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Spring 2024

### Death, Love, And Feathers: Poems Teaching Us To Fly

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#### Recommended Citation

Isa Specchierla , '26; Sophia Cáceres , '26; and Peter Schmidt. (2024). "Death, Love, And Feathers: Poems Teaching Us To Fly".

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# **Death, Love, and Feathers: Poems Teaching Us to Fly**

by Isa Specchierla & Sophia Cáceres  
Swarthmore College

This anthology was created for “Ecopoetry and the Climate Crisis”

English 71E/ENVS 041, Spring 2024  
with support from Prof. Peter Schmidt,  
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## **Introduction:**

*Death, Love, and Feathers: Poems Teaching Us to Fly* is an anthology that provides readers who are just starting to become interested in ecopoetry and want a place to begin their wonderful journey. We have incorporated some well-known ecopoets such as **Mary Oliver**, **Robert Frost**, **Emily Dickinson**, and **Maya Angelou**, which have personally inspired our own interest and sparked our love for ecopoetry. We have also included a few other lesser-known contemporary eco-poets, whose work touches on how our environment has been transformed through climate change.

We also present poems by **Wanda Coleman**, **Eleanor Wilner**, and **Joy Harjo**.

Through this anthology of eight poems, we highlight 3 prominent themes (love, birds, death) that often serve as a common thread between both ecopoems and poetry writ-large. The commonality of these themes demonstrate how eco-poems can be tied to a multitude of different aspects, not simply about painting a picture of the natural world. These poems highlight additional themes of femininity, different human interactions with the earth, desire, mortality, and violence. Enjoy!

## “A Meeting,” by Mary Oliver

Born in 1935 and recently passed in 2019, the poet Mary Oliver was best known for reflecting humanity's relationship with the natural world through poetry. Her poem also treats the themes of death, appreciation of nature, the soul, queerness, love, and the afterlife, and such a mix is characteristic of Oliver's distinctiveness as a writer. Throughout her life, she published more than fifteen collections of poetry including *Blue Iris* (2004), *A Thousand Mornings* (2012), and *Devotions* (2017).

You can find “A Meeting” in her book *New and Selected Poems* (1992).

Read the poem online: <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/5248/a-meeting/>.

*A Meeting* by Mary Oliver is a beautifully serene poem that explores the themes of motherhood, life, and femininity. This poem reminds us, readers of the universality that is the creation of life, whether that be in the natural or human world. In this poem, the speaker is filled with a sense of awe and adoration, prompting reflection on the fleeting nature of such moments and the importance of treasuring them when they occur. In the end, this poem celebrates the profound impact of these special encounters on our lives, reminding us of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the beauty that surrounds us in the natural world.

For the first-time reader, it's not at all clear what kind of creature has just given birth. We don't even know the species (other than it seems to be a mammal?) It's a she and she's delivered a “slippery package,” then licks it. How are these details relevant for the poem?

Similar to many of her other works, Mary Oliver takes upon the role of the observer within this poem. Rather than placing herself in direct involvement with the events taking place, Oliver writes how “I can only stare” (14) and the reader is also forced to simply observe and reflect as Oliver does. It is important for readers to note how Oliver herself does not utilize sensory descriptions (aside from describing her observations) since the speaker is not the main focal point of this poem.

The overall understanding of the poem is a reflection of femininity in the natural world. Although the main focus of the poem is on imagining motherhood and how this scene inspires powerful desires in the narrator, there are also many allusions to Oliver's lesbianism, particularly in the last 4 stanzas. However, it is crucial not to reduce everything in Oliver's work as merely hidden nods to lesbianism. It's about yearning for a loving, connection with the world, particularly nature beyond the conventional *human* realm. Yet, this love isn't entirely platonic, nor is it ever entirely concealed. This poem stands out among her works as one where the theme of same-sex attraction suddenly takes center stage, alongside a profound longing. The primary sexual energy is directed towards the mother figure, rather than solely towards the landscape. It's a longing to embrace wildness entirely in that manner, to experience a sort of rebirth. This moment is one where Oliver almost explicitly exposes her sexual fantasies. They're also present in some of her other poems involving creatures, but typically, she veils such eroticism as not pertaining to lesbian desire but rather as an intense love for nature.

**Questions for the reader to consider:**

- ❖ Another important detail is Oliver's use of flower imagery. Not only are flowers often used to symbolize life (a central theme here), but how do the colors provide a better sense of understanding in regard to themes of femininity in the poem as well?
- ❖ What shift occurs in the last four stanzas? Why do the speaker's desires go suddenly in another direction and how does this reflect queer undertones within the poem?
- ❖ Can you as the reader find a potential reason why there are only two lines in every stanza? What is the purpose of the equal balance of the stanzas and the overall form this poem takes?

## “A Late Walk,” by Robert Frost

Born in 1874, American poet Robert Frost remains one of the most well-known poets of the early 20th century. He grew up in America and then traveled to England to visit for most of his life where many of his poems derive inspiration. Frost is known for his use of colloquial language to depict beautifully serene scenes and rural imagery. Other works of his include *Birches* (1913), *New Hampshire* (1923), and *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening* (1923). *A Late Walk* can be found in the poetry collection *Mountain Interval* (1916).

When I go up through the mowing field,  
    The headless aftermath,  
Smooth-laid like thatch with the heavy dew,  
    Half closes the garden path.

And when I come to the garden ground,  
    The whirl of sober birds  
Up from the tangle of withered weeds  
    Is sadder than any words

A tree beside the wall stands bare,  
    But a leaf that lingered brown,  
Disturbed, I doubt not, by my thought,  
    Comes softly rattling down.

I end not far from my going forth  
    By picking the faded blue  
Of the last remaining aster flower  
    To carry again to you.<sup>1</sup>

Frost uses vivid imagery and natural symbolism to convey a melancholy tone and themes regarding the cyclical nature of life. *A Late Walk* begins with the speaker walking through a harvested field, where the "headless aftermath" and "heavy dew" create a somber and reflective mood. The path, now partially obscured by the remnants of the harvest, symbolizes the transition from growth to decay, mirroring the inevitable approach of winter and highlighting the passage of time. This imagery sets the tone for the rest of the poem, as the speaker encounters scenes of desolation and decline, such as the "withered weeds" and "sober birds," which evoke a deep sense of sadness "sadder than any words."

The poem's concluding stanzas deepen this sense of reflection and loss. A prominent theme within the poem is humanity's interaction with the natural world and the tangible display of time. This is highlighted through the moment with the bare tree with a single "lingered brown"

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<sup>1</sup> "A Late Walk," Poets.org, July 24, 2019, <https://poets.org/poem/late-walk>.

leaf that falls at the speaker's presence. Picking the "faded blue" aster flower, the last remnant of summer signifies an attempt to hold onto beauty and life despite the encroaching decay. Again, it's another example of nature's way of providing the world with visual markings of time passing on. By intending to "carry again to you" this flower, the speaker introduces a personal element, hinting at themes of memory and remembrance. Gifting flowers to another is often associated with the acts of a lover, potentially turning this poem into a love poem. It is known that Frost's wife Elinor Miriam White was a significant influence on the poet's work, and the "you" could be as if he is directly speaking to her. Overall, Frost's use of natural elements to explore the theme of the inevitability of change creates a reflective poem that resonates with the universal human experience of loss, longing, and love.

**Questions for the reader to consider:**

- ❖ Pay attention to the sound and rhythm of the poem. How does Frost use language and structure to create a sense of movement and flow?
- ❖ Notice the specific naming of the "aster flower". What is the symbolism behind this flower? How does understanding its potential significance aid to the poems overall understanding?
- ❖ How does Frost explore the passage of time in the poem?

## “Caged Bird,” by Maya Angelou

Born in 1928, the American memoirist, poet, educator, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, and several books of poetry in her lifetime. Her work often explored themes of identity, empowerment, and resilience. “Caged Bird” is a part of her 1983 poetry collection titled *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*. Angelou is best known for her groundbreaking memoir “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” which not only captured the struggles of African Americans but also resonated with readers of all backgrounds, making her one of the most influential voices of the late 20th and 21st centuries. Other works of hers include *Heart of A Woman* (1981), *Letter to My Daughter* (2008), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013).

Read the poem online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>.

Angelou is rarely called an ‘ecopoet.’ But she uses nature references a lot in her poems (as in this example), and always as a way both to comment on nature for its own sake, but also as a way of thinking critically about human society and history. Further comments and some study questions follow.

Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" is a powerful exploration of oppression, freedom, and resilience. The poem describes a "caged bird"—a bird that is trapped in a “narrow cage” with limited mobility, only able to sing about the freedom it has never had and cannot attain. One may interpret this caged bird as an extended metaphor for the Black community's past and ongoing experience of systemic racism in the United States in particular. Another interpretation is that it portrays the experience of any oppressed group. The metaphor captures the overwhelming agony and cruelty of the oppression of marginalized communities by relating it to the emotional suffering of the caged bird.

The repetition of the third stanza beginning with “the caged bird sings[...]” is also noteworthy. Through Angelou’s use of repetition, she grasps the reader's attention to display the poem's main focus of the “caged bird” rather than the “free bird”. While each are metaphors for the free and the oppressed groups in American society, Angelou particularly takes the time to describe the “caged bird” and despite the suffering it endures, its continued devotion to sing.

Another important aspect of the poem that readers must notice is the fact that the caged bird who is no longer able to fly or move, is the only one that sings. The caged bird sings to express its deep yearning for freedom and its dreams of a life beyond the bars of the cage. The act of singing represents the bird's hope and its innate desire to experience the world outside its confinement. It can also be seen as an act of defiance against its captivity. Despite its physical constraints, the bird uses its voice as a means of resistance, asserting its presence and its refusal to be completely subdued by its circumstances.

This poem is a great example of how ecopoetry does not need to be created for the sole purpose of describing nature as many who do not know of it, presume it to be so. Ecopoetry and



the use of the natural world and its creatures within has the ability to reflect injustice and oppression occurring within human society.

**Questions for the reader to consider:**

- ❖ Notice the contrast between the caged bird and the free bird in the poem. What do you think the free bird symbolizes, and how does its freedom highlight the caged bird's captivity?
  
- ❖ Maya Angelou was not only a poet but also a prominent civil rights activist. How does her activism inform the themes and messages of "Caged Bird"? Consider the historical and social context in which Angelou wrote this poem as well. How do issues of race, gender, and inequality influence the poem's meaning and relevance? In what ways does the poem contribute to conversations about social justice and equality?

## “Hope is the thing with feathers,” by Emily Dickinson

“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” was written in approximately 1861. However, it wasn’t published until roughly thirty years later in *Poems by Emily Dickinson- second series*, well after Dickinson’s death<sup>2</sup>. While all of her works were published posthumously, you can now find several published compilations of her poems on shelves around the world. Since then it’s become one of Dickinson’s most inspiring poems for readers.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me

Dickinson’s poem above is well known within seasoned poetry readers as well as for those new to the genre. Its hopeful tone paired with chaotic imagery is a familiar juxtaposition seen within many ecopoems, making it an ideal starting point for readers who are just beginning their poetry journey. When approaching the interpretation of the poem, however, readers should pay close attention to the shift in perspective of the last line. Not only is this line iconic, but it also forces readers to reflect on what Dickinson is referring to when she means that hope has never “asked a crumb- of [her].”

Dickinson chooses to compare hope to a bird, a familiar symbol of new beginnings and longing. Throughout the poem, hope is threatened by an angry storm yet also finds place within faraway lands and seas. However, Dickinson notes that hope is never found in “Extremity.” It is up to readers to determine what she means by this. Some interpretations take “Extremity” to refer to what is other-worldly, while theists may attribute it to some type of heaven. Despite these seemingly conflicting interpretations, Dickinson’s ambivalent representation of religious belief within her work makes each reading unique and valuable<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson, “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers by Emily...,” Poetry Foundation, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>.

<sup>3</sup>Linda Freedman, “Introduction: Dickinson and Religion - Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination,” Cambridge Core, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/emily-dickinson-and-the-religious-imagination/introduction-dickinson-and-religion/AE1FD6C989628333DE0F2BDD2EF923D8>.

The word “extremity” in the poem doesn’t have to refer to the next world; it could refer to extreme emotions caused by life in this world, including loss. Dealing with loss is a topic of many other Dickinson poems.

“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” is especially valuable when understanding the goals of ecopoetry because it provides a more positive perspective on our relationship to the Earth. While many contemporary ecopoems stress the importance of climate crisis and often carry a fearful tone, those that emphasize hope offer an alternative viewpoint often missing from today’s ecopoetry. Being exposed to both ends of the spectrum (hope vs fear) can help readers come to terms with how they reckon with today’s climate crisis.

**Questions for the reader to consider:**

- ❖ How do the hyphens add to the aesthetics and overall reading experience of the poem? What do you think they signify?
- ❖ Focus on the last two lines. How does the capitalization of the “E” in “Extremity” affect your interpretation of the poem? What if the “E” was in lowercase?
- ❖ Look at the other capitalized words in the poem. Why do you think Dickinson chose to emphasize those words specifically? How might they reflect natural power dynamics?

## “Requiem for a Nest,” by Wanda Coleman

Born in 1946, Wanda Coleman was a poet who explored the intersections of race and class, particularly in impoverished Los Angeles, California. While never formally educated in poetry, she has a prolific list of publications including *American Sonnets* (1994), *Bathwater Wine* (1998), and *Native in a strange land* (1996).

You can find “Requiem for a Nest” in her book *Ostinato Vamps* (2003).

Read the poem online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52931/requiem-for-a-nest>.

Coleman’s poem is particularly valuable in the genre of ecopoetry because it explores the timely tension between urbanization and nature. As deforestation continues on a terrifying scale, more animals (like the bird Coleman describes) become endangered by the extermination of their homes and the expansion of pollutants. When approaching “Requiem for a Nest,” it is paramount for readers to acknowledge the tone of sadness present as Coleman describes how “all” are unwittingly doomed by human commercial aspirations.

While Coleman describes several animals in her poem, the “winged thang” takes center stage in taking readers through the destruction of ecosystems through rapid urbanization. Characterizing a bird as just a “winged thang” suggests a sort of innocence, forcing readers to witness the destruction of natural environments through the lens of an innocent and unwitting onlooker. “thang” also celebrates Black English. While the bird itself is unaware of the pollutants and predators present in its vicinity, us as readers hold the power of recognition when adopting the bird’s perspective. It is important to interrogate Coleman’s choice of presenting a naive perspective of natural destruction to her readers, as it may allude to our own naivete on the subject.

### Questions for the reader to consider:

- ❖ For a more nuanced understanding of the poem, it is suggested that readers take the time to research the significance of the word “Requiem.” How might Coleman’s choice to include this word in her title affect the tone of the poem?
- ❖ After researching the meaning of “requiem,” read the poem again. Do any new emotions come up? If yes, what do you think the title adds to the reading experience? Think also about the poet’s pleasure in mixing informal or slang English in with formal diction in the poem, including an ancient word such as “requiem.”

## “For the Willows to Bless,” by Eleanor Wilner

Born in 1937, poet Eleanor Wilner “is known for writing poetry that engages politics, culture, history, and myth”<sup>4</sup>. She was also awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1991. Her poem “For the Willows to Bless” can be found in the March/April 2021 edition of the *American Poetry Review*. Additional publications include *Shekhinah* (1984) and *Before Our Eyes: New and Selected Poems* (2019). She is a Philadelphia-based poet.

“For the Willows to Bless” is available in the American Poetry Review digital issue for March/April 2021.

“For the Willows to Bless” is especially interesting because it observes the human funeral ceremony through the perspective of willow trees. Surprisingly, the trees seem quite willing to extend their limited resources out to the grieving humans below, especially given humans’ penchant for natural destruction. It is valuable for readers to note this tension and reflect on how a symbiotic interpretation of our relationship to nature may be helpful in engaging with nature and its life-saving abilities.

Readers should also take time to research the symbolic significance of the willow tree when approaching the poem. Wilner could have very easily chosen not to name the type of tree, or chosen another species entirely to witness the funeral procession. How does the symbolism of the willow tree specifically contribute to the overall interpretation of the poem? What emotions does the willow tree evoke following your outside investigation?

The ending is perhaps the most surprising moment of the entire poem. Up until the last few lines, the willows recount their witnessing of an immense magnitude of human grief. Through this witnessing, the trees offer shelter in the form of shade and music through their leaves swaying in the wind. Yet, the last lines “this sorrowing/ multitude, who, in return, bring/ their tears to water our roots” introduce an element of symbiosis between human grief and nature. When approaching the significance of this implied symbiosis, it is valuable for readers to ask: What are the implications of human tears contributing to the survival of the willows? What element does grief play in this survival? Is it necessary?

In addition, it’s not clear that the humans are even aware that the willows are empathic and are blessing them. Or that their tears are (literally or metaphorically) being recycled, re-joining the great water cycles via the willows’ roots and then the air (via transpiration through the leaves). The humans appear to be too wrapped up in their own grieving for one of their own kind? The really complicated syntax of the last dozen or so lines of the poem allow these kinds of ambiguities to proliferate...

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<sup>4</sup> “Eleanor Wilner,” Poetry Foundation, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eleanor-wilner>.

## “White Flowers,” by Mary Oliver

Born in 1935 and recently passed in 2019, the poet Mary Oliver was best known for reflecting humanity's relationship with the natural world through poetry. Her use of simple prose to depict additional themes of death, appreciation of nature, the soul, queerness, love, and the afterlife, highlights her particular distinctiveness as a writer. Throughout her life, she published more than fifteen collections of poetry including *New and Selected Poems* (1992), *A Thousand Mornings* (2012), and *Devotions* (2017).

You can find “White Flowers” in her book *Blue Iris* (2004).

Read the poem online: [https://www.poeticous.com/mary-oliver/white-flowers#google\\_vignette](https://www.poeticous.com/mary-oliver/white-flowers#google_vignette).

*White Flowers* by Mary Oliver is a poignant meditation on the transient beauty of nature and the inevitability of mortality. Through vivid imagery and lyrical language, Oliver paints a picture of delicate white flowers, evoking a sense of awe and wonder. Yet, beneath their pristine appearance lies the knowledge of their eventual decay. The poem explores the theme of transience, reminding readers of the fleeting nature of life and the constant cycle of birth, growth, and death. Despite the poem's focus on mortality, there is also a sense of reverence for the beauty of the natural world and the interconnectedness of all living things. Oliver's masterful use of symbolism and metaphor invites readers to reflect on their own mortality and find solace in the enduring beauty of the world around them. Ultimately, *White Flowers* serves as a gentle reminder to cherish each moment and appreciate the fleeting beauty that surrounds us.

The structure of the poem in addition to the beautiful imagery of the natural world, allows the reader almost to start “diving down” into Oliver’s mind filled with these haunted yet beautifully depicted thoughts of death. Oftentimes death is associated with a sense of fear yet through the many tones within this poem, fear is not one of them. She reminds us readers to take the time to reflect on how through the hustle and bustle of our daily lives we begin to feel farther and farther away from the natural world. Yet Oliver reminds us where we eventually return to in times of death—and that is back to the earth—illustrating the cyclical nature of life and the interconnectedness of all living things. This is the heart of what ecopoetry is all about.

### Questions for the reader to consider:

- ❖ How would you describe the overall tone and mood of the poem? Does it evoke a sense of serenity, melancholy, or something else? How does Oliver achieve this tone through her language and imagery?
- ❖ Note the structure of the poem. Does one ongoing stanza in the center of the page provide almost a similar sinking feeling to what Oliver is describing? How does the form aid in fully immersing the reader?

- ❖ What final thoughts or impressions does Oliver leave the reader with? What is your interpretation of what happens to the author at the end of the poem? How does the ending contribute to the overall impact of the poem?

## “How to Write a Poem in a Time of War,” Joy Harjo

Poet and musician Joy Harjo was born in 1951 as a citizen of Muscogee Creek Nation in Oklahoma<sup>5</sup>. Her work centers around telling histories through poetry and amplifying indigenous culture and experience<sup>6</sup>. She was named the 23rd National Poet Laureate from 2019-2022. The poem below, “How to Write a Poem in a Time of War,” was published in her book *An American Sunrise*. Additional publications by Harjo include *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (2015), and *She Had Some Horses: Poems* (1983).

Read the poem online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143934/how-to-write-a-poem-in-a-time-of-war>.

It may seem unclear as to how Harjo’s poem fits within the larger mosaic of ecopoetry. Furthermore, because her poem recounts the distinctly human experience of war, it may feel more difficult to draw connections to the environment. However, Harjo’s juxtaposition of violence against images and similes of nature provides a powerful portrait of nature’s continuity during times of human crisis. When adopting an Indigenous perspective, her poem becomes even more powerful as nature transforms into something that humanity strives to live in harmony with, rather than entirely separate from. War becomes a parasite to the continuity of both human populations as well as our natural environment.

### Questions for the reader to consider:

- ❖ Approaching “How to Write a Poem in a Time of War” may initially seem daunting. Its jagged spacing and shifts in text style can confuse readers. When approaching this challenge, we suggest that readers reflect on the feelings the structure of the poem evokes. It is unsettling? Is it dysfunctional? Why might Harjo want you (the reader) to feel this as you make your way through her work?
- ❖ Why do you think the poem is structured around multiple failed beginnings, and then reflections on why the failures must occur and what should be learned from them?
- ❖ Thoughts on what it means to have the poem finally offer what it says is the right beginning—at its end? Do you think that is indeed the beginning? Why?

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<sup>5</sup> “Joy Harjo,” Poetry Foundation, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/joy-harjo>.

<sup>6</sup> Daisy Fried, “From the Country’s New Poet Laureate, Poems Reclaiming Tribal Culture,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/13/books/review/an-american-sunrise-poems-joy-harjo.html>.



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