

# 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

### Not for a Nation

Edna St Vincent Millay

*Not for a nation:*

*Not the dividing, the estranging, thing*

*For;*

*Nor, in a world so small, the insulation*

*Of dream from dream—where dreams are links in the chain*

*Of a common hope; that man may yet regain*

*His dignity on earth—where before all*

*Eyes: small eyes of elephant and shark; still*

*Eyes of lizard grey in the sub-tropic noon,*

*Blowing his throat out into a scarlet, edged-with-cream incredible balloon*

*Suddenly, and suddenly dancing, hoisting and lowering his body on his short legs on the  
hot stone window-sill;*

*And the eyes of the upturned, grooved and dusty, rounded dull cut-worm*

*Staring upward at the spade,—*

*These, all these, and more, from the corner of the eye see man, infirm,*

*Tottering like a tree about to fall,—*

*Who yet had such high dreams—who not for this was made (or so said he),—*

*nor did design to die at all.*

*Not for a nation,*

*Not the dividing, the estranging thing*

*For;*

*Nor, on a world so small, the insulation*

*Of dream from dream,*

*In what might be today, had we been better welders, a new chain for pulling down old  
buildings, uprooting the wrong trees; these*

*Not for;*

*Not for my country right or wrong;*

*Not for the drum or the bugle; not for the song*

*Which pipes me away from my home against my will along with the other children*

*To where I would not go*

*And makes me say what I promised never to say, and do the thing I am through with—*

*Into the Piper's Hill;*

Selected by

Victor Postnikov

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

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Edna St Vincent Millay

(1892–1950) was an

American feminist poet and playwright. She received

the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

in 1923. 'Not for a Nation'

is her masterpiece, deep in

scope and vision.

Not for the flag  
 Of any land because myself was born there  
 Will I give up my life.  
 But I will love that land where man is free,  
 And that will I defend.  
 "To the end?" you ask, "To the end?"—Naturally, to the end.

What is it to the world, or to me,  
 That I beneath an elm, not beneath a tamarisk-tree  
 First filled my lungs, and clenched my tiny hands already spurred and nailed  
 Against the world, and wailed  
 In anger and frustration that all my tricks had failed and I been torn  
 Out of the cave where I was hiding, to suffer in the world as I have done and I still do—  
 Never again—oh, no, no more on earth—ever again to find abiding-place.  
 Birth—awful birth...  
 Whatever the country, whatever the colour and race.

The colour and the traits of each,  
 The shaping of his speech,—  
 These can the elm, given a long time, alter; these,  
 Too, the tamarisk.  
 But if he starve, but if he freeze—  
 Early, in his own tongue, he knows;  
 And though with arms or bows or a dipped thorn  
 Blown through a tube, he fights—the brisk  
 Rattle of shot he is not slow to tell  
 From the sound of ripe seed bursting from a poddy shell;  
 And he whom, all his life, life has abused  
 Yet knows if he be justly or unjustly used.

I know these elms, this beautiful doorway: here  
 I am at home, if anywhere.  
 A natural fondness, an affection which need never be said,  
 Rises from the wooden sidewalks warm as the smell of new-baked bread  
 From a neighbour's kitchen. It is dusk. The sun goes down.  
 Sparsely strung along the street the thrifty lights appear.  
 It is pleasant. It is good.  
 I am very well-known here; here I am understood.  
 I can walk along the street, or turn into a path unlighted, without fear  
 Of poisonous snakes, or of any face in town.  
 Tall elms, my roots go down  
 As deep as yours into this soil, yes, quite as deep.  
 And I hear the rocking of my cradle. And I must not sleep.

Not for a nation; not for a little town,  
 Where, when the sun goes down, you may sit without fear  
 On the front porch, just out of reach of the arc-light, rocking,  
 With supper ready, wearing a pale new dress, and your baby near  
 In its crib, and your husband due to be home by the next trolley that you hear bumping into  
 Elm Street—no:  
 But for a dream that was dreamt an elm-tree's life ago—  
 And longer, yes, much longer, and what I mean you know.

For the dream, for the plan, for the freedom of man as it was meant  
 To be;  
 Not for the structure set up so lustily, by rule of thumb  
 And over-night, bound to become  
 Loose, lop-sided, out of plumb,  
 But for the dream, for the plan, for the freedom of man as it was meant  
 To be  
 By men with more vision, more wisdom, more purpose, more brains  
 Than we,  
 (Possibly, possibly)  
 Men with more courage, men more unselfish, more intent  
 Than we, upon their dreams, upon their dream of Freedom,—  
 Freedom not alone  
 For oneself, but for all, wherever the word is known,  
 In whatever tongue, or the longing in whatever spirit—  
 Men with more honour. (That remains  
 To be seen! That we shall see!)

Possibly. Possibly.

And if still these truths be held to be  
 Self-evident.

Source: Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Not for a Nation" from *Collected Poems*. Copyright 1954, © 1982 by Norma Millay Ellis. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Holly Peppe, Literary Executor, The Edna St. Vincent Millay Society, [www.millay.org](http://www.millay.org).

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## CONTEMPORARY POETRY

### Say Nuth Khaw Yum

#### Kim Trainor

*I heard the falls as we paddled north in shadow cast by the fjord's sheer hills, or we might have missed it. Tabu to look at, but you were drawn by sound and current to water coursing down the rock's dark face. As you looked up, I looked down, and the water bloomed with sea jellies, a hundred tiny slips of moonlight sown in black water. I have read that the blooms have become more frequent as earth's oceans warm, clogging the filters of coal and nuclear power plants that warm them. Even so, you said, at least it is life of a kind. New species will replace old. We will have to accept many changes as ecological zones transform and shift northwards. Hard to say how deep they went in sounding. We are a translucent and voracious singing flesh.*

*We camped at Berg's Landing, near Bishop Creek.  
 I lay in the grass and studied the starbursts of dark green moss interspersed with tiny purple orchids. I had no name for them, or for the lichen, sprayed high on the rock walls, or the pale orange blossoms like Chinese lanterns strung along delicate stalks.*

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Kim Trainor is the granddaughter of an Irish banjo player and a Polish faller who worked in the logging camps around Port Alberni in the 1930s. Her second book, *Ledi*, a finalist for the 2019 Raymond Souster Award, describes the excavation of an Iron Age horsewoman's grave in the steppes of Siberia. Her next book, *Bluegrass*, will appear with Icehouse Press (Gooselane Editions) in 2022.

*And I didn't see the petroglyphs the man on the Deep Cove bus told us to look for, carved by our people. Two Tsleil-waututh men came in on a fishing boat, maintaining the grounds, doing catch and release. You asked, what have you found? Lots of jelly fish—the red ones sting. Sculpins. Chum and pink at par. But they're mostly still in the river at that stage? They said, here the water's calm enough.*

*That afternoon I sheltered in our blue tent writing, until I got distracted by thoughts of an equation for a tattoo, something ecological—a beautiful and spare equilibrium, like Dirac's equation or the first law of thermodynamics. You suggested the Shannon diversity index but there was no internet to look it up. We ate nuts and mandarins for dinner, with tea brewed from the creek, mine spiked with whiskey.*

*Thinking now of that day, as we shelter in place and Sars-CoV-2 slips from bat reservoir to pangolin to human, it seems a world away. They say it's given some space to the wild, though. Coyotes and jackals in the streets. And orcas in Indian Arm, for the first time in years.*

Note: Say Nuth Khaw Yum ('Serpent's Land') is the Tsleil-waututh name for 'Indian Arm', British Columbia, Canada.

## Hospitality

### Leath Tonino

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*. Originally from Vermont, he has also lived and worked in California, Arizona, and Colorado, with shorter stints in New Jersey and Antarctica.

*In this land  
where trees are watched for clocks,  
where animals move hours,  
where the river,  
like the sky,  
is always  
here and gone,*

*I travel  
as a stranger,  
travel by foot,  
travel light,  
travel at first light,  
and spend my nights  
in villages,*

*the people  
saying you look familiar,  
saying eat this,  
saying once you're full,  
old friend,  
you can sleep  
on our dirt floor.*

## These days

### Leath Tonino

*So much talk of the future,  
so little talk of the future's future.*

*So much talk of the past,  
so little talk of the past's past.*

*After later and prior to before,  
these times are on my mind,*

*this place we come from, return.  
Taste of dirt, feel of fern, feet in dance,*

*birds in starry flight. Sleeping  
with our backs to the wind.*

*So much talk and talk and  
talk of a great unknown.*

*I disagree. I know we know  
these days, our home.*

## Antarctic voices

### Australian Antarctic Territory

### Stuart Flynn

*Sometimes when the wind here talks  
it tells me things that science will never say:  
how long ago by different stars  
the gods of night and day agreed  
to split the year between them;  
that jutting rocks above the snow  
are the eggs of enormous stone birds  
and every iceberg is a wayward child  
running away from home;  
how the sky god bled the world of colour  
to make the southern lights;  
that rolling balls of snow  
are tossed around by baby giants  
while their parents' snores from underground  
pile up stacks of frozen steam  
and that the penguins march away each year  
to seek the trick of flight;  
and how much more the cold would tell me  
if I could catch its icy tongue.*

Stuart Flynn was born in Australia of Irish origin and now lives in Dublin. Starting with *Seneca the Spin Doctor* (Acumen Publications, 2001) he has published various small-press books of poetry, and his poems have recently been published, or will soon be published, in Ireland in *Galway Review*, *Blue Nib* and *Strukturriiss*.