

# Nature in Words

Ecopoetry: The New Nature Poetry

Courtney Kalmbach

Central Michigan University

September 24, 2012

## **Abstract**

My objective this summer was to write a collection of original poems inspired by ecopoetry and ecopoetics. To achieve this, I read various works by poets whose central themes are nature and environmental concerns while also researching critical literature surrounding ecopoetry. Ecopoetry shines a light on preservation, conservation, and the link between human and nonhuman nature, extending our role from mere observers to active participants in the preservation in our natural world. The Pierce Cedar Creek Institute has served—not only as a place of residence, but a medium to inspire the poems, and to deepen my understanding and knowledge of nature in my own transformation from poet to ecopoet.

## **Introduction**

In choosing ecopoetry, I wanted to explore and refocus on nature in poetry. Naming Ecopoetry “The New Nature Poetry” addresses ecopoetry as contemporary in its concern, appreciation and relationship to the natural environment. Ecopoems do not focus on observation alone, but the human impact on nature as well. The 21<sup>st</sup> century places value on technology, machinery and cities, while nature is pushed back—overlooked and replaced. Inevitably, our attitude toward the natural environment has also changed our attitude toward nature poetry. Nature poetry can be looked upon by some as a thing of the past, romantic, out-dated or trite. This loss of respect and value in nature is something I wanted to re-engage with and emphasize through my own ecopoetry. Ecopoets focus on the need to find balance between the human and nature, to restore the human and nonhuman nature relationship. This summer’s fellowship experience has brought me closer to nature and understanding ecopoetry as essential to

contemporary poetry; ecopoetry as representative of the nature we know today, but, also, the nature that is disintegrating without it. Awareness of our interactions with nature and examining how human and nature impact each other are some of many themes I came to discuss through ecopoetry.

## **Methods**

Approaching the project of ecopoetry was daunting at first. I was unsure of how to begin, because I felt I had pigeon-holed myself into writing political poetry with which I hadn't much experience. Since the beauty and vastness of nature became intimidating and overwhelming; I started a routine of hiking the trails to get familiar with Pierce Cedar Creek Institute (PCCI). If I could become comfortable with the nature around me I would be comfortable writing about it. I took walks around the beech/maple trail just about every day I stayed at PCCI and made a habit of walking to meals in case I found something on my way. Often in my pack I'd store a book or two of poems, a notebook, pen and water. I'd walk with my pen and paper in hand to easily transfer ideas. Hiking through the woods each day involved anything from a listening experience or pure observation, to thinking out loud or simple solitude where I could, with the assistance of natural surroundings, piece my thoughts together. I wanted to immerse all senses—sight, smell, touch, taste—into my experience at PCCI and in the ecopoetry inspired by PCCI, such as the citrus leaves of spicebush or sassafras, or the music of red-winged blackbirds in the morning. I constantly marveled at what I'd find day to day, because nature is always changing. One week Pink Lady's Slippers would be small white-headed bulbs along the boardwalk, and the next they'd be spread and bloomed into the shaped slipper that gives them their name. In order to document these

great daily findings I often photographed new or revisited natural objects and phenomena with my phone's camera. To improve the quality of my photos, I used Instagram—an application on my phone. With Instagram I could add different filters to the photos to emphasize certain colors, areas of the photo or lighting—for example, a picture of goldenrod could be in focus while everything around it is blurred. Having these photos helped recollect my findings throughout the day and to record my summer at PCCI. More often than not, I would enlarge the photos on my computer while I would write drafts at Meadow Lodge in the evening when I wasn't able to write outside.

The task of writing became more natural as I read eco-poets and poets whose style and voice inspired me to write about nature in new ways, whether nature was a main theme in their work or not. Along with fundamental texts like “Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction” and “Sustainable Poetry: Four Eco-poets.” Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Louise Gluck, Sandra Beasley, Robert Fanning, Jeffrey Bean, Sabrina Orsh Mark and Traci Brimhall are major poets who inspired my work this summer and beyond. Reading these poets' works helped me approach eco-poetry or nature poetry differently than I ever had. For example, Traci Brimhall's “Rookery” uses dark imagery, many containing dead animals, which guided me in writing about dark human and nature relationships (including dead animals like raccoons, deer, moles and birds I sometimes came across on my walks). Each poem was inspired by PCCI in some way—be it a walk, a conversation with a researcher, volunteer work or weekly meetings—and came into being through its own unique accord.

## Results and Discussion

Many of my poems focus on the human and nonhuman relationship: directly or indirectly. For instance, “One violin string left” aims to create a human relationship affected and imitated by nature surrounding the persons and the poem. The first section of the poem begins with an image of nature—crows—and the human that follows after, literally following nature. The human relationship in the poem moves with the events of the poem. The second section demonstrates the mindless destruction of a log that is walked on by the speaker and their “other.” The log has been marked not only by them but nature as well, showing that both can be destructive with purpose and without—“hurt[ing] what cannot respond.” “We do this to each other” is suggestive of this and the human relationship that is somewhat falling apart throughout the poem, though there are moments when it picks itself up and rejuvenates with what is learned from the environment. For example, the death of a raccoon reminds the speaker of a death in the family and the death of nature:

This is the part where everything comes back to life.  
My grandpa, your dog, the wild columbine.

Things rise from dirt  
whether they mean to or not.

Acknowledging the past in the present and its ability to always be there but not always seen; the speaker and “other” are asked to consider life outside of the human, like that of nature, or those who’ve died.

Given this time, I also wanted to experiment and challenge myself with formal poetry. I have written three sonnets, one prose poem and one sestina. The three sonnets are also dramatic monologues and personas from the perspective of a flower, as each title suggests. In choosing a form for each of these voices I was able to condense and

tighten my use of images, language and ideas in the poem to only fourteen lines. The sonnet, not only restricts length, but includes the challenge of an end-rhyme scheme. Each of these sonnets has a voice exclusive to that flower, wherein I empathized with concerns or questions that flower might ask of the human. Particularly, “Queen Ann’s Lace” challenges ideas of femininity and power structures between the human and nature, but also female and male relationships. Lines that propose these ideas include: “I, too, was built// like the carrot” and “All I hear are your machines. Or are you your machines?” Conversely, “Water Hemlock Sonnet” suggests a previously lived human life before being reincarnated into Water Hemlock: “In another life I was an hour. An Annabelle. A Susan.” The concentration on nature in this poem is a resurrection of history or a past that might have been forgotten in the human sense of memory, but the last line: “Mouth or not, nature forgets no one,” aims to rectify those who either ended their life on their own or by some sort of closure that was never fully executed, like a funeral or a missing body. The poem is more of a ghost than the flower itself, but the body of the flower helps ground it in something visually and tangibly alive. It also suggests that parts of us are parts of nature as well.

Another poem that suggests this connectedness is “Operation,” which is in the form of a sestina. The sestina is a seven stanza poem, the first six of which are sestets that end with the same words the first stanza sets up. For example, I repeated the words: *death, flower, passed, line, built, I*. The seventh stanza, or envoi, is three lines long and must include all six repeated words in a prescribed order. I chose a sestina in order to create a pattern of repetition and break it. In a way, the sestina resists being a form since the repeated words alternate in each stanza, but, also, longs for structure through repetition. My poem’s narrative focuses on the horrors found in nature but also the ability of nature

to cure itself. Operation is a pattern and procedure used to create a cycle and recycled nature similar to the sestina's use of repetition. The poem's dark imagery and focus on death—presents a way of viewing nature's usage, existence and meaning: “Dead/ or alive—everything is a home.” Its center is life as one big operation that is constantly healing, repairing and adapting—the nature and human relationship today.

## **Summary**

As a Nature in Words Fellow, I was allowed time and space to indulge in my project—ecopoetry. Through this experience I have grown a deeper kinship with nature and my voice as a poet. This fellowship has encouraged me to focus on what I can do as a poet or writer to improve and preserve nature. I believe words can and do make a difference, and I want to help in refocusing the human eye on nature—whether by the simple appreciation of natural beauty, or to evoke a responsibility toward nature. There are many routes to consider when becoming a nature activist—for me, it's ecopoetry; Pierce Cedar Creek Institute and the Nature in Words Fellowship has helped me realize this. I am beholden to Pierce Cedar Creek Institute and staff, and Diane Herbruck—for making the Nature in Words Fellowship possible. This fellowship has reshaped my views of poetry, nature and the importance of the arts and sciences. I'm grateful for all this fellowship has offered and its encouragement of mentorship. My professor, Robert Fanning, was a tremendous help and critical voice along my journey toward ecopoetry. This close mentorship provided individual workshops, attention and advice I could have only received through Nature in Words. The relationships I've made with nature and my mentor, Robert, have given me support and confidence in what I write about and how it's read. Jeffrey Bean, one of my creative writing professors at Central Michigan

University, suggested the idea of ecopoetry and for this I am ever grateful. I wouldn't have come to the conclusions and questions I have about the nature we see today and the nature poetry that's needed if it wasn't for his suggestion. I plan to continue with ecopoetry and further my studies in poetry by applying to MFA programs in Creative Writing. Along with education, I plan to visit my former high school this fall to share my ecopoetry and Nature in Words Fellowship experience with students—hopefully peeking interest in poetry and nature. I cannot express how much this opportunity has changed me; only offer the poems I've written through this experience and the poems to come after, because I will be writing about the beauty of nature and the necessity for its conservation for a very long time.

### **Table of Contents:**

9. After Smoke Clears
10. Blue Thumb
11. Violets
12. Dead Gray Catbird
13. One Violin String Left
14. One Violin String Left (cont.)
15. Queen Ann's Lace Sonnet
16. Water Hemlock Sonnet
17. Web of Voices
18. The Nest
19. Spillover
20. The Wind Speaks
21. Operation
22. Firewood
23. Sunlight
24. Somnambulists

**AFTER SMOKE CLEARS**

*for my Grandpa Joe*

You are last night's campfire,  
your stale scent reeled in my hair.

Your heart no longer a place to build.

At a prairie's distance I hear the honeybees sob  
in the oak's hefty skeleton—  
vines braid themselves,  
sling of the throat,  
some tight  
some loose.

We do not understand this form of life support,  
but agree that help may be a form of strangle.

We know that to worry is to kneel,  
and we do.

When branches turn to steel  
and birds lose their voices  
we notice the ashes  
and ask to be immobile.

## Blue Song

An emptied robin's  
egg—a blue thumb  
stopped between pages  
of grass. A stung bell,  
the bird's bowled  
lip. Grief comes not from  
the pinched throat  
but the release of it.

## Violets

Don't you see—the leaves are the hearts.  
Vulnerable and changing, they're unlike the bite  
that binds me here: the root. Less fortunate than pine  
whose leaves resemble centipedes, are

natural swordsmen, anything but the heart  
on the sleeve. Do I reveal too much? Lie  
to me, tell me I'm not obvious. The night  
separates us. I imagine you swatting at bugs with a jar.

The utility of your hand shoveling toward small desires.  
I shudder at once,  
remembering, *longing is not a direction—*

*it is having no escape in fire.*  
Morning is a sin. The sun touches  
me with a thirst you'll never know, it is not human.

## **dead gray catbird**

Despair blooms in the throat. And pollinates in song.  
*Ow, Ow, Ow*—goes your metronome pain,

though no more. Whatever struck you came for peace.  
For fossil silence. For picnic. Now you're a castle.

Or museum. Isn't that all nature is?

A shingled soldier. Wings hunched, hugging  
like corn husks. That empty. That full.

A deaf deposit refused by sky. Gifted to land.  
Toads fishing for flies outside the body. Yours. Mine.

Its jaw rusted with the blood of our names—  
unspoken flowers. In ground. In human.

The tongue a ghost. A hand.  
Hungry it is like. An applause.

Gorged it is like. An end.  
Nothing but pelt. Skin.

## One violin string left

From the tops of oaks  
crows chant on knuckled branches.

Answering, you follow their cruel echoes.

My hand pulled by yours  
toward the moss wrinkled trail,  
toward history unrefined.

\*\*\*

The purpose is not to mutilate the surface,  
though we do, but to rattle  
the bodies within.

Balancing on, then kicking a fallen tree.  
We hurt what cannot respond—the bark discarded,  
freckled, signed by boot and woodpecker—  
eliminating it piece by piece.

We do this to each other.

\*\*\*

One violin string left  
of a spider web. A tickling noose  
around my neck.

Gnats knock *Stop! Stop!* at our skin—  
as if to slow us for danger.

Tucked in ribbons of grass, a raccoon—  
its dead face a rash of flies.

You say I am a leech. A lichen.  
I cling to everything. And in this moment, I do.

\*\*\*

You push us forward, thinking I will not  
notice those who still follow.  
The flies. Red. The tailed warning.  
The gone eye's volcano abyss.

I cannot look at you without thinking:  
*swarm, swarm.*

\*\*\*

This is the part where everything comes back to life.  
My grandpa, your dog, the wild columbine.

Things rise from dirt  
whether they mean to or not.

Teaching us: there are things still alive underneath  
our loudness. Our solid quiet.

\*\*\*

The cabin we rented is a new night we enter.

I tell you you're stunning. You're caustic.  
You could field an entire fire.

Later we'll collapse and fold into ampersands.

The way trees divide their roots  
into ribs, ellipses.

Each an attempt to gather and separate  
what is ours.

\*\*\*

Even through window screens we hear  
mosquitoes ring their distant sirens.

They cannot look at us without thinking:  
*drought, drought.* The dry dig  
to the dark river inside.

## Queen Ann's Lace Sonnet

The O of no, of origin, of no  
origin. You pass me like milky

pane or empty table. Me, the roadside  
flare of sheep hair flame. The wilted

hem of a doll's dress. Tenting the mold  
of my moss disc. My silk

compartments. You do not know  
what you feel. I, too, was built

like the carrot. With the soundless skirt of chartreuse beetle legs.  
I am no Virgin's Bower, no Hemlock. You sit

touching me like so. I snow like sleep when you shake  
my corked throat. I cannot music, though my head is filled with it—

not your kind:      wristwatch,   hammer,   engine.  
All I hear are your machines. Or are you your machines?

## **Water Hemlock Sonnet**

Scattered like hail. Like gasping hand. Like explosion.  
I am the stored tantrum. The slow punch of white floret.

Boutonniere of fingertips. Of bald bone. Of fish-belly sore.  
Do not speak to me unless you know:

hearse blouse, anchor chest.  
I am no potato. No—buried much deeper: the root

of all evil. Playing bride. Playing pearl.  
A torn twin. The deadly simulacrum.

Circling like fog. Or the rabbit's ringed eye.  
I, no older than morning.

Pockets ingested with lake. Both times.  
In another life I was an hour. An Annabelle. A Susan.

Now, gowned in white to plant my past. My tongue.  
A holey umbrella. Mouth or not, nature forgets no one.

## Web of Voices

The prairie's voices  
drift like baby spiders  
into my ears.

Each a seed. Feeding spleens  
of invisible alphabets.

Fractions of attachment.  
Kneaded tangents or aphorisms,  
short-end anachronisms.

I, their composer—  
uneven with measure,  
hermetic with bad luck, bad hearing.

I, their translator—  
tower untuned  
to corporeal language.

These webs of what have been  
said and what is still being.

Sounds wheeling, spinning, spun.  
Are we linked by sentence or song?

## The Nest

Like the bird—  
helplessness starts  
when we decide to build nests.

Unlearned, why had we gathered these things—  
damp mulch, apricot seed, shrapnel?  
When dry, how could we keep them  
from bouldering loose?

But we got use to the fireplace  
of shoulder to shoulder,  
the smell of leaves changing with temperature,  
having nothing to say,  
and grasses tapping their canes  
along night's cinnamon song.

Never mindful of the foundation around us.

Not like the birds—  
who trust it  
with their children.

What is it that makes them return, year after year, anyway?  
Rebuilding what winter thieved.  
What wills one to stay over setting fire—  
over mice bones, over warped lace?

I cannot tell which is safe:  
never understanding this piling wreckage,  
or bonding what never will?

I fear breakthroughs  
and overlapping lives:  
purple beeches with baby's breath,  
scurf with thyme.

I know tremulous breath can be beautiful,  
but is there difference between panic and pleasure?  
I ask because home is that threatening.  
That terrible. That honest.

## Spillover

Bitten tongues of spicebush  
pulse with citrus ginger breath.

Like the forest, I'm never settled.

Here, I fret the *tick, tick, tick*.  
Each step setting off a grasshopper.

I'm not afraid of what I'll find,  
only what might find me.

The 8 o'clock sunset leaves me  
with too much time to wander  
and you the excuse to end  
the evening early.

The prairie is thick  
with rising fireflies. Messages  
from the kingdom of love in their waists,

they harbor lanterns of easy affection.

When I return you are asleep  
and I want to disturb  
your body,

that quiet garden—your shoulders dull  
yet glowing like lamb's ear.

I don't know what kind of love  
I'm asking for when I tell you,  
*I regret everything*.

I do not separate like plastic or concrete,

but spill over  
like the ocean bleeds  
into sand.

I can't help but kiss like the snail—  
*taking everything back*:

the letters and lilies, the insults  
and flames—swelled with mistakes—  
like an earth.

## The Wind Speaks

You condemn me for using voices not my own,  
like the closing door or shuffling sycamore.  
For being too high strung for the human ear.

A scream as strong as *gin* or scattered as *fear*.

I am an Ash Collector,  
Closet Acrobat,  
Man of Many Hats.

I take what I want and go:

I'll undress your petals and stomach your sails.  
Or lull your beer cans to sleep.

I'll sound your feeble flags,  
even ride your receipts out of town but I will *always*  
come back.

As invisible stork I deliver to gardens:  
knapweed, autumn olive, garlic mustard seed  
teaching, *invade the space you want. I do.*

You say my mind is too blank, that my face is always racing.

I roll with the punches when the punches are light but yours are coal.

All I want is a place to return to  
but I tire of your exhaust.

Haunted with ghosts you empty,  
with breath I can't refuse.

## Operation

You can only imagine what death  
smells like in 98° heat. No herb or flower  
could nurse the decapitated deer I passed  
walking on Brewster Lake Trail. A power-line  
down had severed its lost head like a built  
fist with no hesitation. I

know when you're old as nature the eye  
cannot fix itself on death,  
but only adapt to repair—nature built  
like a surgeon or architect. Pollen and seed flour  
filling each lifeline  
and past

with wind that always passes  
like *goodbye*, but even I  
can hear its whispered lines:  
*there are no final words. Dead  
or alive—everything is a home.* A flower  
is built

like a funeral—one of nature's smallest buildings  
or sanctuaries. Passing  
this deer has made only one thing clear: *everything flowers.*  
Whether its blood, carnivorous insects, or the eye  
thrown clear from the body. Dead  
is the world we live in—a lineage

of patchwork incarnation—a timeline  
of borrowed time. Built  
on death,  
a landfill of body parts. To see not past  
the horror but to be a part of it. I  
cannot speak for the flower

but I can plant flowers  
in a parade lining  
what's left of the body. I  
will quicken resurrection with building,  
as people do, to surpass  
the borders of what we call dead.

Here, soil is the table of life's operations—flowers build  
stitches along nature's open heart. The sunset's lining passes  
and the surgical lamp deadens.

## **Firewood**

Your 100 year old elephant heart, forty years of cigarettes. Your seafoam fungus on a gray-faced ocean. Your black cherry ripeness reveals a humanness, an animalness—all bare ribs and spine. Your glowing seahorse bones. Joints cracking and kindling a flood of migratory returns. I'd like to speak your raspberry moon language pulsing inside your chamber of cavities. You, milk-ash universe. Two-foot heap of dishes. Disengaged volcano. Maestro of broken noses. Your abyssal canyons and fork-path maps of doom. And labyrinths of tissue. Dozens of disconnected boxcars below a cliff. Night of a thousand piano keys. You, the oldest book—I'll never read.



## Somnambulists

Blind as rutabagas we walk between  
the peeled plum-dark trees.  
On trail, we notice gray plush, limp as a sock—  
a small mole with ravens nested in eyes

that know nothing else.  
Pink hands like clams: half palm,  
half fingernail. The up-ended nose,  
swimmer's pose. Prayer. Drowned.

Someone has been dragging  
the moles from their deep pockets of darkness  
to show us: *sleepwalking is already a kind of death.*  
Those who cannot confront the surface

never understand the full potential of their lungs.  
Bending, wetting my hair with shadow,  
you tell me—*violence is forgiveness.* I kiss you,  
confessing—*we're all steered by nightmares.*

I want to be moved the way ants cathedral  
in their columns of mourning. Black dots  
ballooning the skin. Like us, they begin  
on a path that ends with no exit.