

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.

CLASSIC POETRY

Darkness (1916)

Lord Byron

*I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:
And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,
The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
To look once more into each other's face;
Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:
A fearful hope was all the world contain'd;
Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.
The brows of men by the despairing light
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;
And others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of a past world; and then again
With curses cast them down upon the dust,
And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds shriek'd*

Selected by

Victor Postnikov

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

George Gordon (Lord Byron) is an English poet who lived from 1788 to 1824. He was a revolutionary and one of the leading figures of the 19th century Romantic movement.

And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd
And twin'd themselves among the multitude,
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.
And War, which for a moment was no more,
Did glut himself again: a meal was bought
With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;
All earth was but one thought—and that was death
Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
Of famine fed upon all entrails—men
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,
Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead
Lur'd their lank jaws; himself sought out no food,
But with a piteous and perpetual moan,
And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand
Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.
The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two
Of an enormous city did survive,
And they were enemies: they met beside
The dying embers of an altar-place
Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things
For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,
And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands
The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath
Blew for a little life, and made a flame
Which was a mockery; then they lifted up
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,
Unknowing who he was upon whose brow
Famine had written Fiend. The world was void,
The populous and the powerful was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—
A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.
The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;
Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,
And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd
They slept on the abyss without a surge—
The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expir'd before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.

Source: public domain.

Excerpt from Ways of Cain

Maximilian Voloshin

REBELLION

4

*The world's a staircase Man has tried to climb:
Beasts, stars, the slag of flesh... –
They served him as ascending steps
While he clutched high
Along the path
Of his rebellious mind.*

5

*Rebellion or adaptation?
From these two ways
That creatures earnestly beseech,
The former is sheer madness
(for nature never yields);
Yet, who can stop a madman from
His craze?
Some've chosen adaptation – thus
They're hushed forever on a trodden step.
The beast is fit for nature's bends,
But man rows stubbornly to chaos:
He worships war,
Creates through doubt,
And gains a firm hold through negation.
He is an architect,
But chisel he employs is death,
His clay – capricious mind inside him.*

6

*Once, in the ancient dark,
A shaggy beast
Went out of mind,
And turned into a Man –
Most evil and perilous beast on Earth,
Insane with logic,
And obsessed by faith;
Intelligence became a cursing of Creation.
Man left his stains across the way:
Dissected life and put it into numbers,
Laid bare the nature's roots,
And probed the substance;
Like a parasite,
He sucked the earth
Until it suffered inextinguishable pain;
He searched the keys for sacred truths,
Released the titans, dressed them into iron,*

Maximilian Voloshin is a Russian poet, watercolor artist, art critic and translator who lived between 1877 and 1932. (The excerpt has been taken from his *Ways of Cain*, a poem published in the early 1920s.)

*He harnessed them for an exhausting work;
He changed the world but could not change himself;
He's gotten lost in his own caves,
He's turned into a slave of his own servants.*

7
*The time has come for new rebellions
And madness, catastrophes and falls.
The prudent ones, "Return to flock!"
The rebels, "Re-create your being!"*

Source: Translation by Victor Postnikov of a public-domain original.

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Under it All

Gigi Marks

*Where the rotten tree falls
and hollows out the snow,
where feathers miss the bird that they
belong to, have broken away and
stay where the low trail holds them,
in the rut we've made while walking,
there, small rivulets of snowmelt
reach the large stream and run
like nothing else does: fluid
over every stone and dammed-in stick,
over the half decay of darkened leaves
while the entire dug-out bank goes white
with ice and snow. Below that,
I haven't gone: I only know
of rocks that cling together, the heavy
soil's reassuring weight and pressure,
the roots of trees that haven't fallen yet,
growing towards other life that buries
itself and is safer there than here.*

Evidence and Absence

Gigi Marks

*We have outlasted the daffodils
of these spring days, except
for those late ones who swing
their flowers in the breezy day,
and outlasted all the maple flowers
that are fallen on the ground.
There is no sign of bees
on a cool day, and morning
birds singing has passed. Where*

*is the sun behind the clouds, where
is water when it leaves the creek bed
to travel underground, and where
is the seed before it forms
after the flower is gone? Here--
the answer is the absence that holds us
when there is more of it than
the evidence of our growing days*

Gigi Marks lives with her family on a small farm near the western edge of Cayuga Lake, in New York State, USA. She has worked as an educator, independent scholar, editor and conservationist. Her writing centres on the sustained relationship of family in and around the countryside of the Finger Lakes region, – Gayogohóno', the lands of the Cayuga people.

An Augury of Experience

Guy Essex

I confess: I killed a thing in that grim spinney.

*Even at a distance, I remember a bored Wolds
mardy backend day – not anything of loss.*

*From here, loss is a dim vision of black-water
Where slack trees propped on shaken ground,*

*Surround, lean in, encroach and leer
like a crowd at a scene; those horrified*

*Voyeurs of a hole swamping down dusk light.
All around flows down; sluicing bent cans*

*Through ladders of limbs, buckling
will across shards, rumbling crumpled bottles;*

*A deflation, a loss of urge surges
to that black water to be nuzzled*

*By slick city rats whiskering at the bent
Backed ring pulls and bleached fag-packs.*

*I learned late how lightness once
Lived in a bone-purse of breast*

*Now slugged and lead-heavy
Where my stunned thumbs pressed.*

*There, it swung, under-slung.
Slugged on that cleft twig:*

*Feathers unfurled, claws clinging,
Clung, song-less, swinging,*

swinging, swung.

Guy Essex, a scholar in English literature, at present lives in Muscat, Oman, and works in an international school. His childhood was spent in Malta, and in both Yorkshire and Cornwall in the UK – the places that often form the backdrop for his writing.

The swansong of Malta

Guy Essex

*So the voices of birds are finally silenced.
No more mercurial songs and refrains.
Too late to record the replayed phrasing
Of avian hosannas, hallelujahs, airs –
Those solar celebrating revelations that
Song is existence, radiance, essence –*

*That ecstatic moment, epiphany wrung
Over and over until the eternal force and urge
Might be rinsed in song.*

*Now, laud the bells of the angelus
Solo. That dawn chorus order
For those who feel in the phonemes of Arabia
And write in the alphabet of Rome,
To hear their daily mortuus lingua
Return in the run out of a recording.
What they mishear, what some feel they miss
Is the incantation of incarnation
Is the holy word-song.*

*So now the birds have gone; now they come to ask?
Now they won't know the song all poetry sings:
How all are errant until their Troy –
Us, the birds, the mites in the down,
All are first Odysseus,
then Aeneus, then the underworld awaits
Her prodigal children
To return, down to be birthed and out again
Cleansed anew in the fugue of the earth.
In the catacomb choirs
Where her gestating minerals
Sing from the source, to bid
Each living thing to dig to her core,
To her egg –*

*Animals burrow wombs and we are
In flood, blood and soil, earth born
To return with a song.*

*See how the Maltese trees offer
Their empty dry cradles, their Orphic song
Gone. In memoriam, we might listen,
ears flat to cold hard bark
To hear them sustain
Themselves on the fertile fat of the earth's returned.
Or, when paused above
The spade thrust – caught undecided between
The horizon's twin gifts of cold earth fact
And imagination,
We are shod and searching for the source of fire
In the flames;
the body,
then the fire,
the embers, then the glow
gone
and
no more
song.*

Ode to the desert

Aspa D Chatziefthimiou

*That desert that desert
with such wondrous physique
she invites me to walk her
to taste her
to take her all in*

*That desert that desert
that fiery wild beast
she cooks
me she burns me
she eats me with her sharp teeth*

*That desert that desert
that playful lunatic
she blows sand in my eyes
she moves the wave from under my feet
she exposes her tree roots and buries her creatures in hypoliths*

*That desert that desert
that afternoon deity
she gives me her lizards and foxes
her camel stampedes
she gives me her mangroves and dunes
her rocks and the seas*

*That desert that desert
that magical fairy
she gives me the pink of her sunset
the cool of her breeze
she gives me the majestic silence of her vast scenery*

*Oh desert oh desert
you take me all in
you capture me
you captivate me
you efface my past*

*Oh desert oh desert
I am here at last!*

Aspa D Chatziefthimiou is an ecologist, a visiting research scientist at Weill Cornell Medicine, and a talks coordinator for the Qatar Natural History Group.

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Patrick Curry is the
Journal's Editor-in-Chief.

Winnipeg

Patrick Curry

I.m. Robinson Jeffers

*All this detritus left behind
when capital last roared through –
strip malls, jumped-up jeeps, drug marts
and cheap fast food –
the prairie, crouched, is waiting
to reclaim:*

*The tawny scrub, African
in its dry soul
The spindly trees, shaved off at mid-height
by a giant hand of cold
The dishevelled ice, in stately sail
down the sullen brown river
And the crows, mob-handed,
shouting*

Not long now,
not long now

Victor Postnikov is the
Journal's Poetry Editor.

Birds of Bliss

Victor Postnikov

*I walked –
The snow was gone
Displaying rotten leaves,
The crows gaily tossed
The decomposing heaps
(Perhaps the smell of leaves
Was dear to their nose);
The youth were piercing trees
In synchronizing spurt;
I thought the crows were bleak
Harbingers of the woe –
I saw the Birds of Bliss
Forgetful of the snow.*

For details on submitting poetry visit: www.ecologicalcitizen.net/call-for-poetry.html