land itself. The land in its embodied sense haunts law with its reality and law haunts the land with its mostly diminished imagination.

Perhaps that is why billionaires will dream of Mars, as though the act of living elsewhere, were as simple as having the thought. There are preludes. Are they inspired by dust storms? Melbourne wakes up covered in red dust – the land itself obliterating those lines on maps that have pretended to contain it. For some, this is a call to action. For others, a call to escape what is coming. Both utopias and dystopias are stories about how we might respond otherwise.

These days I am often seized by the sensation of the future pulling away from me, like threads unspooling from my fingers into a mass of lines tugging at their own weight.

I am haunted by ghosts, some of which are dead and some of which are yet to even live. The law teaches us to see only one ghost, one possibility, and this is taken as reality. But there are many others at the periphery – the spectres of what could have been and what could be. We see this most easily when thinking of the past, but the future is even more crowded with ghosts. The unborn can be more persistent than the dead.

Plato wrote amongst the ghosts. I think of Plato conjuring his dead master’s presence and voice and making the past through the act of writing. How curious to have a symposium – the forum for reason and reasonable things – on Love, and how curious to put these thoughts on love into the mouths of ghosts and set it several decades in the past, bookended at beginning and end by the spectre of Socrates. Socrates, who is long dead. Socrates who haunts and is longed for and gone.
In my own grief for my grandmother, what I missed most was her particular way of looking at things. I mourned for the fact that every experience after would be bereft of her perception of them and I would never know what she thought, never converse with her again and create together that unique pulse that is the result of the meeting and parting of minds.

Plato writes the past but what he makes is the present and where he reaches is the future, so that we read the Symposium and think about how that might change things now. Every act of mourning is an act of time travelling. Words are slippery and indelible fellows and the mark they leave can crook sharply away from the author’s intention. That is their mystical character – they call forth things in excess of intentions.

Law too, as a system built entirely on words, can have these moments of diversion and breaking, where the paths of potential futures become possible futures. Everything is possible until it chooses one.

If we can love ghosts so much that our attempt to bring them close to us again becomes an impossible traversal across time, what happens when we use the register of haunting and the force of love to rethink our relationship with the land? Could we love the spectral visions of the potential futures of the land, of lands, so much that we want to keep these futures living instead of abandoning them for something out in space – another blank slate to exploit? Another myth of empty lands.

A dust storm’s sense of the uncanny is in temporarily transporting us to a time and place where all alternatives are buried and human bodies, culture and architecture have become mere cups for dust. We could instead imagine law escaping the flattening logic of maps, recovering the spherical complexity of the land and repopulating it with the agencies of the many lives within it.

I am most haunted by one future, which contains multitudes itself. To the child I am yet to have, I long for you. The only justice I can offer you is to hope that we can keep this world haunted by the possibilities of its beauty and to suspend the arrival of permanent closure – before the futures in which you exist are gone.

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