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### Poets *Rooted* In Nature: An Ecopoetry Anthology

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#### Recommended Citation

Ian Chen , '24; Winston Zhang , '27; Riya Rao , '26; and Peter Schmidt. (2024). "Poets *Rooted* In Nature: An Ecopoetry Anthology".

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# Poets *Rooted* in Nature: An Ecopoetry Anthology

by Ian Chen, Winston Zhang, Riya Rao

a final project created for “Ecopoetry and the Climate Crisis”

ENGL 71E/ENVS 041

Swarthmore College May 2024

with support from Prof. Peter Schmidt

Department of English Literature

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## Introduction

Anyone who has studied poetry has experienced its elusiveness as well as the profound impact that it brings upon its readers. Although poetry comes in many shapes and forms, the universal theme among impactful poetry is its ability to both evoke powerful emotions and inspire readers to action. In the somewhat bleak time of the present, individuals can easily feel insignificant among the masses; however, poetry can inspire wonder and break readers away from the screens and fickle distractions ever present in the modern world. In this anthology, we focus on the multifaceted genre of eco-poetry, a genre of poetry that includes poems with an emphasis on the environment, empathy towards all living creatures, and providing a voice to nature and its natural processes. This broad definition encompasses many poems that delve into themes ranging from the appreciation of nature and ecological awareness to sustainability and the current Anthropocene crisis. In this anthology, we will explore the extensive nature of eco-poetry through carefully curated selections. In this manner, we seek to showcase the breadth and depth of this genre and highlight the myriad of ways in which poets engage with ecological themes. We hope that in following this anthology, you as a reader will come to understand the hopeful and vast genre of eco-poetry and leave with a freshly-evoked passion and connection to our ecological environment.

## “Dear Death” - David Hernández

“Dear Death” is a poem written by David Hernández and published by the University of Pittsburgh Press as a part of the Pitt Poetry Series in 2016: <https://upittpress.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/9780822964070exr.pdf>.

### Synopsis:

This poem is one of many in Hernández’s collection of poems entitled *Dear, Sincerely*; a collection of poems that the University of Pittsburgh Press writes in their publication description: “explores the Self, the collective We, the cosmos, and the murky division that separates one from the other”. Apart from *Dear, Sincerely*, Hernández has also published several books of poetry and two fiction novels, many of which have received high praise from critics and many awards. Most recently, Hernández published a book of poems entitled *Hello I Must Be Going* which was a finalist for both the 2023 NBCC Award for Poetry and the 2022 California Book Award for Poetry (CSULB Article). Hernández earned an MFA in creative writing from UC Irvine before eventually teaching creative writing at California State University, Long Beach from 2015 to the present.

This specific poem was dedicated to Hernández’s mother and reflects the sadness of her passing. In this poem, Hernández writes as if he is delivering a monologue to death itself, or more specifically the Grim Reaper. From the beginning, although not immediately apparent to the reader, the poem immediately develops a sardonic tone. Here, Hernández comments on several characterizations of the Grim Reaper, almost complimenting the Grim Reaper for its appearance via its traditional characterization as a robed, faceless figure holding a curved scythe. However, the true purpose of the poem quickly emerges, and it soon becomes evident that this introduction is sarcastic when Hernández writes, “Snath sounds like an infectious disease \ I might’ve caught if my mother wasn’t there \ to steer me from the gutter.” From this sentence, the focus of the poem instantly shifts from complimenting the Grim Reaper to Hernández’s mother. From this point on, Hernández reverses the narrative, in place of his previous compliments, he criticizes the Grim Reaper and floods him with questions before ending his onslaught by stating, “I have 77 more questions \ for you, give or take, you’re often \ in my thoughts.” Then, in the penultimate section of this poem, Hernández creates a beautiful yet heart-wrenching visualization of his thoughts and feelings during his mother’s passing, a feeling that he often returns to during many mundane everyday tasks.

It works this way: I’m running the knife  
across the cutting board, the cilantro  
breaks into confetti, I remember my mother  
scattering the herb over a Chilean dish, then  
her voice on Monday, “numbness in my leg,”  
“congestive heart failure,” and it fails,

my mind fast-forwards to when it fails,  
I can't help it, you grip her IV'd hand, pull her  
over, and it is done, her silence begins  
blowing through in waves, icing the room—  
the thought seized me so completely, the knife  
hovered still above the wooden board.

Hernández's use of descriptive language and quotes in this section is incredibly effective at creating a vivid image of the situation in the reader's mind. Instantly, the reader is able to understand the true intent of the poem and the use of vivid imagery pulls the reader in even more. Finally, Hernández ends the poem with yet another tone shift, this time returning to the original sardonic tone as he once again compliments the Grim Reaper for his cloak - a reference back to his previous mock praise. In this manner, Hernández brings all the sarcasm embedded within the poem together for a final climax as he references his fear and wonder in relation to all the beings captured on the inside of death's cloak.

The connection between this poem and eco-poetry is not immediately apparent; however certain aspects of this poem allow it to fit in among many other eco-poems. First and foremost, this poem references life and death, an inevitable cycle in nature. Throughout our society, it is a common belief that you must avoid death by any means possible, and in this sense, the Grim Reaper becomes a boogeyman who ruins hopes and dreams. However, only through coming to terms with the reality of the cycle of life and death can one truly live to the fullest. Throughout this poem, despite Hernández's annoyance and indignation towards the Grim Reaper, he begins and ends the poem by applauding and complimenting death, even as he struggles to come to terms with the unfairness of his mother's passing. In this manner, Hernández uses poetry as a method of coming to terms with his mother's death and working through his displeasure, while also acknowledging this natural course of life.

### Study Questions:

1. What were some of the places that Hernández mentioned when criticizing death? What do they reference?

*Comments for teachers:* Midway through the poem Hernández questions, "How many times \ do mosquitoes do your dirty work anyway? \ Versus fleas? Versus gunpowder? \ How bone-tired were you in Tohoku? \ The previous year in Haiti?" In this section, Hernández makes reference to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami as well as the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Both of these events were large-scale natural disasters with unbelievably high death tolls, and in this section, he essentially calls death lazy in these instances. Something interesting about this section is that by mentioning how natural disasters mean the Grim Reaper doesn't have to work very hard, Hernández implies that Death may enjoy natural disasters — a disturbing idea that you may want to raise with students?

2. What was interesting about the form of the poem?

*Comments and questions teachers might ask students:* Doesn't the poem feel as though it is all one giant thought (How does Hernández capture consciousness in motion in the poem)? How does Hernández's use of enjambement (line breaks in the middle of sentences) as well as commas and long sentences help to create this effect? Importantly, how does the form of this poem relate to the other insights in the poem? Explain why the abrupt tone shifts present throughout the poem make sense.

3. What does the ending of this poem mean when it talks about the whole world lined on the inside of the Grim Reaper's cloak?

*Comments:* When looking into this topic, it is important to note that this is not included in a traditional representation of the Grim Reaper, whose cloak just tends to be solid black. Why do you think that Hernández may have chosen to portray the Grim Reaper this way?

One reasonable explanation for this big reveal of an ending could be a connection to Mexican culture wherein luchadores (Mexican wrestlers) wear embroidered masks and regalia with special meanings behind them. This comparison of the Grim Reaper to beloved luchadores almost portrays death as a superhero, heavily contradicting some of Hernández's earlier criticisms in the middle of the poem. In this sense, the final big reveal may indicate that while Hernández may loathe death for taking his mother, he understands that death comes to everybody and is both extraordinary and mysterious.

**Citations:**

Chang, Richard. "Beach professor's poetry collection earns national recognition | California State University Long Beach." *Cal State Long Beach*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.csulb.edu/news/article/beach-professors-poetry-collection-earns-national-recognition>. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Hernández, David. "David Hernandez." *David Hernandez*, <http://www.davidahernandez.com/bio.htm>. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Hernandez, David. *Dear, Sincerely*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016, <https://upittpress.org/books/9780822964070/>. Accessed 15 May 2024.



## “The good, the bad, the inconvenient” - Marge Piercy

“The good, the bad, the inconvenient” is a poem written by Marge Piercy from her book of poems *The Crooked Inheritance* published by Knopf in 2006. It may also be read online on this Public Radio site:

<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2012%252F03%252F31.html>.

### Synopsis:

*Crooked Inheritance* is one among many of Piercy’s almost 20 published poetry works, most recently including *On The Way Out, Turn Off The Light* published in 2020 and *Made In Detroit* published in 2015. Piercy’s work is also not confined to simply poetry. She has also published around 20 fiction novels and several non-fiction books as well, solidifying her as a very accomplished and well-published author (Piercy’s Website). As for her background and training, Piercy received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Michigan as well as a master’s from Northwestern University. Importantly, Piercy was an organizer for political movements in the 1960s and has also had sustained involvement with feminism, Marxism and environmental thought - much of which is echoed in her commentary on social and environmental issues within her poetry (Poetry Foundation).

In this poem, Piercy comments on gardening from an entirely different perspective than many before her. Straight from the initial paragraph, Piercy immediately comments the following, “Gardening is often a measured cruelty: \ what is to live and what is to be torn \ up by its roots and flung on the compost \ to rot and give its essence to new soil.” This paragraph immediately sets the tone for the poem with its direct nature and the implications that it brings. Specifically, this paragraph alludes to the fact that gardening is as though one is playing god. The gardener is the one with the ultimate power and has the final decision when it comes to what lives or dies within the garden. This idea is pushed further when Piercy writes, “go down the row of new spinach— \ their little bright Vs crowding— \ and snatch every other, flinging \ their little bodies just as healthy, \ just as sound as their neighbors \ but judged, by me, superfluous.” This section clearly demonstrates the aforementioned comparison between gardening and playing god. In this passage, she indicates that although the spinach chosen to be thrown away may be equally healthy, she judges them “superfluous” and therefore they must be torn out of the ground. However, following this passage, Piercy begins to reshape the perspective of the poem. Piercy moves from focusing on the gardener playing god, to the insects and pests afflicted by gardening practices. Piercy writes,

It is I who decide which beetles  
are "good" and which are "bad"  
as if each is not whole in its kind.  
We eat to live and so do they,

the locusts, the grasshoppers,  
the flea beetles and aphids and slugs.

In this passage, Piercy rearranges the overall narrative of the poem by humanizing and getting the reader to sympathize with the insects and garden pests. In this manner, Piercy can make the reader think about human actions from a different view, stressing the importance of perspective. Finally, Piercy ends the poem with the mention of inconvenience and the consequences of human action. Piercy writes: “By bad I mean inconvenient. Nothing \ we do is simple, without consequence \ and each act is shadowed with death.” In this final passage, Piercy stresses the impact of human actions, one which is especially apparent in the case of gardening and the god-like powers that it bestows upon gardeners. I also believe that Piercy’s use of the word inconvenient in this last passage is significant and worth working with and ruminating upon, therefore I’ve included it as a study question.

This poem has a very clear connection to eco-poetry as it reframes a human process from a natural perspective. In this poem, Piercy doesn’t necessarily give nature a voice, but she firmly pushes the reader to consider nature’s perspectives. This poem is very impactful as it does well at changing the way that the reader thinks about gardens and natural environments. Within this poem, Piercy makes a case that perhaps humans are overstepping their bounds within their gardens, and much of her writing can be applied to the large-scale environment as well. Specifically, Piercy’s poem suggests that perhaps weeds and pests are not bad, but simply inconvenient. In this manner, she provides commentary on the consequences of the obsessive and controlling nature of human gardening - something highly applicable outside of the garden as well.

### **Study Questions:**

1. What do you notice about the form of this poem? Perhaps think about Piercy’s use of short sentences and direct language. What effect does this have on the reader?
2. Why do you think Piercy breaks sentences up between paragraphs? What does this do to the reader?
3. Why do you think Piercy chose to use the word inconvenient? How does that reflect and relate to the theme of the poem?
  - a. Explore how Piercy invokes value and humanizes the perspectives of inconvenient insects and bugs within the garden such as her comments on the ant soldiers and their families.

### **Citations:**

Piercy, Marge. *Marge Piercy*, <https://margepiercy.com/>. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Piercy, Marge. *The Crooked Inheritance: Poems*. Knopf, 2006.

Poetry Foundation. "Marge Piercy." *Poetry Foundation*,  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/marge-piercy>. Accessed 15 May 2024.

## “Mosses” - Jane Hirschfield

“Mosses” by Jane Hirschfield was originally published in *Scientific American Magazine* in November 2022. It may be read there in full: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/poem-mosses/>. It also appears in Hirschfield’s 10th poetry collection, *The Asking: New & Selected Poems*, published in September, 2023 (see “Jane Hirschfield” in the bibliography below).

### Synopsis:

In “Mosses”, Hirschfield explains the existence and resilience of hypolithic mosses that thrive in desert conditions. These mosses survive by relying on the translucent quartz crystals for shelter from the sun and the condensation of water. Central to her poem, Hirschfield compares these mosses' way of survival to humanity. She wrote this poem and drew this comparison to prompt readers to reflect on the implications of the Anthropocene. Anthropocene refers to the current geological age and period in which human activity influence has a significant impact on the planet that leads to major extinctions, climate change, and destruction of ecosystems (*Anthropocene*). Furthermore, her poem sheds light on humanity's disregard for the ecosystem and aims to inspire individuals to make their small yet impactful contribution toward addressing the environmental crisis.

Fundamental to understanding Hirschfield’s message against Anthropogenic activity in the poem is the parallel drawn between mosses and humans. In reflecting on the hypolithic mosses' reliance on translucent quartz crystals in the desert, Hirschfield draws a connection saying, “Perhaps we, too, are mosses, evolving to the parch of our self-made Mojaves. Unable to bear the full brightness.” In this quote, Hirschfield suggests that like the mosses seeking refuge in the desert, humans evolved to survive in the hostile and “parch” environments created by their own actions. The reference to the “Mojaves” alludes to the Mojaves Desert located in the southwestern United States known for its hot, barren, and dry climate. The term “self-made” used to describe the Mojaves suggests anthropogenic human activities, such as pollution, deforestation, and climate change, created the desert. She references this self-made desert because she envisions a future of Earth marked by desolation and inhospitality due to the consequences of anthropogenic activities. Thus, similar to hypolithic mosses, humans will have to evolve to live on an Earth that is increasingly hot, barren, dry, and lacking in resources. However, the author, considering the increased heat of the sun due to climate change, is worried that humans will be “unable to bear the full brightness the full seeing.” By drawing this parallel, the author prompts readers to consider the potential repercussions of our actions and the necessity of addressing environmental issues to prevent such a dire future.

The poem introduces additional complexity when considering the metaphorical role of the “sun” in the parallel. Specifically, the “sun” is used to symbolize the full truth of Earth’s environmental crisis. In continuing the parallel from the previous quote, the author writes, “Unable to bear the full brightness, the full seeing. To recognize fully the Amazon burning, the

Arctic burning,\ the Monarchs' smoke-colored missing migration.” To be able to understand something, one must be able to see it. However, the quote implies that we are “unable to bear the full brightness,\ the full seeing”. Specifically, the inability to see the full light is being compared to the inability to recognize the environmental crisis in “the Amazon burning”, “the Arctic burning”, and the “Monarchs' smoke-colored missing migration”. In this context, the “sun” symbolizes the truth or knowledge of environmental crises, which humanity finds difficult to confront or acknowledge in full. Thus, humans shelter from the sun, refuging from the truth and living in the comfort of ignorance. Through both the literal and metaphorical framing, Hirshfield encourages readers to confront the implications of their limited comprehension and ongoing disregard for Earth's distress signals.

However, Hirshfield does not condemn humanity for seeking shelter from the full truth of the sun, similar to the behavior of the mosses. Instead, she introduces the concept of contributing 4% to environmental solutions. In citing the 4% of sunlight filtered by the mosses, the author writes, "To the implausible green of existence,\ for-better, for-worse,\ we offered our four-percent portion of praises,\ for-better, for-worse,\ our four-percent portion of comprehension." This phrase symbolizes the small fraction of understanding and appreciation that humans can offer towards Earth's “implausible green of existence”. Despite this complexity, Hirshfield acknowledges the significance of this small yet meaningful contribution. She does so by adopting a hopeful tone, stating "for better or for worse" before each line. Just like the resilience and adaptability of mosses, Hirshfield implores humans to see that 4% of the sunlight, understand that 4% of truth, and contribute their 4% part in fixing the environmental crisis. Through her narrative and hopeful tone, the end of her poem serves as a call to action, highlighting the importance of collective action and responsibility in striving for positive change.

### Study Questions:

1. Do some more research on hypolithic mosses. Given the themes of this poem, how else can these mosses be compared to human activity on Earth?
2. In what ways can individuals contribute their "four-percent portion" to environmental solutions?
3. The poem references "an experiment not meant to last" (Wilner, line 22). What might this line signify in the context of the poem? Particularly, how are human actions and impact on Earth similar to an experiment?

### Citations:

*Anthropocene*. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/anthropocene>. Accessed 1 Mar. 2024.

Hirshfield, Jane. “Poem: ‘Mosses.’” *Scientific American*, 1 Nov. 2022, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/poem-mosses/>.

“Jane Hirshfield.” *Poetry Foundation*, 4 May 2024,  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jane-hirshfield>.

## “Singularity” - Marie Howe

“Singularity” is available on the poets.org website, published there with her permission: <https://poets.org/poem/singularity>. Howe has also read a live audience in 2018, at Universe in Verse as a tribute to Stephen Hawking, a brilliant astrophysicist, who had then recently passed away (Popova, 2018). See this website for her interview with Popova and her reading of the poem: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2020/04/23/singularity-marie-howe-animated/>.

### Synopsis:

Howe was born in 1950 in Rochester, New York earned her MFA from Columbia University in 1983, and she is known as one of the great poets of our time. A few of her publications include *Magdalene*, which was long-listed for the National Book Award, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, which was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and many more (Marie). In her poem, Howe weaves in themes of Anthropocene, spreading environmental awareness and conveying her desire to return to the beginning, or the singularity—a time before human constructs, suffering, and environmental destruction. Singularity refers to a point in space-time of infinite density that exists within the event horizon of a black hole. At this point matter and energy is infinitely compressed, leading to an infinite warping of space-time where rules and equations of physics cease to be applicable. Hawking devised a theorem that extended beyond the microcosm of black holes to the macrocosm of the universe. Specifically, he hypothesized that if black holes could form from the collapse of massive stars, then perhaps the entire universe originated from a similar singularity. That singularity, also known as the Big Bang, is what initiated the expansion of space-time we observe today (Howell, 2022; Penrose Wikipedia).

Through the lens of Stephen Hawking's concept of singularity in physics, the poem reflects on humanity's relationship with the natural world and the universe at large. Central to the theme of Howe's poem is the idea of universal interconnectedness. As Howe reminisces about the “singularity we once were”, Howe writes, “*For every atom belonging to me as good\ Belongs to you. Remember?\ There was no Nature. No\ them.*” This quote highlights the fundamental interconnectedness through shared ownership of atoms that underlies all existence. Human bodies, nature, and even celestial bodies are composed of a myriad of atoms that may have been recycled countless times throughout the ages. Whether it's the carbon in our cells, the oxygen in our breath, or the nitrogen in our DNA, these atoms have cycled through various forms of life and matter. The constant exchange and reuse of atoms illustrate how our existence is intricately intertwined with the fundamental elements of the universe. Howe's concept of interconnectedness establishes a theoretical yet personal connection with nature for the readers.

### Study Question:

1. Research examples of atoms being recycled in the natural world. There is a large scale in which atoms are recycled, from the microscopic carbon cycle to the macroscopic supernova explosion. How do these examples reinforce the theme of interconnectedness presented in the poem?

Building upon the theme of interconnectedness, Howe introduces the concept of singularity. In this state, there is no distinction between "you" and "me", no separation between "Nature" and "Them," and no boundaries between living beings and the cosmos, further strengthening the reader's sense of connection with nature. Howe introduces this concept to articulate her profound longing to return to a time when humans were one with nature, and environmental degradation was not widespread. One of the ways she evokes the same longing in readers is through the poem's tone. Using terms like "Remember?" and the line "Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity\ we once were?", Howe evokes a profound sense of nostalgia of the primal state of existence in a singularity. This nostalgia evokes a deep emotional resonance within readers, prompting them to reflect on the harmony that once was between humans and the natural world. Howe further expands on this message by writing, "Trashed\ oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French?". The imagery underscores the notion that the ocean doesn't need to articulate its distress in human languages; its degraded state, visible to all, serves as a universal language that can be understood. This simple yet powerful observation, serving as a call to action, advocates for collective responsibility to protect and preserve our natural world.

### **Study Question:**

2. Many in the world are still skeptical of the environmental crisis. In the poem, Howe gives voice to the skeptics. Where in the poem did she do this and how does she address this skepticism?

Another way Howe builds on her theme of interconnectedness and her desire to return to the singularity is through the poem's form. As the poem moves to its final stanzas, the form breaks down significantly. However, Howe uses the reduced form at the end of the poem to create a moment of singularity for the readers. In imagining the singularity, Howe writes:

No I, no We, no one. No was

No verb    no noun

only a tiny tiny dot brimming with

is is is is is

All    everything    home.



While conveying the same message to return to the singularity, this quote also showcases a gradual transition towards a fragmented syntax and language structure. Notably, the breakdown of syntax is evident as several lines lack commas and periods typical of conventional sentence structure. Commas and periods are developed English rules used to separate parts of sentences and ideas, yet Howe chooses not to include these grammatical devices. Thus, in creating a singularity for the readers, she removes the linguistic division and undoes the human construct of language. Moreover, the absence and use of the verb “is” in the final line are also striking. “Is” is an important verb to describe existing beings and things, but in the last line, where one would normally expect an “is” is missing, contributing to the reduction of human constructs. Instead, previous to the last sentence, the verb used to describe a state of being “is” is used repeatedly in an onomatopoeic way for the singularity's representation as a tiny do. Together, the gradual degradation of form builds up to effectively create a moment of singularity for the readers.

### Study Question:

3. In thinking about the form of the poem, one may realize the weird uses of spaces between words in the poem. How does the use of space between words contribute to themes of interconnectedness and the concept of singularity?

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Popova, Maria. “Singularity: Poet Marie Howe’s Beautiful Tribute to Stephen Hawking and Our Belonging to the Universe.” *The Marginalian*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2018/05/22/singularity-marie-howe-stephen-hawking/>.

## “For the Willows to Bless” - Eleanor Wilner

“For the Willows to Bless” by Eleanor Wilner was published by the journal *American Poetry Review* in the March/April 2021 issue, p. 12.

### Synopsis:

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1937, Wilner is a renowned poet who received many awards and honors for her work. She is an active educator who has taught poetry at large universities such as the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and others. While her work typically embraces a wide range of concerns, Wilner is known for writing poetry that engages in politics, culture, history, and myth. Some of her other collections include *Before Our Eyes: New and Selected Poems*, *Tourist in Hell*, *The Girl with Bees in Her Hair*, and more (*Poets*). In her poem, Wilner captures the interaction between a willow tree and a procession of human visitors. She gives a voice to the willow tree which observes and sympathizes with the grieving humans who came to visit. However, when reading the poem symbolically, it becomes a larger metaphor for the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene era in which humans are grieving for Earth. Wilner pens this poem to illuminate the environmental crisis and motivate action toward solutions. However, unlike the other anthropogenic poems of “Mosses” and “Singularity”, Wilner ingeniously advocates for this issue through the subtle voice of the tree, representing nature’s perspective.

Before discussing how Wilner gives a voice to nature and uses her poem to motivate action toward environmental solutions, I will first explain how to read this poem and connect the narrative to Anthropocene. Taking the perspective of the willow tree, the poem uses descriptions such as “a two-legged figure” to describe humans arriving to visit from an “endless procession.” Specifically, the humans are arriving from a funeral procession indicated by the tree’s observation of hearing a “great keening” which means a loud wailing or lament for the dead (Keening). Moreover, other descriptions such as the humans’ “great grief”, and the tree offering a “sorrowing multitude” support this interpretation while depicting the visitors’ dark and melancholic atmosphere. Together, these lines and terms set the scene and tone where the author grants the willow tree a voice. This offers readers a lens into nature’s perspective, allowing them to empathize with nature as it observes and engages with the mourning humans.

Beyond a simple compassionate interaction between a tree and humans, the tree provides insight into the larger Anthropogenic crises from nature’s point of view. Reading metaphorically, the willow tree and the endless procession of humans are representatives of nature and humanity, respectively. When the willow tree contemplates the arrival of the humans, it reflects, “it was hard to discern one\ from another, so alike they appeared,\and so endless their procession.” This observation highlights the willow tree’s struggle to differentiate between individual humans, serving as a satirical commentary on human perceptions of trees in nature. Particularly, the homogeneity and indistinguishability of humans as a collective presence lacking in individuality

mirrors how humans perceive trees—a collective element of nature without recognition of each tree's inherent uniqueness. Importantly, the willow tree, by using the word “their”, addresses the procession of humans as a unified entity or collective whole. This would suggest that man in this poem metaphorically represents humanity. In aligning with this metaphor, that would mean that the observations and thoughts of the tree, an element of nature, are representative of nature’s perspective.

Considering the willow tree as a representation of nature, Wilner accurately captures nature's role and personality as a generous provider and empathetic, compassionate individual. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to its human counterparts. Upon the humans' arrival, the willow tree reacts thoughtfully, “unsure how to greet them.” However, it attempts to comfort the grieving humans as it “sang to them.” and “offered them what we\ could: shade, a cool shelter from\ the heat that had begun to follow\ the sun, a soft bed of needles\ from the pine to sleep on.” This illustrates nature's crucial role in society as a primary provider of essential resources, highlighting the diverse offerings and benefits that humans derive from it. Since it cannot speak its mind, Wilner grants nature a voice, imagining it as a helpful being who is willing to provide comfort and support to humanity without demanding a return. Crucially, the willow tree understands human emotions and needs despite being a different species. However, this understanding is not mutual, because the willow tree does not report any reactions from the humans. The tree mentions how their songs and thoughts are lost in the “slipstream of time’s passage”, implying these songs and thoughts were not received by the human visitors. It is unclear whether humans understand and appreciate nature's intentions and gifts as humanity often takes nature’s resources for granted. This draws a parallel between the personalities of nature and humans. While nature is able to understand human emotions and provide for them, humans are not able to reciprocate that same attentiveness towards nature. Together, Wilner highlights human unappreciation of nature’s gifts and unawareness of the modes of communication of nature—two critical issues that surround the Anthropocene.

### **Study Questions:**

1. In the poem, there are two mentions of "wind in the harps" (Wilner, lines 34 &39). This wind harp undergoes a transition from being "left there in despair"(line 36) by humans to being "mingled and merged"(line 40) with the willow tree. Do some research on Aeolian harps. What are these tools? Who were they used by? How does its purpose support the willow tree's attempts at communication?
2. Towards the end of the poem, Wilner writes, “a singing\ we offer them now, this sorrowing\ multitude, who, in return, bring\ their tears to water our roots”(Wilner, lines 41-44). Given the context of the poem, in what ways does this final line imply a sense of tentativeness while acting as a call action against the Anthropocene era? Specifically, is it clear that humanity in the poem is giving back to nature because humanity has received and understood nature's messages?

**Citations:**

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<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/keening>. Accessed 14 May 2024.

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## “Owed to the Durag” - Joshua Bennett

This poem may be found on the Academy of American Poets website:

<https://poets.org/poem/owed-durag>.

### Synopsis:

The author of “Owed to the Durag,” Dr. Joshua Bennett, grew up in a working-class black family in a mostly Latinx neighborhood in Yonkers, NY. His interest in performing spoken word began when he would perform his version of the church sermons to his family every Sunday. His apparent talent earned him a scholarship at an elite private school, where he joined the small population of black students. It was his two-hour commutes to school spent reading essays on race in the United States that nurtured his desire to become a professor. He attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his undergraduate degree in Africana Studies and English, and then completed his PhD in English at Princeton, in addition to an MA in theater and performance studies from the University of Warwick. He has published five books, namely, *Spoken Word: A Cultural History* (2023), *The Study of Human Life* (2022), *Owed* (2020), *Being Property Once Myself* (2020), and *The Sobbing School* (2016). He is the winner of the National Poetry Series and a finalist for an NAACP Image Award, among numerous other accolades. His works have seen an audience at the Sundance Film Festival, the NAACP Image Awards, and President Obama’s Evening of Poetry and Music at the White House. His research focuses on 20th and 21st-century African-American literature, environmental studies, poetry and poetics, animality studies, and affect theory.

“Owed to the Durag” is significant for its exploration of the daily black experience as a facet of the larger discussion of race in America. In this piece, Bennett poignantly discusses the criminalization of blackness, using his hair to symbolize the societal framing of Afro-centric features as a point of shame rather than pride. Bennett examines the implicit racism spanning from the level of higher education to the familial level and those from his community, ultimately underscoring how prejudice has become a deeply ingrained element of the United States. It may be easy to dismiss this poem from the greater genre of eco-poetry; however, Bennett makes it difficult to ignore the connection between racism and environmentalism. Several environmentalists, such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, are calling for a return to indigenous practices of reciprocity and environmental stewardship. They emphasize that healing and regenerating the planet requires a significant shift in belief. Concisely put, the solution to the climate crisis is ultimately decolonization and the subsequent pivot away from the current mode of operation, which contributes to the exponential destruction of ecosystems. Part of this is reexamining the lingering impacts of European imperialism, which includes systemic, institutional racism as well as the microaggressions experienced by black people in their daily lives. To decolonize is to perform “anti-colonial choreography,” Bennett’s resonant phrase, which encompasses both the practice of indigenous principles of conservation and the rejection of systems which have

exploited the environment and marginalized people alike. These very same institutions that perpetuate overconsumption and capitalistic tendencies can only be dismantled by the collective attempt to understand and sympathize, which is made possible by works like “Owed to the Durag.”

**Study Questions:**

1. One important thing to consider while reading is Bennett’s hyper-awareness of how he is being perceived and his consciousness almost being distributed to those around him—he’s constantly looking at himself through the eyes of others. How does this habit in any way affirm or contradict the point he attempts to make in the piece? Is it conducive to maintaining a firm grip on one’s identity?
2. In describing the memory with the poet’s father, it is clear that there’s something about this recollection that conjures up mixed feelings. What are these feelings? Where is this tension expressed in the piece? How can we understand his father’s relationship to the poet wearing a durag?
3. It is also interesting to note the natural and evocative imagery of the durag in conjunction with the harsh, critical stereotypes associated with it. For example, Bennett describes it as a cape, an uplifting force, while others see him as a criminal. How does this assertion of beauty and nature open up the possibility of sympathy or understanding?

**Citations:**

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Academy of American Poets. “Owed to the Durag by Joshua Bennett - Poems | Academy of American Poets.” <https://poets.org/poem/owed-durag>. Copyright © 2016 Joshua Bennett. “Owed to the Durag” was originally published in the journal *Public Pool*.

## “The Great Silence” - Ted Chiang

The story/essay may be found on the Electric Literature website:

<https://www.electricle.com/the-great-silence-by-ted-chiang/>. It's also available in Chiang's most recent collection of fiction, *Stories of Your Life and Others*. An essay on this story and the ethical questions it raises for humanity is Joshua Rothman's. See our bibliography below.

### Synopsis:

Science fiction writer Ted Chiang was born in Port Jefferson, New York. He grew up on Long Island in an immigrant household, with both his parents having moved from Taiwan to attend graduate school. His love for science fiction and fantasy blossomed at an early age, eventually leading him to pursue a computer science degree at Brown University, graduating in 1989. His background in computer science often finds its way into his stories as he explores the intersection of technology and humanity. After college, Chiang worked as a technical writer in the software industry while also pursuing his writing career. He began submitting his stories to science fiction magazines in the early 1990s, and his work quickly gained attention for its originality and depth, as well as its exploration of the intersection between technology and humanity. His provocative writing has earned him dozens of awards, including four Nebula Awards, three Hugo Awards, the John W. Campbell Award, three Locus Awards, the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and the Sidewise Award. A few other notable works are “Story of Your Life” (1998), which was adapted into the 2016 film “Arrival” starring Amy Adams, and his first piece, “Tower of Babylon” (1990). “The Great Silence” appeared in the short story collection *Stories of Your Life and Others* (2016). Today, he writes for the *New Yorker* on many topics, including using his voice to fervently criticize AI and its negative implications.

In “The Great Silence,” Chiang uses the reverse apostrophe to take on and affirm the sentence of a parrot. He masterfully bridges the gap between humanity's desperate search for extraterrestrial intelligence and the various creatures exhibiting high cognition on this planet itself. In the example of parrots, humans are believed to be superior because of their power of voice and communication. While parrots can also speak, humans tend to assume their voice is limited to repetition, which gives little to no indication of intelligence. However, the narrator refutes this by providing the example of his cousin, who had told his caretaker he loved her before he died, solidifying that parrots aren't simply repeating concepts but understanding them as well. Chiang evokes a sense of abandonment and dismissal in people's refusal or perhaps inability to acknowledge the brilliance in Earthly creatures demonstrating the behaviors they continue to scour the universe for. Not only is this piece extremely thought-provoking about intelligence within life on earth, but it is also a deeply emotional piece that conjures up an amalgamation of feelings about humanity's actions. There is a point where the narrator discusses the looming extinction of their kind and humanity's hand in it, only speaking of humans in a kind and forgiving manner. They acknowledge that humans are not malicious but simply unaware,

making it clear that they hold no anger or resentment. Yet there is something immeasurably sad about our cruelty towards creatures that can't even hate us for it. Despite it all, nature understands and empathizes with human struggle; its love is unconditional. "The Great Silence" is important because it reminds us of this love and leaves us inspired to make it count.

**Study Questions:**

1. Chiang draws this tension between silence and noise, not only between humans and animals. The Great Silence is humanity's unanswered call to the universe, yet when the Arecibo telescope is directed toward space between stars, it hears a hum. What do you make of this tension? Is silence simply a lack of noise, or something else?
2. Chiang takes a very brave step by wielding the voice of the parrot as a medium to convey not only compassion but also the feeling of abandonment. Are there certain areas where he edges on the side of generosity towards humans or animals? Are there others where he is going in a more critical direction?
3. "The Great Silence" talks about the scientific and technological advancements of the Arecibo telescope, as well as its subsequent philosophical implications and elements. How does Chiang's balance of these themes contribute to the overall tone of the piece? How do they reflect our current understanding of the world?

**Citations:**

Chiang, Ted. "The Great Silence by Ted Chiang." *Electric Literature*, 12 Oct. 2016, <https://electricliterature.com/the-great-silence-by-ted-chiang/>.

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Rothman, Joshua. "Ted Chiang's Soulful Science Fiction." *The New Yorker*, 5 Jan. 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/ted-chiangs-soulful-science-fiction>.



## “Roots” - Robert Francis

This poem is from Francis' first poetry collection, *Stand With Me Here* (1936). It's also in *The Collected Poems of Robert Francis, 1936-1976*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1985.

### Synopsis:

Robert Francis was born on August 12, 1901, in Upland, Pennsylvania, and grew up in rural Massachusetts. Francis's connection to the natural world grew, spending much of his time as a child exploring the woods and fields near his home. He attended Harvard University, where he studied English literature but left without graduating, feeling that the academic environment wasn't suitable for his creative pursuits. After Harvard, Francis lived a simple life, living in a self-built, one-room house in Amherst, Massachusetts. Surrounded by woods and meadows, Francis found inspiration for his poetry in the quiet beauty of the natural landscape. Though largely underappreciated, his poetry often reflects this deep reverence for the natural world, as well as his belief in nature as a source of solace and wisdom. He published many meaningful works, such as "The Sound I Listened For" (1944), "Come Out into the Sun" (1942), *Valhalla and Other Poems* (1938), and "Like Ghosts of Eagles" (1997, posthumously). Each further established his reputation as a simple yet timeless poet.

Francis begins the poem with a man standing barefoot on the ground. It opens on a note of wonder and awe as seen through the comparison of a child. There is a skin to Earth connection that is forged, almost as if the contact to the ground opens a transient portal to what lies below the surface. Where the first half of the poem is largely focused on sensations and the physical, the second enters the transcendent space cleaved open by the contact. There is a deeper connection that begins to unravel as the mind, following the roots, travels past crystallized time and any barrier between the dead and living—rather a place where both exist as one. Eventually, the root finds what it is looking for, having traveled through infinite spaces, and agency shifts to the Earth. Not only is this poem a beautiful imagining of a physical connection giving way to a metaphysical one, but it is in reverence of all forces immensely older and greater. It is an acknowledgment of the well of eternal knowledge and the journey to get there. It is ultimately a surrendering of agency and control, reconfiguring where humans fit into the hierarchy of nature.

### Study Questions:

1. Francis uses very vivid imagery to build up the contrast between the dead and the living, the old and new. Analyze specific phrases used and how they add meaning to the themes of connection growth and decay.
2. In the poem, the eternal presence and knowledge of the earth are established alongside the fleeting nature of life and humanity. How does Francis do this? How do the two

become connected? In other words, how is the intersection between mortality and immortality explored? How does this contribute to the overall meaning of the poem?

3. It is interesting to consider how will transfers from object to object throughout the poem. While deep reflection may sometimes be a conscious effort at times, others it occurs naturally. What is Francis suggesting about the role agency plays in introspection and contemplation? How does that relate to connecting to the earth?

**Citations:**

Francis, Robert. "Roots." *Stand With Me Here*, 1936. Reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Robert Francis, 1936-1976*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1985.

Poetry Foundation. "Robert Francis." *Poetry Foundation*, 24 Nov. 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-francis>.