

Poetry and prose section

Edited by **Victor Postnikov**

Victor is a poet, essayist and translator whose home is in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Life far exceeds humans. For millennia, eco-poets have understood it as a far greater enterprise. In their poetry, we can hear the voices of those who came before us and those who live alongside us. Now, however, they face extinction and die in silence, deafened by the roar of civilization. The time has come to renew the old understanding that all life, including humanity, speaks a common language. Thus, the mission of ecocentric poetry, or ecopoetry, is to help us empathize with non-human entities, be they a whale, a tree or a mountain. For we are all kin. Through metaphor and imagery, it speaks directly to our hearts and genes. We begin to realize that we have evolved together and share a common fate.

CLASSIC POETRY

I know the truth

Marina Tsvetaeva

*I know the truth! Throw other truths – away!
No need to fight those we hold dear!
Look: night is creeping to erase the day,
What do you say – the poet, lover, brigadier?*

*Now, wind is low, and the dew is on,
Soon we shall see the starry blizzard gone,
And all be sleeping underneath the stone,
Who wouldn't let each other sleep alone.*

Translated by VI Postnikov.

CLASSIC POETRY

Kingdom of birds

Czesław Miłosz

*In higher skies, a heavy capercaillie
Wings over forests of the land,
A pigeon swings in windy wildness,
A raven dashes like a blade.*

*What is the earth to them? A lake of darkness,
The night I always have to drink.*

*Yet their homes are sunlit islands,
Sheltered by inaccessibility.*

*When with a beak they cherish their feathers,
One may descend – it slowly drifts
And kisses cheek – a hail from other quarters,
Where all is clear, and beautiful, and free.*

Translated by VI Postnikov.

CLASSIC POETRY

Forest of Arden

Zbigniew Herbert

*Cup your hands as if to hold a dream
just as a kernel draws water into itself
and a wood will appear: a green cloud
and a birch trunk like a chord of light
and a thousand eyelids start to flutter
speaking a forgotten tongue of leaves
then you'll remember a white morning
when you waited for the gates to open*

*you know this land will be unlocked
by a bird that sleeps in a tree in earth
but here is a source of fresh questions
the currents of evil roots run underfoot
so look at the bark's pattern on which
the chords of music are stretched tight
a lutenist adjusts the pegs of the strings
to draw a sound out of what is silent*

*gather leaves: a wild strawberry patch
dewdrops on a leaf the comb of grass
and then a golden damselfly's wing
and there is an ant burying its sister
higher up above belladonna's treacheries
the wild pear is sweetly growing ripe
therefore expecting no greater reward
sit yourself down underneath this tree*

*cup your hands as if to hold a memory
like a dried kernel of perished names
and another wood: a cloud of smoke
a forehead marked with black light
and a thousand eyelids stretched thin
over the unmoving rounds of the eyes*

*a tree broken like bread with the wind
the betrayed faith of deserted shelters*

*and that wood is for us and for you
the dead have need of fairy tales too
a clutch of herbs water of memories
so over the pine needles and the rustles
over the sheer spun silk of fragrances
no matter that you catch on a branch
and a shadow leads up steep passages
for you will find and unlock the gate
to our Forest of Arden.*

CLASSIC POETRY

Nemesis (from *Pansies*)

DH Lawrence

*If we do not rapidly open all the doors of consciousness
and freshen the putrid little space in which we are cribbed
the sky-blue walls of our unventilated heaven
will be bright red with blood.*

CONTEMPORARY PROSE

Four Visits to an Ancient Granary in the Utah Canyonlands

Leath Tonino

Across the wash, up the white ridge, down diagonal ramps, look right, two alcoves. In the lower one. Something boxy. A granary?

I contour slow, say my little piece—just here to observe, not mess with stuff, stay a short while, not entitled, just asking permission, is this cool? No answer from the land, from the quiet, but asking feels good.

Out a shelf, over black and gray and olive lichens. Stand on the ledge below gran, maybe fifty feet away. Half of it's rubble, the other half intact. Mud, blocks, logs atop, crisscrossed with sticks. A circular thing. And then, the very moment that I arrive, that I pause there, a peripheral darting. Turn and a bird zips straight in along the cliff face, disappearing inside the gran. You've gotta be kidding me. Did that just happen? Haven't seen a single bird in two hours of hiking, only dim skies, chilly wind, white rock the foot grips, canyon plunging away, exposure increasing. And now the one bird I do see flies straight into the gran?

A canyon wren, wow. Popping up, perching on the broken masonry, flitting to another perch, flitting, flitting, off around the corner. Gone.

I take a seat, still fifty feet away. Don't allow myself to go any closer on this first visit.

* * *

Sitting with gran at my back today. Why? Almost like I'm trying to give it privacy, trying to not put pressure on it, pressure to become clear in my understanding—number of sticks, height of walls, what it is—or, worse, pressure to mean something. Like the herd of browsing mule deer I startled earlier. Rude to stare at them. Let them be.

This isn't about the gran, is it? I suspect this is about sitting with a place. The gran creates a reason, an anchor, a "seat."

Not sure why I put that in quotes.

Something sharp is poking my butt, needling me. For a moment I consider that it could be gran trying to get my attention. So I turn and, hey, the wren is back, dangling upside down from a crack, not looking at me, but not really not-looking at me either. Reach a cold hand into the seat of my jeans, rub at the prickery spot on my butt. A pine needle, oh.

I think the magic of the place, the power of it to transform you, make you move slowly, carefully, delicately, notice stuff, feel a tingle zip up your spine, I think it has less to do with any inherent specialness, like the presence of a granary, and more with the method of approach, the manner of engaging, the deep desire, manifested in the body and mind, pinky toes up to thinking head, to not mess shit up, to be a gentle visitor, a grateful passenger on the journey of the site. Isn't every spot on every map, and every unmapped spot too, a possible site of this sort, a possible ride, if only we bring a certain disposition, comportment? Gran, no gran, in either case we can tiptoe, our feet and our thoughts going lightly, alertly.

Steady wind, but somehow simultaneous stillness, as if there is nonmotion at the center of this motion —that kind of wind, that kind of evening.

Gets so damn cold that I stand up and pace, swing my legs and arms to keep what little warmth I've got flowing, keep it fluid. Would like to stay longer, stare into afterglow, dying colors, the fade to night giving birth to new moods in my mind, but the wind has worsened, is worsening, and no stamping or shaking or pacing is going to prevent me from going brittle, iced over.

Nose drip. Big shiver.

* * *

The wren chirps once when I arrive, a sound from above, from a hidden cubby. I say hello, wait. Minutes pass, a frigid wind blowing through them. Waiting for the wren—to do what? to make a sound? to show itself?—I strip, put on long

johns, tuck pants into socks, jacket into pants. Then, one shoe still untied, I hear the sharp high call and there's the white breast, the orangey flanks. A quick short shot, up out of the gran's rubble. Thin strong feet gripping a ledge. Hello, I say again, though the bird likely heard me the first time.

Back at my seat. Same seat as yesterday and the day before, different view. Always a different view, always difference within sameness.

Sit and sit, get cold and colder. Three hours of this, clouds easing across the sky. I want to pull my hood up, cinch it tight, but doing so would, it seems, shut out the place. Periphery, that's the ticket. Places are never focused, never condensed, never centered, even when there's something like an attention-grabbing granary. You can't look straight at a place, can't put on the blinders of a microscope or binoculars to get a richer, fuller sense. You'll miss the edges, the interactions, the flickerings and flutterings, the faint creatures of the periphery. Thus no hood.

Raven croaking, flying with its shadow, the two of them winging across the blank pink of a huge cliff across the canyon, out beyond my toes.

* * *

All right, here we go.

I step up gingerly, where I haven't yet allowed myself—haven't yet wanted? haven't yet been invited?—to step. A few moves, balancing, trying not to disturb a grain of sand, and I'm there, side by side with the gran, looking under it, into it, through its cracks. The thing breeds quiet in me, total attention, like a sleepy animal I badly want to leave undisturbed, let wake when it wants to wake, slumber forever if it so chooses. Not a grain of sand, brother, don't nudge a grain.

Cobwebs, invisible from a certain angle, clot the fallen rubble. Small brown twists of leaf, blown in from elsewhere, tremble on the webs, creating a kind of force field, a gauze of energy surrounding the gran. Tripwires, brother, don't trip a single web, don't break a single thread.

What holds the world together?

Mortar mud is yellow, about as thick between stones as the stones themselves, an inch, two inches, three inches. Glop, child's sandcastle at the beach, fat handfuls smooshed down, pushed into chinks, no clean finish, yet the swipe of an index finger, the pat of a palm, more or less apparent.

Wait, really? Finger tracks? Not sure if I'm seeing these strokes or just intuiting them. Regardless, I'm feeling them, hands in my pockets, touching nothing.

Seriously, I feel my own pocketed hands patting, swiping, adding water to the sand, glopping on more, shifting the stones, making it sturdy. Ah, how the ancient motion is here before us. Wind in rock. Hands in mortar. Paused in time.

Is that what makes it powerful, the knowledge that somebody stood right here, placed herself just so, hand like this, then like that? Is it this sense of petrified motion? Mud holding the movement of a hand, a mind, a hunger—is this what moves me? Am I even moved, standing here very still, looking, wondering, or am I just standing very still, looking, pretending to wonder, and not really feeling much of anything? I don't think I'm forcing this. I don't think this is me trying to be "deep" or whatever. Not a wannabe shaman, not be. Just trying to pay attention. React in the moment, if such a thing is possible.

I dunno, I dunno. No need to analyze. No need to complicate.

My last visit, at least for this trip, this lifetime. My life in the city, my life in the noise, my life elsewhere calls. I will respond. So be it. And now I will say goodbye.

A long stare at the gran. A nod to the wren, the wren that hasn't shown today, the wren that I'm certain is near. Taking in the lichens, the twigs, the swirls inside slickrock. Taking in the slickness, how my shoes hold tight here on a shelf in the middle of a cliff, on a narrow ledge, so much above me, so much plunging away below.

And then it's goodbye for real, walking fast, sun setting, too cold to stop and look back over my shoulder, teeth chattering, heart pumping, breath a ghost escaping with each exhale.

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Empty trees

SC Flynn

*A town, complete in indifference,
where noon falls heavy as a concrete slab
and the days are long, bright and vast,
far too large for their meagre content,
waiting for the promised arrival of something.
There should be vultures on those branches
watching the efforts of the humans
to give a semblance of meaning to their lives,
but this silence slowly maturing
in a world bleached of meaning was their fate.
Wings of the past lightly brush your cheek
and for a moment you see them again:
refugees migrating into extinction,
heads bowed against the bitter wind of time.*

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Elytra

Sarah Westcott

*our screens are clear something larger sounds birds & bats are falling
we walk out at night as if we've been punched we come round
broken carcasses crunching like glass some of us will tell
of their colours how they looked when crushed onto the pages
& you could lift the frame off the paper folded into likeness
how they struck our brows & you could hear them breaking like tiny eggs
tiny thud of guts thuds & indentations hard little carriers always metaphor
& children will look in disbelief as if any of this was ours to tell*

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Earthed

Sarah Westcott

*This other living, living here.
Language dragging on its subjects.
I'll body my body – cranial dome,
a garland of coral. Sea swell.
Cup the light under my face
take the feet and arms,
angel with a shock of hair
not vengeful but exercised.
What do I see through the trees?
Songs to a far-off son, a tongued trunk
and what of the fished snakes,
brown scope of water?
My voice needs soft rain
stepping on light-feet, the notes falling, opening.
Heart beats are a landscape,
I am a bridge, close to a face
the face is chalk countless lives
fantails, orange eyes, magnetite.
Weather falling; thick American snow.
I was a child, I was a soul in a green-white bower,
who called me into this language?*

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Intrinsic

Peter D VanderBloomer

*We strive, understandably,
To preserve what flatters our fancy,
What gilds the path we walk—
Manage the harvest so that we can
Harvest evermore; myopia
Is a curse we seem actually able to cure*

*When the requisite motivation trips the wire
And the tangle of axons
Fire like the sky's electric storm
To the tune of delighting in that which
Beaches itself upon humanity's shore.*

*But is there not an incentive of a saintlier breed
Than simply securing salvation
For that which we may encounter
And be delighted in?
What of everywhere man has never strode,
Those fish that were there below the murk
But never brought twitch to baited pole, and the
Life that crawls just past where the firelight falls?
A black box to us
That retreats from our every probe,
Found everywhere and always
Save for the dim dawn we've spawned
In a tremendous night—a black box to us,
Illumined though, perhaps, to itself from inside.*

*Alongside us reality thrives, brightly
In the places and times our light will never shine:
The delights I will never stumble upon,
The awe I will never know,
Save for the thought that, intrinsic,
It glows in the swollen interstices
Unreachable from the filamentous paths we breach
Through the universal body;*

*And of this otherness that I will never unite with,
Why, pray tell, do I love the thought of it—
This great material-god extended beyond—
And shiver in delight
To think of us and all we've ever seen and thought as
But a tangle of illumined filaments
Feebly firing in a tremendous night?*

About the contributors

Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) was possibly the greatest Russian female poet of the 20th century. She was unrivalled in her passion, lyricism and language experimentation. She committed suicide.

Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was a Polish-American poet, prose writer, translator and diplomat. Regarded as one of the great poets of the 20th century, he won the 1980 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998) was one of Poland's most eminent poets. The Forest of Arden in Warwickshire figured importantly in *As You Like It*. But it's possible that Herbert was also thinking (as was Shakespeare) of the Forest of Ardennes, in Belgium and Northern France, which was the site of fierce fighting World War 2.

DH Lawrence (1885–1930) was an English writer, novelist, poet and essayist. He was a critic of modernity and industrialization, and a proponent of emotional health, spontaneity, vitality and instinct.

Leath Tonino is a freelance writer and the author of two essay collections about the outdoors, both published by Trinity University Press: *The Animal One Thousand Miles Long* and *The West Will Swallow You*.

SC Flynn was born in Australia of Irish and Scottish origin and now lives in Dublin, Ireland. His poetry has been published in more than ten countries.

Sarah Westcott has published a pamphlet and two collections with Pavilion Poetry, Liverpool University Press. Sarah was a news journalist for twenty years and now works as a freelance tutor and writer. Poems have appeared on beer mats, billboards and buses, baked into bread and installed in a nature reserve, triggered by footsteps.

Peter D VanderBloomer is a biologist and poet from the Chicagoland area.