

Poetry and prose 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 – and to give them voice. 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

Subjected Earth

Robinson Jeffers

*Walking in the flat Oxfordshire fields
Where the eye can find no rock to rest on but little flints
Speckle the soil, and the million-berried hedges
Tingle with birds at evening, I saw the sombre
November day redden and go down; a flight of lapwings
Whirled in the hollow of the field, and half-tame pheasants
Cried from the trees. I remembered impatiently
How the long bronze mountain of my own coast,
Where color is no account and pathos ridiculous, the sculpture is all,
Breaks the arrows of the setting sun
Over the enormous mounded eyeball of ocean.*

*The soft alien twilight
Worn and weak with too much humanity hooded my mind.
Poor flourishing earth, meek-smiling slave,
If sometime the swamps return and the heavy forest, black beech and oak-roots
Break up the paving of London streets;
And only, as long before, on the lifted ridgeways
Few people shivering by little fires
Watch the night of the forest cover the land
And shiver to hear the wild dogs howling where the cities were,
Would you be glad to be free? I think you will never
Be glad again, so kneaded with human flesh, so humbled and changed.
Here all's down hill and passively goes to the grave,
Asks only a pinch of pleasure between the darknesses,
Contented to think that everything has been done
That's in the scope of the race: so should I also perhaps
Dream, under the empty angel of this twilight,
But the great memory of that unhumanized world,
With all its wave of good and evil to climb yet,
Its exorbitant power to match, its heartless passion to equal,
And all its music to make, beats on the grave-mound.*

Selected by

Victor Postnikov

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

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.

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.

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.

Stairways

Marina Tsvetaeva

*We with skills, we with mills,
What have we done to Eden?
The first knife, the first pry,
What have we done to a Season?*

*A Thing – like a woman – believed us!
Seems like trees were not enough,
And iron had to be beaten –
We needed nails and stuff!*

*Chips! Convenient things!
What have we done, starting this?
The planet, where all speak of Grace –
Turned into a messy waste?*

*The Glory was once river-run,
The Glory was once cliff-wrought.
Into the World – a soulful thing –
What has Man brought?*

*A Tree, trustful to a sound
Of an insolent axe and tedious saw,
Stretched an apple-hand.
Man – axed.*

*Mountains, displaying ore
Secretly (called “metal” later),
Firmly attested: “A wonder!”
Man – blasted.*

*Educated by this mode
Things answered with a row –
Table stated: I’m a bole.
Broken chair: a bough.*

*In your lacquered cages, a noise
You think come from ancestors?
No, it’s a Walnut, stretching
To the stars.*

*You wake – as from a salvo!
A wardrobe cracked? No, things
Revenge. Domestic have a ball!
Gas burst? No, Devil winks!*

*YOUR SLAVERIES AND YOUR SUPREMACIES –
LOOK, LOOK HOW THEY SHRINK!*

Source: A translation
by Victor Postnikov

From School of Trees

Jun Takami

Patience

*Take my patience for yourself,
A tree on a cliff!
Give me, instead, your patience,
Which is not aware of itself.*

A Plum Tree

*In the garden, where
Snow has not melted yet,
On a half-dried plum tree,
The buds have swollen.*

*O this intensive work
Of an old body,
ONCE IT IS ALIVE!*

*This persevering plum tree
Now, despite winter,
Is striving to show the beauty that
Has been silently accumulated in this
Stern and frozen world.*

Voices of Heaven

*Passing over my head,
A bird had said something
In a low voice.
“I understand you” –
was my reply.*

*Indeed, I’ve been absent-minded so far,
Always missing the voices of heaven.*

Durer and Trees

I.
*The accuracy of Durer’s sketches
Is very similar to the accuracy of trees.*

II.
*The tree, just like Durer, with habitual accuracy,
Draws a line across the sky.
Bravely, severely, flawlessly,
It exerts the right amount of effort
To create a beauty without deceit.*

The poems of Jun Takami represent some of the greatest examples of Japanese free verse (*gendaishi*). Becoming terminally ill, Takami abandoned prose and returned to poetry, which, in his words, “opens the truth more easily and fully than prose.” His poems probe the existential nature of humans and turn to nature for instruction. There, he seeks liberation from the falsehood that is so obvious in human society. His poetry has an unmistakably delicate Japanese flavour and is a rare blend of humanism and ecocentric vision. He died in 1965.

III.

*At twilight, the tree silhouette is perfect;
Like nature itself;
And like a Durer's sketch,
It is full of real life.*

Each Stem has a Flower

*I napped
And dreamed a merry dream:
Wherever you looked,
Every tree had a blooming flower
As if each one of us
Had his own joy.*

Fresh Green

*Once,
Having looked out of the window
Into the garden,
I unexpectedly touched
The life of living things.*

The Tree**I.**

*Withering, –
It lives.
Living, –
It withers.*

*Courageous life
For the sake of rich withering.*

II.

*Leaves – soft.
Branches – hard.*

*On hard branches,
Soft leaves are being born.*

III.

*Each year, they lose their creations,
And again, each year compels them
To furious growth.*

IV.

*Leaves and branches – open to view,
Whereas roots – crucial for living –
hidden in the ground.*

Source: Translations by Victor Postnikov

The Wood

Edward Thomas

*There are so many things I have forgot,
That once were much to me, or that were not,
All lost, as is a childless woman's child
And its child's children, in the undefiled
Abyss of what can never be again.
I have forgot, too, names of the mighty men
That fought and lost or won in the old wars,
Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars.
Some things I have forgot that I forget.
But lesser things there are, remembered yet,
Than all the others. One name that I have not –
Though 'tis an empty thingless name – forgot
Never can die because Spring after Spring
Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.
There is always one at midday saying it clear
And tart – only the name I hear.
While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent
That is like food, or while I am content
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,
This name suddenly is cried out to me
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird
Over and over again, a pure thrush word.*

Source: Public domain

Lizard

DH Lawrence

*A lizard ran out on a rock and looked up, listening
No doubt to the shouting of the spheres.
And what a dandy fellow! The right toss of a chin for you
And swirl of a tail!*

*If men were as much men as lizards are lizards
They'd be worth looking at.*

Source: Public domain

The poems of Edward Thomas are noted for, among other things, their attention to the English countryside. An Englishman of Welsh descent, Thomas was an essayist and literary critic for most of his life but, encouraged by his close friend Robert Frost, he began writing poems in 1914. He died in action in France in 1917.

The poems of DH Lawrence are more complex to fathom than those of other classic poets. He probes both human and non-human nature, sometimes revealing depths never seen before. He was one of the few poets who paralleled nature's beauty with the feminine, and praised their wildness.

Artwork overleaf

Sand Lizard by Rebecca R Burrill

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

Original: Pencil, ink and watercolour on cold-pressed paper (2017; 12.38 x 9.75 inches).

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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.

1456

Emily Dickinson

*So gay a Flower
Bereaves the Mind
As if it were a Woe —
Is Beauty an Affliction — then?
Tradition ought to know —*

Source: Public domain

722

Emily Dickinson

*Sweet Mountains — Ye tell Me no lie —
Never deny Me — Never fly —
Those same unvarying Eyes
Turn on Me — when I fail — or feign,
Or take the Royal names in vain —
Their far — slow — Violet Gaze —*

*My Strong Madonnas — Cherish still —
The Wayward Nun — beneath the Hill —
Whose service — is to You —
Her latest Worship — When the Day
Fades from the Firmament away —
To lift Her Brows on You —*

Source: Public domain

1634

Emily Dickinson

*Talk not to me of Summer Trees
The foliage of the mind
A Tabernacle is for Birds
Of no corporeal kind
And winds do go that way at noon
To their Ethereal Homes
Whose Bugles call the least of us
To undepicted Realms*

Source: Public domain

CONTEMPORARY PROSE

In my imagination

Laura Larriva Page

In my imagination I hear the land speak to me of things. This is not to say I make them up.

There are no phrases, no names – no words at all, but a spontaneous upwelling within that has me dancing on the trails, far from curbing eyes. Speaking back in the way life has always spoken; through the movement of form, the shaping of a hand or tail, or fin, the slide of rock into water, the dry cracking of soil under a Tuscan sun.

Sometimes it's the plants that do the speaking. The great Oak with their broad leaves, their trunks dimpled in the dappled light of the canopy. Their magnificence neither tyrannical nor reticent. Their leaves, like hands, flap in the hot breeze and my heart lifts.

The ferns beckon with curled fingers, through the blackberry brambles, over the soft Lodgepole pine and cone blanketed forest to the heart of their sweeping world. To have seen the Earth come alive as they have! First to root and multiply over the land. Then flowers, and dinosaurs! Glaciers! Mammals large and small! The marching of the mountains over the continents! The rise and fall of civilizations! And the steady fencing in of their world... Still they offer themselves to the dreaming of the earth, as they offer themselves to me.

I hear too the voices of those that once walked here. The grey wolf and her cubs, yellow-eyed and lean. Her tufted hair catches on the thorny bushes in the springtime. She turns and our eyes meet. Whole worlds shift. She is wary of the stalking future. All I can do is nod.

And the European brown bear, picking newly ripe berries off the vines. Bursting muscle and rippling fur catches water drops as it catches rainbows of light from the mountain stream. Surprisingly agile for his bulk, his paw darts into the water to spear a gilded silver fish. One of many. He is acutely aware I'm there... as I am aware he no longer is.

The forest seems louder without these voices among it, more hollow. Their footprints and steady gazes, their stalking ways, and rumbling bellies reverberate across the valley, bouncing off the granite bedrock and the mined marble veins of the Apennines, dodging tall Cypress trees standing like sentinels, past the olive, grape, and almond groves... A bell tower tolls noon. One little fig trembles and falls, full and ripe. It seeps white, sticky sap. The ground smells of day-old spilled wine, sweet and rotting.

More often now when I listen, I hear the whole community speaking at once. A symphony of thus-ness, a confluence of sound and taste and touch and sight. I hear/feel their wailing. Its rich endlessness. I respond with the Shrinking and Disappearing Dance. The Dying Sea Lion Dance. The Too-Warm Water Dance. The Helpless Dance. The Frog In My Throat Dance. The Holy Shame Dance...

Laura Larriva Page is a movement guide, yoga teacher and advocate of the Earth, blending her deep love of somatic movement, mythology and ecology into powerful, embodied explorations of soul.

Sometimes when I let my gaze soften wide the Others teach me to move as they do, and when that happens it is the Remembering Dance that comes. And always, *always*, even on the days I get caught in my too-small world, my feet pounding up the trail fast and forward moving and un-acknowledging, it is the Gratitude Dance that pours up and out in respiratory rhythms and dewdrops, then beads, then rivers and torrents of sweat. Anointing the earth, giving back what I can. Longing to give more.

I respond differently each day to these voices that never says the same thing twice, that have never known repeat. They are the voices of deep time. The continuous thread of all from the beginning to the end. They are the rising and falling voices, the voices of the abyss, the bursting and sucking, mouth-smacking voices of creation. What they have to say keeps me up at night.

And still I, human, tarry in their world, reluctant to turn toward home where the game trail becomes a foot path and the foot path paved, and the paved path then becomes a road. Knowing that with each step a part of their magic can pass no longer where the imagination is at best underestimated. Fixed within a closed system of make-believe, its possibilities bleed under the knife of reductionism, commoditization, and power politicking.

I, just like you, am not exempt my part in the mess. But in the still moments in the center of everything with the cars flying past and the lights buzzing, and the screens harking the wares of a worn-out system, *I hear our human voices, strong and noble and not at all separate*. And I know, as you do, that past the static of forgetfulness an ancient way still lingers to catch us off guard. A tenuous flame unsoiled by our amnesia. It is this voice, (this one!), that needs our keen ears now, as it needs our fierce spirit and our wild imaginations. For it whispers the way that can pull the Others through the mists, back across the landscape of time to tumble the fences and the precarious walls strung up around our perception.

Cicadas live for a day and then die. The figs trees are ripe all at once. The village cat comes by at sunset begging for food like clockwork. The ducks in the pond past the vineyards are always laughing. We too have our time and place. When my mind is full, and I cannot see the way, *I know this in my imagination...* which is not to say I'm making it up.

* * * * *

“There is an inner wisdom that has long been lost. Not only has it been long lost but when it pokes its head into our awareness we have all learned to shun it, deny it, and to discount it. That inner wisdom is not a book, as our present intellect would have us believe. It is not a bank of knowledge, or a storehouse of formulas. It is a living dimension of our very selves, and in its livingness it is in the moment, so that in order for us to tap that ancient deep inner wisdom we must engage it directly in its aliveness, we must be willing to be present with it on its terms, we must be willing to let it teach us its language rather than demanding that it speak in our own.”

ES Gallegos

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Imagine It

Elizabeth Carothers Herron

*Imagine it—the space where that split
 does not exist, dark and half-forgotten.
 This is about power. This is about magic.
 A dark ribbon, fields of wild grass.
 You know the worst stories—
 the terror, the grief
 ancient as the sword and the clock.
 Now's your chance—earth, body, womb, night—
 imagine it! We are always reinventing the world.
 Begin where you are: light
 through red geranium petals, silver-gray grasses
 lying down toward winter
 draped along the bed of the dry marsh
 waiting for rain.
 Begin now with me. All this light—
 more than the eye or the mind or the heart can take.
 Do you see
 how our skin melts into it?
 Whatever darkness holds the seed
 is always moving, opening to light, petals
 becoming formless sky. Imagine it—
 a seed like a closed fist opening.
 Your life like that,
 no matter how you hold what you hold.*

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

Rapunzel and the Ravens

Robert Fagen

*Clouds again today,
 the hundred colors of fog.*

*This spring
 ravens nested in the yard
 and fledged two young.
 Now they're grown.*

*Evening sky –
 mouse-grey Edo kimono's
 blue lining.*

Robert Fagen is a zoologist
 based in Alaska, USA, and
 his special areas of interest
 include animal behaviour.

You can discuss ecopoetry by joining the Ecocentric Alliance's email group: www.ecocentricalliance.org/#ju

Patrick Curry is a writer and scholar based in London, UK. He is Editor-in-Chief of *The Ecological Citizen*.

Upon Hearing Lena Willemark Sing Patrick Curry

*Her cry pierces me through, all seven bodies.
It is the cry of life itself, and against it
I am helpless.*

*In it nestle all our crazy hopes,
our loves and fears, their shadow,
both the glory and the folly of defying
our insignificance.*

*How can it be? This single sliver
of human sound, pure as any wolf's or whale's,
shakes my heart open.
Yet 'that animal called Man' I encounter every day –
petty paragons of I, me and mine,
grasping, meddling and befouling
this whole wondrous world –
fills me with despair.*

*Individually, it may well not be so:
how many times
have I been surprised by a stranger,
and humbled?*

*But taken all together and at once –
though it pains me to say so –
these people are beyond compassion,
or else I am.*

*Maybe only in some far Northern landscape of the soul
(the place which bore such a singer),
where we are once again merely one among
ten thousand more-than-human things –*

*The mad yellow eye of the husky,
the sky's endless sea,
the silence, intense as a mother's,
and the Sun a young god,
playing among the birches
graceful as young women,
his light broken into intelligent tiny crystals
by the snow's satin sheen –*

*Maybe there, finally, I will find
room in my heart
for Man.*

Madrone Dance

Pepper Trail

*No tree, standing still , moves as you move
No limbs so bare, so sleek, so suited for the dance
You crouch and stride, balance and curve
Arms aloft, the art of gesture is yours, all yours
And the pines stand around you
Stiff with scandalized admiration*

*O madrone, dance now, dance
As never, dance up the mountainside
Fast and faster than ever you have done
Use the birds, all of them, the flocking
Robins and the waxwings, the starlings and the thrushes
In these hot days, burst with berries
Send them far and wide, send them
Always higher, find that place
Wherever it has gone, still cool
But below the hardest cold
Dry, but above the cracking earth*

*The time has come to run
You, madrone, cannot run
So, dance*

Pepper Trail is a conservation biologist and poet from Oregon, USA.



Artwork

Prothonotary Warbler

by **Andrea Williamson**

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

About the artwork:
See page 122.

Haydn Washington is an environmental scientist, writer and activist based in New South Wales, Australia.

The Gift

Haydn Washington

*Sometimes we are gifted
With a special moment,
A day of meaning
Where all things
Come together
And one smiles
In sheer wonder.
With a sudden silence
A caress of wind
And a brief, ethereal
Ripple of light –
It is as if
The Goddess passes
And bestows a smile
Upon the open heart.*

*So good to know
In this teeming world
So full of worries
That even now
She still walks!
And those who listen
Can still step into
The eternal now.
Just as Thoreau
Marvelled
At the friendship
Of a pine needle,
I too looked out
At trees, grass and sun –
So suddenly enfolding:
So very much kin.*

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