

# Poetry section

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.

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## CLASSIC POETRY

### Young Sonorous Grove

#### Marina Tsvetaeva

*Young sonorous grove  
A woodcutter hewed.  
All that God conceived –  
Man reviewed.*

*And the grove no more –  
Only rusted stubs.  
In the native voice –  
Only foreign sobs.*

*Haunted are the rings  
In your darkened eyes.  
Now that we become –  
Close-knit enemies.*

Source: Public domain (original version) – translated by Victor Postnikov (2013)

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### The Answer

#### Robinson Jeffers

*Then what is the answer? – Not to be deluded by dreams.  
To know that great civilizations have broken down into violence,  
and their tyrants come, many times before.  
When open violence appears, to avoid it with honor or choose  
the least ugly faction; these evils are essential.  
To keep one's own integrity, be merciful and uncorrupted  
and not wish for evil; and not be duped  
By dreams of universal justice or happiness. These dreams will not be fulfilled.  
To know this, and know that however ugly the parts appear  
the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand*

Selected by

#### Victor Postnikov

Victor is a poet, essayist and translator based in Kiev, Ukraine.

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#### The poems of Marina

**Tsvetaeva** are a testimony of human predicaments caused by inter-human relations and relations with nature. Her verse is piercing and heartfelt. In some, almost imperceptible, ways, her style recalls that of Emily Dickinson, although her verse is much more bitter and satirical. She committed suicide in 1941.

#### The poems of Robinson

**Jeffers** are dedicated to wild beauty, rocks and the ocean, trees and creatures, with no humans in sight, and almost devoid of 'normal' human emotions. Yet, the disgust at what humans have inflicted on nature impregnates every poem. He's minimalistic in his poetic expression and the words he uses very much resemble the rocks he loved.

*Is an ugly thing and man dissevered from the earth and stars  
and his history... for contemplation or in fact...  
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is  
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty  
of the universe. Love that, not man  
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions,  
or drown in despair when his days darken.*

Source: The editors thank Stanford University Press, sup.org, for permission to publish this poem from *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, Volume 2. Robinson Jeffers, edited by Tim Hunt; 1938, by Garth and Donnan Jeffers; renewed 1966; all rights reserved. No reproduction, distribution, or any other use of the poems in any way and form is permitted without the publisher's prior permission.

1706

### Emily Dickinson

*When we have ceased to care  
The Gift is given  
For which we gave the Earth  
And mortgaged Heaven  
But so declined in worth  
'Tis ignominy now  
To look upon —*

Source: Public domain

41

### Emily Dickinson

*I robbed the Woods—  
The trusting Woods.  
The unsuspecting Trees  
Brought out their Burs and mosses  
My fantasy to please.  
I scanned their trinkets curious—I grasped—I bore away—  
What will the solemn Hemlock—  
What will the Oak tree say?*

Source: Public domain

## The Triumph of the Machine

### DH Lawrence

*They talk of the triumph of the machine,  
but the machine will never triumph.*

The poems of Emily Dickinson are a true bible for nature lovers. Being a naturalist herself, she was a great connoisseur of various 'moods' of plants, birds, insects and other animals – 'nature's people' – that invariably were of primary concern in her poems. Her artistic vision covered such existential categories as death, faith, sanity and madness. She has some subtle infatuation with the 'small and beautiful', and in that resembles Japanese masters.

*Out of the thousands and thousands of centuries of man  
the unrolling of ferns, white tongues of the acanthus lapping at the sun,  
for one sad century  
machines have triumphed, rolled us hither and thither,  
shaking the lark's nest till the eggs have broken.*

*Shaken the marshes, till the geese have gone  
and the wild swans flown away singing the swan-song at us.*

*Hard, hard on the earth the machines are rolling,  
but through some hearts they will never roll.*

*The lark nests in his heart  
and the white swan swims in the marshes of his loams,  
and through the wide prairies of his breast a young bull herds his cows,  
lambs frisk among the daisies of his brain.*

*And at last  
all these creatures that cannot die, driven back  
into the uttermost corners of the soul,  
will send up the wild cry of despair.*

*The thrilling lark in a wild despair will trill down arrows from the sky,  
the swan will beat the waters in rage, white rage of an enraged swan,  
even the lambs will stretch forth their necks like serpents,  
like snakes of hate, against the man in the machine:  
even the shaking white poplar will dazzle like splinters of glass against him.*

*And against him inward revolt of the native creatures of the soul  
mechanical man, in triumph seated upon the seat of his machine  
will be powerless, for no engine can reach into the marshes and depths of a man.*

*So mechanical man in triumph seated upon the seat of his machine  
will be driven mad from within himself, and sightless, and on this day  
the machines will turn to run into one another  
traffic will tangle up in a long-drawn-out crash of collision  
and engines will rush at the solid houses, the edifice of our life  
will rock in the shock of the mad machine, and the house will come down.*

*Then, far beyond the ruin, in the far, in the ultimate, remote places  
the swan will lift up again his flattened, smitten head  
and look round and up to greet the sun with a silky glitter of a new day  
and the lark will follow trilling, angerless again,  
and the lambs will bite off the heads of the daisies for very friskiness.  
But over the middle of the earth will be the smoky ruin of iron  
the triumph of the machine.*

Source: Public domain

The poems of DH Lawrence are more complex to fathom than those of other classic eco-poets. He probes both human and non-human nature, sometimes revealing depths never seen before. He is a great psychological master. It is hard to name another poet who would depict wild nature with such intimacy and compassion. He was one of the few poets who paralleled nature's beauty with the feminine, and praised their wildness.

Artwork overleaf

## Swan by Rebecca R Burrill

Higher-resolution version:  
<https://is.gd/ecoartwork>

Original: Watercolour on cold-pressed paper (2017; 20 x 15 inches).



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Elizabeth Carothers Herron writes poetry and articles on art and ecology. She is based in California, USA.

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## CONTEMPORARY POETRY

### Meanwhile, Music

#### Elizabeth Carothers Herron

*Tree to tree the birds fly to perch and sing  
amid the sway and swing of spring's busy wind,  
while wars go on, while the sea rises and the ice melts.*

*In the midst of life narrowing to the onyx box,  
the house of Anubis side by side with the house of music,  
sun blesses the breakfast table.*

*All is perishing, and yet they sing, they sing.*

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### Flint

#### Hannibal Rhoades

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Hannibal Rhoades is a journalist and indigenous and environmental rights advocate who works with the Gaia Foundation in London, UK.

*Pick a stone from the path.  
Any one.  
The flint, blue-merle and grey  
A good choice.  
They are common here.*

*This stone is a billion times your age.  
It was born backwards in an ocean's mouth  
Wombed in striations  
That would leave you flat  
Dead.*

*Formed to a sharp knuckle  
fair boned, in a glorious body  
A hundred miles long  
Time itself stopped by  
To hew it from the hand  
And cast it, chuckling, over this land.*

*Its cousin fingers  
Fed your greatest grandmothers.  
Flayed deer, schucked shells  
Took lives, gave them sustenance.*

*Now drop the stone.  
Kick it along the path.  
You will hear it*

*And know a laugh so old  
It is its own reverence.*

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## To the Tune of Battle Hymn of the Republic

Fred Schueler

*I'd been licking his hot spots and she'd been licking mine,  
As we hung there on the cable of our high tensile-strength slime,  
Knowing our extrudables were fully intertwined –  
as sperm gets passed around.*

*Sluggish, sluggish copulation,  
Sluggish, sluggish copulation,  
Sluggish, sluggish copulation,  
I lay her eggs, he lays mine.*

*In the beauty of the compost eggs are placed where none can see,  
In a slimey sort of substrate that preserves integrity,  
and they hatch out spotted sluglets that resemble you and me,  
when sperm got passed around.*

*Sluggish, sluggish copulation,  
Sluggish, sluggish copulation,  
Sluggish, sluggish copulation,  
I laid his eggs, she laid mine.*

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**Fred Schueler** is a naturalist, herpetologist, and scholar who lives in Ontario, Canada. (In 1990, he discovered the Bruce Peninsula, Ontario, population of the accidentally introduced slug *Limax maximus*.)

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## River Finds Its Tongue

Midsomer Norton, Somerset

Helen Moore

*Pawnshop to chippie, the high street artery  
blocked with junk,*

*a supermarket trolley's ribcage sunk  
into this backwash that had somatised*

*the town's spirit – through concrete shafts  
the dull mien, sluggish passage,*

*mute depression since the mines shut down –  
old river choked.*

*Then the clear-up – fishing  
for rubbish, people wearing rubber boots & gloves;*

*tankers sucking up the sludge;  
later, rocks brought from a local quarry*

*to curve the water's course;  
& patched into the mud, aquatic plants.*

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**Helen Moore** is an award-winning British eco-poet and socially engaged artist based in north-east Scotland, UK. Her poetry collections include *Hedge Fund & Other Living Margins* (Shearsman Books, 2012).

*Now flicking over the pebbles,  
river licks at fronds of Mint nodding in its path;*

*Water Forget-me-Not carpets the stones  
where Duck & Drake have bedded down;*

*and from its banks, Meadowsweet  
strews a merrie scent as Yellow Flag*

*runs its masts up to the Sun.  
And this alongside the road –  
that loud asthmatic wheeze  
of traffic drowning low watery*

*intonements – but all around  
other voices flow. “Hello, little ducks!”*

*Drake tips his head, fixes an eye –  
is wary sentinel & shrewd exemplar*

*of what seems a parallel world.  
“They got no ducklings left; rats must’ve had ‘em!”*

*a tattooed bloke grunts.  
“Here little duck, come here!” For what do*

*the children long? A woman points:  
“Baby Trouts, look they stay so still!”*

*Hanging on the current’s every word  
these fingerlings, as river finds its tongue.*

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