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A Loving Compilation Of Ecopoems: An Anthology Of My Favorites From The Ecopoetry And Climate Crisis Course Syllabus And Beyond

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This anthology draws from a series of poems that I read as a college junior in a humanities-focused environmental studies class at Swarthmore College, as well as ecopoems that I have read in my own free time. It is meant to honor each of these poems that touched me in a unique way, which I will discuss in my commentary. For some, I was drawn to the poem’s overall message, or strong sensory language, or the identity of the poet that seeped through. I love poetry as a medium of expression, even though I sometimes struggle to find my poetic voice. Throughout this anthology, there is no one cohesive theme, except for the genre of ecopoetry, of course. Nevertheless, I hope you will enjoy these musings, and come away with a new sense of appreciation, curiosity, and wonder for these poems. Thank you for reading.

Poets included: Mary Oliver, W.S. Merwin, Tamiko Beyer, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, David Hernandez, Jane Hirshfield, and Craig Santos Perez; plus an excerpt from Robin Wall Kimmerer’s prose in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

I. Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”

From *Wild Geese*, published October 28, 2004.
Read the poem online, which also includes a recording of Oliver reading her poem: https://www.best-poems.net/mary_oliver/wild_geese.html#google_vignette.

Other publications to consider:

- “The Lilies Break Open Over the Dark Water”
- “A Meeting”

My Commentary:

Despite the plethora of Mary Oliver poems we read for this course, “Wild Geese” was not on our syllabus, and yet, I wanted to include it in this anthology. This is one of my favorite poems and a poem that never fails to evoke strong emotions in me. The first time I read this poem aloud, to my mom, I cried, because I felt seen. Whenever I feel lost, or lonely, or uncertain about myself and the world around me, the words from this poem rise up, and I can seek comfort from them.

This poem is an ecopoem, because it reminds us that humans have a place in this world. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in a lecture at Swarthmore College, once said that the view that many people have, that humans do not have a place in nature, especially due to their causation of climate change, is fundamentally wrong. Humans do have a place in nature, but it must be to honor and give back to the Earth, not to continue to seek ways to take more for ourselves. Mary Oliver, in this poem, reminds us that human beings are animals too, and that we can find where we belong by tuning into and respecting our fellow inhabitants of this planet. She also reminds us that the land is constantly changing, so do not dwell in despair.

“Wild Geese” is also a queer poem, written by a queer woman, as many ecopoems often are. It welcomes the reader to abandon shame, isolation, and melancholy. Oliver recognizes the feelings that come with being different from other people, and she alludes to the animalistic side of humans, giving the reader permission to embrace themselves and whoever and whatever they love. She assures the reader that they are not bad or damned, and I think that is a powerful message, and why the poem resonates with myself, and many others.

Study Questions:

1. In what other ways is this poem a typical ecopoem?
2. What is the significance of the wild geese? Why might Mary Oliver have titled this poem the way she did, or included the reference to geese calling to each other as they fly?

II. W.S Merwin, “For a Coming Extinction”

From *The Lice*, published 1967.
Read the poem online: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57936/for-a-coming-extinction-56d23be1c33a8.

Other publications to consider:

- “To the Wires Overhead”
- “After the Dragonflies”

My Commentary:

I analyzed this poem for my course’s first assignment. We needed to choose a poem, and pick one reference to annotate thoroughly. I picked this poem, and researched the gray whale, and its significance to William Stanley Merwin. I found the poem particularly haunting and mesmerizing, just as I find the deep ocean, and its inhabitants, such as the gray whale, fascinating, yet terrifying. The language within this poem evokes religious imagery, as the speaker uses irony to discuss God and man’s role in anthropogenic-driven climate change and the loss of the extinct or endangered species named.

Merwin was a prolific writer, as well as a conservationist. My best friend and her twin brother had the honor of meeting Merwin before he passed away in 2019. Nora, my friend, described him as a surrogate grandfather, and as a kind and gentle soul. He inspired her brother, Kip, to write his own poems. He wrote his personal essay for the application process that helped him get admitted to Swarthmore College. It was a bizarre and wonderful coincidence to me, that such a close friend would personally know a poet that I greatly admired and wanted to investigate for a class paper. His care and love for the Earth, and fears about climate change, are all reflected in his work.

Study Questions:

1. What does the second stanza of this poem mean? Who is the “you” the speaker is referring to?
2. What do you think about the religious imagery throughout this poem?
3. The gray whale is no longer critically endangered, thankfully. Typically, “characteristic megafauna”, or large mammals that humans can typically relate to, get a lot of media attention in the field of conservation. How might this poem’s tone or meaning change had its focus centered on an amphibian, reptile, or bird?

III. Tamiko Beyer, “Estuary”

From *Last Days*, published by Alice James Books in 2021.
Beyer recommends using Bookshop.org or the Alice James website to order the book: https://www.alicejamesbooks.org/bookstore/lastdays?rq=tamiko%20Beyer. See also Beyer’s website for a teaching and discussion guide for *Last Days*: https://www.tamikobeyer.com/resources.

Other publications to consider:

- “Solstice”
- “We are Bodies in Bodies We are Stars”

My Commentary:

This ecopoem is particularly powerful, because it channels the voice and identity of the author vividly, and exhibits the connection between the climate change movement, as well as the continued struggle for civil rights. It acknowledges the deep-seated inequality among species, and delves further, revealing that although humans have constructed a hierarchy in which they stop atop the animal kingdom, humans still find ways to place themselves above other their fellow humans. And yet, we all exist together, as a collective on this planet. As Beyer states, our bodies contain as many bacteria as our own cells, and in fact, bacteria outnumber our somatic cells. We cannot deny these intimate connections, no matter how many categories we construct to convince ourselves that we are somehow better than another person or species.

Tamiko Beyer is a Japanese-American queer woman. Her poetry intermingles identity with a connection to nature. I believe that is the beauty of ecopoetry. It is a diverse medium, with plenty of room for each poet’s unique interpretation of what an ecopoem is. For many people, especially BIPOC, the fight against climate change is also the fight for racial and social justice, or environmental justice. While less contemporary, more Romantic ecopoets tend to focus on their personal connection to nature and what it has given them, more modern ecopoets weave in their identities to draw parallels between how society uses and abuses nature and how society dismisses anyone viewed as deviating from what is “normal”. While I enjoy both styles, I find the latter particularly compelling, especially as an Environmental Studies student concentrating on environmental justice and conservation.

The poem places these issues front and center. For instance, the lines where her reveries about birds and the landscape are interrupted by a prowling police car, causing the poet to whisper to herself, “Not safe”…]

Study Questions:

1. How does the poem's structure, more specifically, the line breaks, impact your interpretation? What do you think of the shift from two lined stanzas to three lined stanzas?
2. How does the poet's identity lend deeper meaning to the poem?

IV. Theodore Roethke, “Meditation at Oyster River”

From *The Far Field: Last Poems*, published in 1964.
Listen to a reading of the entire poem:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFNQpMvwyw0.

Other publications to consider:

- “Cuttings”
- “Cuttings (Later)”

My Commentary:

I analyzed this poem for the second assignment in my ecopoetry seminar. For the purpose of the assignment, we needed to once again select a line or phrase to annotate, but we needed to delve deeper, and construct a thesis about the poem’s meaning by examining content and form. I chose this ecopoem, because I knew the richness of the text would lend itself well to picking a poignant quote to digest. At the same time, I felt eager and relieved that the scope of the second assignment allowed me to dive into the other stanzas of the poem.

Researching the life of Theodore Roethke only served to further pique my interest in “Meditation at Oyster River”. He lived a somewhat tragic life, and the book in which this poem was published, was released after his death in 1963. This fact adds a strange element of prophecy to the poem, as it discusses death through the lens of a water metaphor, when Roethke himself would die when he suffered a heart attack and drowned in a friend’s swimming pool in 1963. In his younger years, Roethke suffered the loss of his father and uncle, and throughout his life, despite praise for his writing, he experienced feelings of inadequacy. He certainly fit the cliched description of the “tortured artist”.

Despite the vivid depictions of death, the poem ends on a hopeful note. The sun is sinking beneath the horizon, but the light of the moon is rising to take its place. The poet feels more at peace with the water, calling it “his will and his way”. He’s no longer frantic, waiting for a blast of melting ice to sweep debris away, but instead, has found a form of rebirth in the ocean’s waters. Rebirth, death, and nature form a triad of themes that emerge time and time again in ecopoetry.

Study Questions:

1. How do the tone of the references to death shift from stanza to stanza in this poem?
2. What happens in the poem’s final stanza? Note its contrast to the dark dream that is section III.

V. Elizabeth Bishop, “At the Fishhouses”

From *The New Yorker* on August 9, 1947, and reprinted in *A Cold Spring* in 1955. Read the poem online, which also includes a recording of Bishop reading her poem: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52192/at-the-fishhouses.

My Commentary:

What strikes me most about this ecopoem is the vivid sensory imagery. Bishop taps into our sense of sight by describing the color of the fishing nets, the bright hues of the water and moss, and so much more. She supplies the sounds we might hear, such as the singing of a hymn and the scraping of fish scales. She cues us into scent by mentioning reek of codfish, and our sense of touch, by noting the sting we would feel if we placed our hands in the icy cold water of the fishhouse. Bishop even imparts the sense of taste, by sharing that the water would be acrid, salty, and burning. These descriptions serve to bring the reader into the world of the author; we ourselves are invited to be “at the fishhouses”.

Another aspect of the poem that strikes me is the quiet, peaceful atmosphere of the poem. I can close my eyes and picture the darkness of the night, coupled with the gentle sway of the water and writhing of fish. When the seal comes to visit, it has no malice, just curiosity and desire for fleeting company. I can imagine sitting beside Bishop and her grandfather’s friend, watching as he smokes, and cleans the fish, humming along to a hymn. While I love the more chaotic, or even apocalyptic ecopoems that I explored throughout the course I was enrolled in, the simplicity and calmness of the atmosphere of this poem provides a lovely retreat.

Study Questions:

1. What do the last eight lines mean? What other senses could we ascribe to knowledge?
2. Do some research on the specific Baptist hymn Bishop mentions. Why might the poet have included this particular hymn?

VI. David Hernandez, “Dear Death”

From *Dear Sincerely*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2016.
Read the poem online: https://upittpress.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/9780822964070exr.pdf

Other publications to consider:

- *Hoodwinked*
- *Always Danger*

My Commentary:

This elegy addressed to Death is quite different from all the previous poems in this anthology. I would say what sets it apart is its overtly sarcastic tone, especially at the beginning and end of the poem. Hernandez is deeply upset at the passing of his mother, and his grief lingers as he goes about his day. He lashes out at Death as a concept, criticizing Death’s apparent lack of remorse at the multiple horrific ways in which lives have been claimed. “Dear Death” is a powerful example of the senselessness and inescapability of grief; how it pervades every aspect of life, until you find a way to let go.

I think that this qualifies as an ecopoem, because death is an undeniable part of nature’s cycles. All living things eventually perish. Hernandez mentions mosquitos and fleas as carriers of disease and death, which are biological in nature. Grappling with death has been a human pastime for millennia, and has been the subject of the arts for just as long, whether it's through poetry, literature, song, painting, or dance. No matter how far science and technology progresses, death will always be a finality, and I think that is for the best.

Study Questions:

1. What actions seem to remind Hernandez most of death? Why is it that more mundane tasks seem to be when we most remember our grief?
2. How do you think Death would respond to this poem? Would Death be a sympathetic figure, or a wrathful one?

VII. Jane Hirshfield, “Mosses”

From Hirshfield’s 10th poetry collection, *The Asking: New & Selected Poems,* published in September, 2023.
The poem was first published in Scientific American and may be read online in full: https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/poem-mosses/.

Other publications to consider:

- *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*
- *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*

My Commentary:

This ecopoem is stunning in the way it uses the metaphor of mosses to depict our biggest problem concerning climate change, and many other issues that plague our society. That problem is willful ignorance. So many people use social media and other distractions as a buffer so they do not have to confront the damage that people, and especially large corporations, have done to the planet. Conversely, though, if people became hyper-fixated and consumed by the climate crisis, and devoted one hundred percent comprehension to the issue, it would be easy to become overwhelmed and paralyzed, and thus, nothing would be done. “Building our own Mojave” has to mean finding outlets to channel our fears and frustrations, while also committing ourselves to making a difference in some way, just as the mosses do.

Unlike other ecopoems, which reflect the state of climate change and the environment of the time, this ecopoem focuses on the current issues that the planet and its inhabitants are facing now. In that way, ecopoems act as a time capsule, because they largely focus on similar topics. It will be interesting to see what ecopoems get written in the future. If climate change progresses faster than scientists and activists can undo the damage, they may have even more somber tones. However, if humanity makes a concerted effort, and more people ditch fossil fuels, we may see a return to the themes of the Romantics, where people extoll the beauty of nature.

Study Questions:

1. Hypolithic literally means “under a rock”. In what ways are we living under a rock? What is the tone taken against humanity?
2. Hypolithic mosses are a type of extremophile, meaning an organism that can survive and thrive in extreme conditions, such as harsh temperatures, acidity, alkalinity or salinity. While people are not extremophiles, in what ways could humans be defined as extremophiles?

VIII. Sylvia Plath, “Mushrooms”

From The Colossus and Other Poems, published in 1960.
Read the poem online: https://allpoetry.com/poem/8498359-Mushrooms-by-Sylvia-Plath.

Other Plath poems to consider:

- Bitter Strawberries
- Blackberrying

My Commentary:

I am a mushroom and fungi enthusiast. I cannot remember exactly at what point I became obsessed with photographing, learning about, and collecting mushroom-themed items, but my interest in mushrooms has become a defining trait and conversation starter. I enjoy cooking mushrooms and doodling little forest scenes, dotted with *Amanita muscaria*. My Ultimate frisbee team nicknamed me “Mush” last year, due to my apparent love of mushrooms. My mom, and other family members have gifted me mushroom stuffed animals and jewelry. Last year, I attended a lecture from visiting mycologist, Dr. Patricia Kaishian. Dr. Patricia Kaishian described herself as a “queer mycologist”, detailing how growing up in the woods, she always felt insecure in her gender identity, because she acted in a stereotypically masculine fashion. In her lecture, she used theology and Christian-influenced science to paint parallels between mycophobia, or the fear of mushrooms, with homophobia. She pointed out that many people do not know that all mushrooms, even the poisonous ones, can be touched without consequences, even chewed, provided you do not swallow them.

It was fascinating to listen to someone who had devoted their life to mushrooms, the subject of my own burgeoning passion. Currently, there are very few mycologists in the United States, let alone the world, compared to other types of biologists and ecologists. Many discoveries in the field of mycology have been made by amateurs, often using apps, like iNaturalist. I also find it interesting that all the mycologists I have met personally, whether professional or amateur, have been Armenian queer women.

Sylvia Plath approaches fungi how many other poets before and after her time approach fungi in poetry, with a level of wonder, but also trepidation. However, many poetry-analysts consider “Mushrooms”, an allegory for feminism, and the slow, but steady march towards gender equality. That being said, mushrooms were and still are often viewed as these perverse beings with nefarious intentions, or a link to a supernatural world, or omens of death and decay. While other ecopoets sing fungi’s praises, many prevailing misconceptions about mushrooms still pervade today.

Study Questions:

1. This poem paints a sinister picture of mushrooms, as humble creatures, yet on the rise to infiltrate. Read and consider other ecopoems about fungi, such as

Emily Bass' "Fungus on Fallen Alder at Lookout Creek": https://poets.org/poem/fungus-fallen-alder-lookout-creek. In what ways do other poets share Plath's viewpoint, and in what ways do other poets' viewpoints differ?

2. Why are there such differing opinions about mushrooms and fungi? Why do some people fear them, while others host clubs and festivals dedicated to fungi…

IX. Craig Santos Perez, “Thanksgiving in the Plantationocene”

From *Habitat Threshold*, published in 2020.
Read the poem online: https://poets.org/poem/thanksgiving-anthropocene-2015.
There’s also a recording of Perez reading his poem on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNu4KTmKKts.

Other publications to consider:

- The other poems in *Habitat Threshold*
- *from unincorporated territory [lukao]*

My Commentary:

It was incredibly difficult to pick just one of Craig Santos Perez’s poems from *Habitat Threshold* for this anthology. They all are beautifully written, and the style and message encourage readers to slow down and reflect in order to grasp the deeper meaning. I chose this poem because it reminds me of the “Dear Death” poem by David Hernandez, because of its righteously sarcastic and angry tone. Like “Dear Death” it contains snippets of earnesty and despair. It exposes each of the more gruesome and overlooked aspects of a modern classic American holiday . I think a lot of the issues that Perez picks apart in this poem are facets of Thanksgiving that people do not even think about—such as its simplistic version of the settler colonial/Indian encounter, or the ways in which much of today’s conventional Thanksgiving meal (such as turkeys raised on factory farms or beans picked by migrant laborers) are commodities produced for the U.S.’s mass-market industrial agriculture system controlled by large corporations. A lot of the gratitude that people hold during this holiday is that they are far away from the ugliness of things and that they do not have to dwell on them. So many other people and organisms, as Perez points out, do not have that luxury.

This is the type of ecopoem that I wish more people would read simply because it makes people feel uncomfortable. I feel many people think poetry is a flowery type of literature that is supposed to make us recognize beauty or feelings, but this is the type of poetry that hits hard and deep. It forces us to look at and think about things we would rather block out.

Study Questions:

1. Often, it is a joke among American families that there is always one or more conservative family members at the Thanksgiving table that make discussing any remotely political topic impossible. Climate change and environmental justice are cornerstones of this poem. How could one approach the topics in this poem in a way that could include everyone at the table and generate thoughtful, non-aggressive conversation?

2. Research some of the poem's references, including the facts it presents. What do you learn, and how is that helpful for deepening your understanding of this poem?

X. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an excerpt from "Sky Woman Falling"

From *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and Teachings of Plants*, published by Milkweed Editions Press (Minneapolis) in 2013.
The excerpt I discuss if from pp. 3–5. It begins, "*In the beginning there was the Skyworld*" and ends, "Looking into that starry bowl, I see images swirling so fluidly that the past and the present become as one. Images of Skywoman speak not just of where we came from, but also of how we can go forward…"

Other publications to consider:

- *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*
- Other passages from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and Teachings of Plants*

My Commentary:

I feel this anthology would be incomplete if I did not include some of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This semester, I had the honor of seeing Robin Wall Kimmerer in person at a lecture and a breakfast book club event hosted at Swarthmore College. She was a fantastic speaker, and has so many amazing insights. At one of the events that I attended, I remember someone saying that they wished they could share the message of her book into everyone's brain at the same time. Given how profit-driven, and how Western our standard of sustainability is, I deeply agree with that perspective. Similarly, someone once joked that while it is not an official requirement, like the swim test, to read Robin Wall Kimmerer, it is an unspoken requirement, as so many courses across many disciplines include the title on their syllabi. While I do not have the capability to make everyone read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I knew it needed a special place in this anthology. I wanted to open this anthology with one of my favorite ecopoems, and close this anthology with the first chapter of my favorite econovel.

I think what strikes me most about the story of Skywoman, is how different of a creation story it is to Genesis, and to the story of Pandora, which I learned as a child growing up Roman Catholic and being delighted by stories from Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology. In both Genesis and the story of Pandora, we are taught that no matter how well-intentioned, curious, and kind, a woman is always Mankind's downfall. I am grateful to all the women in my life that showed me that womanhood is beautiful and uplifting, but for many women, these stories written by men about women will shape how they see themselves. I wish I had been told the story of Skywoman younger, but I am glad I know her story now and that it lives on in Kimmerer's lovely prose and in the hearts and minds of those who read this story.

Study Questions (for those who have read more, or all, of Kimmerer's book):

1. How is this chapter different from other chapters in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, including the "Windigo" chapter? Why is that difference important?
2. What does "stewardship" of the Earth mean from the Western perspective and from the Indigenous perspective? Can the two different views be reconciled?