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The Whispers Of Magnolias, Nican Tlaca, And The World Around Us: An Anthology

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The Whispers of Magnolias, Nican Tlaca, and the World Around Us: An Anthology

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Spring 2024

created for English 71E, “Ecopoetry and the Climate Crisis”
with support from Prof. Peter Schmidt
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“Good art is a truing of vision, in the way a saw is trued in the saw shop, to cut more cleanly. It is also a changing of vision. Entering a good poem, a person feels, tastes, hears, thinks, and sees in altered ways. Why ask art into a life at all, if not to be transformed and enlarged by its presence and mysterious means?”

— Jane Hirshfield, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*

Why read poetry after all, for all the frustration it can stir and the immense degree of patience it often demands (particularly challenging in our age of distractions)? Jane Hirshfield’s quotes offer a lucid insight: good poetry often changes how we perceive our surroundings and our states of existence. It lets us experience life in a transformed way – different before and after reading the poem – and inspires us to view our world with a sharper, more curious eye.

Here, we have compiled an anthology of ecopoetry that features a diverse selection of poems, ranging in time, culture, and themes. Each piece has left us in wonder, offering fresh perspectives that have transformed our way of thinking, feeling, and perceiving nature. It’s these novel experiences that we are eager to share with you. Every poem in our anthology comes with helpful factual information about the poetry and the poets, along with our personal interpretations. But of course, there is never only one way to think about a great poem and we definitely don’t want to monopolize the conversation. So along with the brief commentaries, we also include some questions that continue to puzzle us and hopefully can inspire you to enjoy the poems more deeply and in alternative ways. Whether you have experience with poetry, regard yourself as eco-conscious, or neither, we hope our anthology will offer you a delightful reading experience.

Poets included: Wang Wei (translated by Paul Rouzer), Elizabeth Bishop (2 poems), Wallace Stevens, Alberto Ríos, Craig Santos Perez (2 poems), and Martín Tonalmeyotl (translated by Whitney DeVos). There’s also a full Works Cited at the end.

1. “Magnolia Basin” (辛夷塢) by Wang Wei, translated by Paul Rouzer

At the tip of tree branches, the lotus-like flowers
Open their red calices in these hills.
By the door in the ravine: quiet, no one there.
In profusion they open, then fall.

On the green embankment the spring grass spreads;
My prince can linger here to enjoy himself.
All the more, because of the magnolia flowers,
With a riot of color like lotuses.

Translation published in “Juan 13: Recent style poems”. Volume 2 The Poetry and Prose of Wang Wei, edited by Paul Rouzer, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2020, pp. 94-137.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501512971-003>. Freely available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Wang Wei (699–759) was an influential Chinese artist during the middle Tang dynasty, well-versed in poetry, music, and painting. He was particularly known for monochromatic ink art and Buddhist-inspired poetry and constantly found inspiration in the landscape around him. In his later years, he embraced the Chan Buddhist faith and led a solitary life in the countryside, away from imperial affairs. One of his notable works is “Magnolia Basin,” (辛夷塢), which is part of a series of 20 quatrains to which his friend Pei Di responded. This series is collectively known as the “Wang River Collection” (輞川集). Some of his other acclaimed poems include “Villa on Zhongnan Mountain” (終南別業) and “Lodge in the Bamboo” (竹里館). Despite their seemingly straightforward nature, these poems often hide deep Zen insights upon further study.

The first two lines of the poem are about the “opening” of the flowers. “At the tip of tree branches, the lotus-like flowers / Open their red calices in these hills.” Flower buds blooming at the very end of each branch are accurately and delicately depicted through the use of the word “tip”. One can almost visualize the poet carefully and attentively illustrating the magnolia buds with a painter's brush. The poet portrays a quiet yet powerful scene of magnolia flowers’ beautiful blooming, driven by the force of life when spring arrives.

The final two lines of the poem, on the other hand, are about the “falling” of the flower. We follow the brush stroke of the poet and see that the magnolias are now situated in a peaceful ravine, untouched by human existence. He describes the flowers that bloom vibrantly, irresistibly, and unconditionally, saturating the mountains with their fiery redness and aroma. The magnolia flowers bloom and wither alone, as nature dictates. When they bloom, they are self-sufficient and do not ask for appreciation; when it's time for them to fall, they do so with no

hesitation or longing. The serene, tranquil, and isolated “ravine” therefore symbolizes the poet’s Zen worldview. The poet shows us that Zen is not about utter emptiness or nothingness. Instead, he applauds the power of life represented in the rich color of the petals and the dynamic of the blooming and falling flowers in the vacant mountains. One can also understand the poem as an outline of the life journey of a human. Universally, we all sprout, bloom, and inevitably fall, a journey we all must undertake alone.

Questions:

- 1) Wang Wei's poems are often recognized for their lack of human narrators, reflecting his Zenist mindset. Would you agree or disagree that this poem embodies a non-anthropocentric perspective?
- 2) In the third line, the phrase “the door in the ravine” is one literal interpretation of the original classical Chinese phrase “Jiàn hù” (涧户). This phrase describes the two steep mountains facing each other in the ravine, creating the impression of a “door.” Another interpretation of this Chinese phrase could be “household by the stream”. How does this alternate translation enhance or alter your interpretation of the poem?

2. “At the Fishhouses” by Elizabeth Bishop

Read the poem: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52192/at-the-fishhouses>.

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 in Massachusetts and grew up there and in Nova Scotia. Throughout her life, Bishop was an avid traveler who lived in many different places across continents and seas, including Brazil, Key West, and Maine. Her extensive travel experiences are often reflected in her works, displaying an intense attachment to geographical and local details. "At the Fishhouses" is an excellent example of her fascination with the edge where the land meets vastness.

“At the Fishhouses” first appeared in 1954 in *The New Yorker* and was later included in her second poetry collection, *North & South/A Cold Spring*, in 1955. This poem might stand as a departure from Bishop's customary style, as she usually adopted a more restrained, rather than revealing, voice. In fact, she opposed the confessional school of poetry, which was very popular in her time and championed by her good friend, poet Robert Lowell. In “At the Fishhouses”, however, Bishop did not shun straightforwardly declaring her mighty prophecy near the end of the poem, “It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, drawn from the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts / forever, flowing and drawn, and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.” This declaration, upon closer examination, was clearly contrived and built up from the start of the poem.

The poem begins rather plainly, delineating a picture of a fishhouse by the coast with painstaking details – a signature of Bishop’s style. As the poem progresses, its focus subtly shifts to the poet’s epistemological contemplations. The sea's “utterly free” and “forever flowing and drawn” nature, as perceived by Bishop, precisely mirrors knowledge. She perceives knowledge as constantly evolving and elusive, forever out of human reach, just like the vastness of the sea. Moreover, in her remarkable lines, “If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately, / your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn/ as if the water were a transmutation of fire”, Bishop draws our attention to how the pursuit of knowledge is enchanting yet overwhelming, and inevitably painful.

Breathing life into the sea, Bishop presents us with an innovative view to examine our relationship with the grandeur of nature. Her fascination with geologically ambiguous locations is indeed intriguing. Many of her most captivating poems were written by the seas, at the boundary of land and water, where the traces of humans have nearly yet not entirely disappeared, and solitude yet not complete isolation was attainable. She leans back and observes. There couldn't be a better place for the poet to reflect on the limitations of humanity and the relationship between us, space, history, and knowledge. A theme often explored in ecopoetry is an unseen power greater than us, and “At the Fishhouses” clearly echoes that idea. Therefore, this poem serves as a poignant reminder of our position, existence, and relationship with nature or a higher power. If you were filled with wonder by this poem, you might also want to check

out Bishop's "Crusoe in England" and "The Map," which also delve into elements of geography and cartography. Enjoy!

Questions:

- 1) How would you describe the narrating voice throughout the poem? Should there be an unexpected shift in the narrative voice at any point in the poem, where would you perceive it to occur? How are the parts before and after the twist different?
- 2) The poem also makes a couple of allusions to Christianity. Look into some of these references, including "Baptist hymns," "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," and "total immersion." What interpretations do these elements inspire in you? How do they add to your understanding of Bishop's viewpoints about humanity's quest for knowledge?

3. “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop

Read the poem: <https://poets.org/poem/fish-2>.

Interestingly, besides the themes of geography and maps, Bishop also wrote quite a few poems on the subjects of animals, in part inspired by her main mentor, Marianne Moore. Other fascinating animal poems by her including “The Man-Moth” and “The Moose”, and the prose poem “Rainy-Season; Sub-Tropics” are also definitely worth checking out. “The Fish” was written in 1946 and initially published in her first collection of poetry, “North & South,” released in the same year. This poem is an excellent example of Bishop’s famously meticulous and vivid imagery, where she provides an in-depth observation of a large fish caught by the speaker.

Bishop perceives the fish as exotic, beautiful, and enigmatic, as if it has emerged from an entirely different world: “He hung a grunting weight, / battered and venerable / and homely.” Indeed, “shapes like full-blown roses / stained and lost through age”, the fish seems to inhabit, and will continue to inhabit, an ancient realm—an expansive space that will remain beyond human reach. She studies the fish with an astonishing amount of patience and awe, delineating both its beauty and suffering to us: “While his gills were breathing in / the terrible oxygen / —the frightening gills, / fresh and crisp with blood, / that can cut so badly—”. Despite being caught by the speaker’s fishing hook, the fish doesn’t exhibit any signs of vulnerability. Rather, it maintains its resilience and grandeur, leaving an overwhelming yet captivating impression on both the poet and readers, almost seeming to demand their undivided attention.

Guided by the poet, we as readers are led into a different space. For me, it was certainly the first time I began to view fish—a common, familiar creature frequently encountered in daily life—in a new light. I believe gaining new perspectives like this is one of the greatest gifts that the practice of reading ecopoetry, or poetry in general, can offer us. What other activities would allow us to take a moment and give our utmost concentration, patience, and humility to dwell upon the magnificence of other living beings that share our habitat?

At the end of the poem, the act of releasing the fish – “And I let the fish go” – is carried out easily and effortlessly by the speaker. This choice seems to stem not from a didactic intention to emphasize the importance of coexisting harmoniously with nature, but from an instinctive response to the awe Bishop feels for the creature’s mystery, might, and majesty. As Professor Schmidt commented, rather than keeping the fish as a trophy or consuming it, the true trophy for Bishop is this very tribute—the poem itself. Ultimately, the poem goes beyond being a straightforward call for awareness about the adverse impact of human activities on the aquatic ecosystem. Instead, the poet offers a patient and profound gaze at the enigmatic, almost monstrous magnificence of the creature and makes that experience real for us through her words.

Mary Oliver's poem, also titled "The Fish," serves as a response to Bishop's work. Oliver invites us to imagine the consequences that follow when we consume what we catch. I highly recommend exploring this poem as well!

Questions:

- 1) At the end of the poem, why do you think the poet deliberately understates the act of releasing the fish with just one simple, short sentence? I've attempted to provide my interpretation in the passage above—do you agree or disagree?
- 2) The fish, as observed by Bishop, seems to imply an immense enigma and sanctity that appears unexplainable. What do you believe is Bishop's reaction to such feelings provoked by her encounter with the fish? In your own experiences, have you encountered similar feelings when interacting with other living beings?

4. “The Idea of Order at Key West” by Wallace Stevens

Read the poem: <https://poets.org/poem/idea-order-key-west>.

“The Idea of Order at Key West” is a poem written in 1934 by American modernist poet Wallace Stevens. It was later included in his second book of poetry, “Ideas of Order”, published in 1936. As its name suggests, the poem is set on the island Key West in the state of Florida. This island used to be quite secluded until a military base was set up and a rail line connected it to the mainland, leading to a surge in residents and visitors. Famous writers like Ernest Hemingway and Elizabeth Bishop often visited this island and found inspiration in its surroundings, and Stevens was amongst these literary visitors.

In “The Idea of Order at Key West”, the poet seems to be greatly concerned with the transformative power of creating art, and how it is connected with the vast universe that is outside of us. Enthralled by a woman singing by the sea, Stevens attempted to distinguish between her song and the sound of the chaotic ocean. The physical universe and the mind of art: both existences seemed to be extricated blended, and which one was real?

Personally, I read this poem as a successive sequence of Stevens’s philosophical propositions centered around this theme. First, he makes it clear that we did not invent the universe – the line “The water never formed to mind or voice” clarifies that the ocean’s existence is an autonomous reality. We could hear it (“constant cry”), confirming its “veritable” presence beyond the realms of our imagination. He then concedes that it is plausible that the woman’s song was influenced by the sound of the sea, as “what she sang was what she heard”. Her song seems to have the power to harness the chaos of the sea and transform it into something comprehensible and meaningful: “It may be that in all her phrases stirred /The grinding water and the gasping wind”. Regardless of whether the sea’s influence on her song was conscious or not, the woman maintained agency over her creation — “She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang.” At this point, Stevens expresses his wonder at the supposition - she is the creator of this powerful, unforgettable moment, the primary reason why the poem was created. As such, he seems to suggest that human “spirit” may, indeed, hold more power than the universe because, in the absence of her song, the “plungings of water and the wind” might resort to being “meaningless”, becoming mere sounds of summer “repeated without end”.

Altogether, the poem recognizes and celebrates the immense power of creating art, which can feel empowering, especially if you have experienced and reveled in moments of crafting sense out of apparent nonsense (which, I believe, we all have experienced at some point in our lives). It reflects upon our irresistible urge to create orders out of the unbearable, utterly chaotic universe, embodied by the way the harbor lights “Mastered the night and portioned out the sea”.

However, this poem also prompts reflection on what Stevens omits—what he fails to see. While Stevens avoids imagining the harmful consequences of human-imposed order, we are now

acutely aware of these realities. Consider the environmental devastation we have wrought in the name of scientific and technological advancement. Therefore, this poem remains pertinent today as it invites us to contemplate the darker side of our “Blessed rage for order” and to meditate on ecological imbalance and our attempts to introduce and maintain order in the environment.

If you are intrigued by this poem and Stevens’ exploration of the tension between reality and perception, you might also want to explore his other works, “The Plain Sense of Things” and “Of Mere Being,” where he delves into similar themes.

Questions:

- 1) Stevens discusses the notion of “order” throughout the poem. What does “order” mean to you in your own past experiences? How do you make of Stevens’s characterization of our desire to seek order in the universe as a “blessed rage”? Do you agree or disagree with such a characterization?
- 2) It seems that “The Idea of Order at Key West” is a poem that was initially prompted by Stevens’ contemplation of the relationship between human’s creativity and the universe. Do you think through the process of creating this poem, Stevens managed to resolve his conflict/ question eventually? Do you think he arrives/ provides a definite answer or a predilection to the readers?

5. “A House Called Tomorrow” by Alberto Álvaro Ríos

Read the poem: <https://poets.org/poem/house-called-tomorrow>.

Alberto Álvaro Ríos, the poet Laureate of the state of Arizona, was born on September 18, 1953, in Nogales Arizona. Ríos received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona in 1974 and 1979 respectively (Academy of American Poets). His writings reflect his youth growing up in a border town to a White mother and a Mexican father (Poetry Foundation). In doing so, he skillfully intertwines distinct aspects of his Mexican heritage, the idea of the borderlands, and pressing political issues to help people expand their panorama of the world around them (Stevenson). His poems beautifully encapsulate certain joys of being human and provide a refreshing new perspective on the mundane like his poem “Don’t Go Into the Library.” Ríos talent for creating masterful works has won him several accolades like the Arizona University’s prestigious Outstanding Alumnus Award and the Walt Whitman Award for *Whispering to Fool the Wind*. Some works of his include *November 2: Día de los muertos*, *Faithful Forest*, and *A Yellow Leaf*. “A House Called Tomorrow” can be read for free on poets.org and was published in 2018.

The tone of Ríos’ poem is hopeful and uplifting as reflective of its initial lines “You are not fifteen, or twelve, or seventeen—/ You are a hundred wild centuries”. Similar to how the winds of a summer day can lift the spirits of those outside in the sweltering heat of the summer sun, this brisk wind of hopefulness inspires and invites readers to begin creating change in their lives when they feel defeated. Moreover, the speaker appears to be a wise older person, possibly a parental figure, who is providing a younger person, the reader, with sage advice to help them through a difficult moment in their life. Moreover, the motif of being the product of generations reflects Ríos’ Mexican heritage where family is an integral aspect of life. At least in my own lived experience as a Mexican-American, I connected with the themes of receiving advice from a loved one and being supported by those physically and spiritually present. Additionally, the use of uplifting language throughout the poem in lines like “That we can make a house called tomorrow./ What we bring, finally, into the new day, every day,/ Is ourselves. And that’s all we need/ To start. That’s everything we require to keep going” instill the idea that although it might seem like the world is crumbling around us, and we feel like we are at a crossroads, there is always an opportunity to create a better future for ourselves. To me, this idea reflects how eco-poetry is not solely for ringing the alarm bells in people’s minds about the current climate crisis but rather for inspiring people to make a change wherever they are. Thus, an interpretation I had reading this poem through an eco-poetic lens is that change can and will happen when we unite with other people.

Historically, change on a wide scale has not been the result of the acts of a lone individual, rather, it is through the collective effort of people who share the same goal, are supportive, and take care of one another. This is evident in climate activism and a core concept found in

ecopoetry where the importance of invoking a sense of belonging not only with the natural world but also with other living beings like family and friends is essential. Additionally, people are stronger and can survive in different places when they have a supportive network of people – family. Overall, this poem pulls from Mexican culture to highlight how people are stronger and can survive when confronted with adversity when they have a supportive network of people. After all, the greater the shared bond between a community, the more powerful one will feel. Although it might seem like nothing can be done to combat the climate crisis and the feelings of hopelessness that come with it, Ríos reminds us that we “...are made, fundamentally, from the good./ With this knowledge, you never march alone.”

Questions:

- 1) How does the metaphor of building a house add to the themes expressed in the poem and why do you think Ríos titled it “A House Called Tomorrow”? If you could give it another title, what would it be and why?
- 2) The final two lines emphasize the idea of support but what other meanings might these lines have and how does it add to your interpretation of the piece? Is the thunder representative of support from family or is there another way this could be interpreted?

6. “The Age of Plastic” by Craig Santos Perez

Read the poem: <https://aaww.org/the-age-of-plastic/>.

Craig Santos Perez is a Chamoru poet from the island of Guam and he currently serves as an English Professor at the University of Hawai'i (Perez). He received his Bachelor's in Creative Writing in 2002 from the University of Redlands, his Master's from the University of San Francisco in 2006, and his PhD from the University of Berkeley in 2015 in Comparative Ethnic studies (Perez). Thus far, he has published five collections of poetry and countless essays where he invokes aspects of his culture while shedding light on serious topics like colonization and the current climate crisis. He has won several awards in his career such as the Gold Medal Nautilus Book Award and the George Garrett Award for Outstanding Community Service in Literature (Perez). “The Age of Plastic” is included in his book *Habitat Threshold*, and is a culmination of all the themes he has explored in his career as a writer and as a person who wants to make the Earth a better place. Some poems of his that explore topics like colonization, Indigenous cultures, and the history of Guam include “A Whole Foods in Hawai'i,” “Care,” and “Thanksgiving in the Plantationocene”. His writing is accessible to all audiences and embeds humor and irony in striking ways to discuss challenging topics (Perez).

This poem discusses the sheer impact plastic has on society while illustrating its caring yet debilitating influence in everyday life. Perez depicts the inherent reliance humans have on plastic by describing an important milestone in his life – the birth of his daughter. For example, he notes that the initial few moments of his daughter's life were thanks to an “inflatable plastic tub” that served as a nurturing landing pad for his daughter and provided his wife with autonomy over her birthing experience. Yet, a few lines later, he describes how innocent creatures are consuming the plastic that brought his beloved daughter into the world. As stated, “... *birds confuse plastic for food*”. This line hints at the disturbance of the food chain because of the abundance of plastic that is finding its way into the ocean. This results in a scarcity of available food for wild animals to consume. Moreover, the eerie use of making all non-plastic words a gray color frame plastic as being a seemingly spectral being that is taking control of modern-day life. Thus, the decision to make the word “plastic” black makes the word become the focal point of what the reader is looking at when we read this poem. To expand on this idea, Perez also anthropomorphizes plastic as being something that feels “empty” when discarded and “free” when in the ocean.

Perez's stress on the negative environmental consequences resulting from humans using so much plastic contrasts with Roland Barthes writing in the 1950s about plastics in his book *Mythologies*. Back then, Barthes in general takes a much more romantic view of plastic; he seems to be in awe of it and treats it as a kind of scientific miracle worthy of mythologizing or heroizing. He treats it as the king of all substances because it can take any form. Or do you read Barthes as hinting in this quotation and there that the sudden new popularity of plastic is

unsettling and dangerous? For more on Perez's poem's engagement with Barthes, see one of the study questions below, and a link.

There is an abrupt shift in the latter half of the poem where Perez dreams that his daughter will be "comprised of plastic/ so that, she too, will survive/ our wasteful hands." This is a chilling way to end the poem and portrays the invasiveness of plastic in his home, his mind, and now his daughter. Perez seems to be warning people about how plastic can not only invade physical spaces but also our thoughts. This is a chilling way to end the poem and portrays the invasiveness of plastic in his home, his mind, and now his daughter.

This made me think about the countless videos of people online who are fixated on obtaining specific plastic figures like a secret Smiski, limited edition anime figures, or "Robby" from the Sonny Angel lineups. Although these plastic figures can liven up desk space and kindle joy, they (and their packaging) will physically end up in landfills creating more harm than good and leaving obsession in its wake.

In short, the structure of Perez's words juxtaposed with the Barthes quote appear like two puzzle pieces that will not fit together. This might have been done so to illustrate how both writers have different views of plastic just as plastic can have two different roles in our society – one that is positive and one that is negative.

Perez's poem perfectly encapsulates the complex nature of the things affecting the natural world around us. In this case, plastic was depicted as being both the savior and usurper of lives and helps initiate conversations about what people can do in their everyday lives to minimize pollution.

Questions:

- 1) The quote featured in the poem comes from French philosopher Roland Barthes' book *Mythologies* which analyzes different aspects of life during the 1950s. I recommend researching more about where this quote comes from in its context and how it alters or adds to your interpretation of Santo's poem (it is an interesting read!). Does it make you think about your current lifestyle choices?
- 2) Santos decided to make all non-plastic words black to illustrate the dominating role plastic plays in our society. He also decided to italicize certain parts of the poem and leave others untouched. Why do you think he did this? Does it emphasize certain ideas?
- 3) How did you interpret the dream/nightmare Santos had about his daughter becoming plastic? Why does he wish she would become plastic?

7. “The Sixth Mass Extinction” by Craig Santos Perez

Read the poem: *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, edited by Sophie Chao, Karin Bolender, and Eben Kirksey. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

No, those aren't misprints. This is a startling poem because 1) in the book from which it is taken, Perez's *Habitat Threshold*, it begins at the bottom of a page with nothing preceding it besides a title; and 2) it seems to be missing most of its words' *vowels*. In addition, the poem is printed in a hushed shade of gray (as shown above), making all the remaining letters rather hard to read. This gives the poem an eerily quiet tone that is amplified by the only missing text being the skeleton of its former self. The source text that Perez “erases” to make his unusual poem is drawn from Alison Deming's prose study *Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit*, 2014.

To us, this mirrors the idea of how living organisms, people, and cultures are being erased because of the climate crisis through the loss of habitat or exacerbation of inequalities in our society. Additionally, this stylistic choice also makes it difficult to read the poem itself. Several vowels are missing throughout each line which forces the reader to slow down and think about what is missing in each word. This makes something that was once easy - reading - more challenging to complete. This is reflective of how some people on this planet are indifferent to the climate crisis because the issues that are created do not affect them while others are fleeing their nations as climate refugees because it is too hot to live.

The overarching theme of this poem is that this current mass extinction will be the detriment of ourselves and the way we currently live our lives. The reason why the poem starts at the bottom of the page is to depict the erasure of certain organisms and human beings.

Another interesting aspect of this poem is the quote from Alison Hawthorne Deming's work that describes how animals were once seen as wise teachers who humans could learn valuable knowledge from and how they are creatures that are intelligent just like us humans. This conversation highlights the erasure of respect humans have towards animals and the catalyst of human-centeredness in Western society. While there are people who acknowledge other living beings as being on the same pedestal as humans and in some cases being placed higher than humans, for the most part, people have lost this way of thinking.

So is there anything hopeful in this poem about extinction? We think there is. Perhaps not all is lost. Although the letters are missing from the quotation, we can still work towards filling in the missing spots and synthesizing new sentences to fill the empty page.

Questions:

- 1) What is another way to interpret the missing letters in the poem? What might the letters that *are* present on the page represent symbolically and why?

- 2) The quote Perez uses is from Alison Hawthorne Deming's collection of essays called *Zoologies*. Do some quick research about this quote and read the text in which it came from. How is reading the quote within its original context strengthening some of the themes touched on in this poem?
- 3) The poem describes how animals in the past held an integral role for humanity, but this has changed with time. What type of relationship do you think Deming is describing? Did animals serve as mentors or were humans still taking advantage of them?

8. “Bad Omen” by Martín Tonalmeyotl, translated by Whitney DeVos

Read the poem: <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/poetry/three-nahuatl-poems-mexico-martin-tonalmeyotl#:~:text=Bad%20Omen>.

Martín Tonalmeyot is a Nahua poet and linguist who strives to bring awareness to indigenous cultures from Mexico through his writing and advocacy. He works on preserving and sharing the language of the indigenous people from Mexico, specifically Náhuatl the ancient tongue of the Aztecs, by writing poems in Náhuatl and Spanish (Indiana University). In doing so, he sheds light on the issues affecting the indigenous people of Mexico, the beauty of the natural world, and the sheer power of language. His messages are so compelling that his poems, anthologies, and other written works have been translated into countless languages. With his Bachelor's in Hispano-American Literature and a Master's in Indo-American Linguistics, he holds a philosophy that every generation of people can create a better situation for themselves (Darling). Moreover, he believes that more people should be encouraged to write poetry and share their narratives so that “outsiders looking in” do not shun and erase their voices. Some interesting poems that are available freely online are “Nestro Salgado”, “Recommendation,” and “My Náhuatl” (Darling; Tonalmeyotl, 2021). This poem was published in Tonalmeyot's collection of poems called *Tlalkatsajtsilistle* in 2016 and is written in Náhuatl, Spanish, and English (Tonalmeyotl and DeVos).

The title of the poem in English is “Bad Omen” and in Spanish, it is “Mariposa de malagüero.” This is fascinating as in Mexican culture, black butterflies are associated with death and if one sees them in their home, it might be a sign that someone will pass away in that household (“Black Witch Moth”). Thus, when there is a black butterfly in the home, or a “moth-bird” like in the poem, it is of the utmost importance for people to remove the foul intruder. What is most interesting about this idea is that the translator of this poem Whitney DeVos states that she had two interpretations of the word “malagüero” whereby one could read it as “agüero” which means premonition or omen or “mala güero” which means “bad blonde” (Tonalmeyotl and DeVos). Taking this into consideration, it provides a different perspective on how to interpret the “moth-bird” as representing the “gringos” or “mala güeros” who are relocating to Mexico and the issues that follow like a “Bad Omen”.

The double meaning of “malagüero” amplifies the intensity the speaker makes in calling forth for help in driving away the moth-bird. This made me interpret the calls for help to those in the speaker's indigenous community and those near him to “wake up!” and acknowledge the inequities occurring because of the colonization by White Americans. This is reflective of the urgent tone of the poem where the speaker is shouting for people to not fall asleep because there will be an “imminent end.” As illustrated in the following lines, “Wake up, brothers, wake up!/ Let's drive this intruder out of the house”. I viewed this end as possibly being the erasure, or death, of the language, culture, and homes of the indigenous people of Mexico.

Currently, there is an influx of White Americans coming to Mexico to work remotely which is displacing people from their homes, the subsequent gentrification of local areas, and the push for speaking English rather than Spanish in these spaces (Medina). Moreover, the climate crisis will exacerbate the inequalities currently affecting the disenfranchised communities in Mexico while also catalyzing the natural disasters that occur and other weather phenomena (United Nations). Yet, there is hope as the speaker is creating a community and calling for the united support of his family to fight against this intruder throughout the poem with the repetition of the word “brothers”.

Ultimately, this poem not only serves to shed light on the injustices Indigenous people are facing in the wake of the climate crisis, but it also highlights the fluid nature of what an ecopoem can be. Oftentimes, when people think about ecopoetry they might have the idea that it is about a poem praising a small bird or sharing awe of a tree, rather it is a diverse area that touches on countless topics like the displacement of native people, the inequalities that occur to disenfranchised people, and the strength of feelings of belonging.

Questions:

- 1) What do you believe is the reason the poet decided to repeat the phrase “wake up brothers”? What is its significance?
- 2) Feel free to research more about the influx of Americans migrating to Mexico and its effects on local communities. How does this change how you interpret the poem? Do you think the poet had this in mind when he wrote this?
- 3) If you can understand Spanish, how does the Spanish version of the poem differ from the English version? Are certain words emphasized or easier to understand like “moth-bird”?

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