

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

The Death of Wolf

Alfred de Vigny

I

*The clouds were covering the blazing moon,
As if it smoldered in the pool of fume;
The blackened trees were stretching to horizon,
We marched through moist and damp in silence,
Through thickly heather and the prickly growth;
When under fir-trees, on the sandy earth,
We noticed trails of two great wolves we chased,
And held our breath and briskly stopped amazed,
Listening intently to the boughs and mead
Lest we should miss a rustle of their tread.
The only sound – the whining weathercock –
Was from a castle on a mountain rock,
Dispatched by winds in heavens' lofty spheres,
Yet barely touching solitary spires,
And crests of oaks that leaned upon the cliff,
And seemed asleep and pacified and stiff.
The silence reigned as one of hunters knelt
And recognized the imprints newly sealed,
For he was most experienced of us,
He said, those were the freshly printed claws
Of two large wolves and their stripling cubs;
Immediately we prepared our knives.
We hid our rifles and their shiny flicker,
And tried to steal across the heavy thicket;
We did not stir a step from one another,
And cautiously we moved amid the heather;
And then we stopped, and I could almost see
Two flaming eyes intent in front of me,
And then, a moment later, four light forms
Were dancing and rejoiced as if the hounds*

Selected by

Victor Postnikov

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

Alfred Victor, Comte de Vigny (1797–1863) was a French poet and early leader of French Romanticism. His own philosophy of life was pessimistic and stoical, but celebrated human fraternity and mutual assistance.

*Met their master; but the wolves played mute
Because they sensed an enemy most brute –
A Man – so father-wolf stood still and mother lay,
Like marble statues of the demigods were they,
Like Romulus and Remus of past days.
Then father-wolf came closer to his friend,
And sat and sank his claws deep into sand.
He sensed the siege, all paths were fully blocked,
Just for a moment he seemed lost inside a pack
Of dogs, then rushed to most ferocious dog,
And seized its throat with iron of his jaws,
Immune to dozens knives that stabbed his guts,
And lots of bullets blazing at his parts;
He stood unmoved with lifeless hound long dead,
Then let the breathless body flatly drop
Under his legs, and having looked around,
He drew himself away onto the ground
With jabbed knives and bullets overlap;
He gave a hazy look at us again,
And lay into his blood lake without groan,
And after licking warm blood by his tongue,
He would not deign to give a sign he'd die,
Just closed his eyes and died without a sigh.*

II

*I leaned against my rifle in deep thought
Unable to pursue his partner and his cubs,
I stood and meditated on their lot,
They probably were waiting for his call;
I thought about the beautiful she-wolf,
She could have fought alongside father-wolf,
But had to run with sons that must be saved
And taught defiance, firmness, and revolt,
And how the owners of the stone and wood
Should steer away from human brood,
With their towns and their servile dogs
That hunt for bedding and for food.*

III

*Alas! I thought, despite all earthly fame,
Our cowardice redounds to our great shame.
That is your wisdom, animals sublime!
Only the animals know how to die,
And live on earth and what to leave behind,
And that the silence is the most divine;
The rest is weakness and disgraceful life.
Wild Wanderer! Now I can understand
What your last glance implied before the end;
It said, "Live thoughtfully and study earth,
So that your soul attain the stoic strength,*

*Like us, born into native woods, would reach;
Yet crying, whining, is what men beseech;
Take eagerly the path your heart aspires,
And silently meet pain when life expires.”*

Source: Translation by Victor Postnikov.

Untitled

Ryota Oshima

*Year after year, all the same:
A monkey entertains the crowd
In a monkey’s disguise.*

Source: Translation by Victor Postnikov.

Untitled

Issa

*The world is so sad!
Even when sakurs are blooming...
Even then...*

Note: Sakurs = cherry blossom.

Source: Translation by Victor Postnikov.

From the poem The Gardener

Rabindranath Tagore

78

*It was in May. The sultry noon seemed endlessly long. The dry earth gaped with thirst in the heat.
When I heard from the riverside a voice calling, “Come, my darling!”
I shut my book and opened the window to look out.
I saw a big buffalo with mud-stained hide, standing near the river with placid, patient eyes; and a youth,
knee deep in water, calling it to its bath.
I smiled amused and felt a touch of sweetness in my heart.*

Source: Public domain.

Ryota Oshima (1718–87) was a Japanese haiku poet.

Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828) was a Japanese haiku poet. He is better known as simply Issa, a pen name meaning cup-of-tea. He is regarded as one of the four haiku masters in Japan, along with Bashō, Buson and Shiki – the ‘Great Four’.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was a Bengali poet, writer, composer, philosopher and painter. He enriched Bengali literature and music, as well as Indian art, with new beautiful metaphors and texture.

Galway Mills Kinnell (1927–2014) was an American poet. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1982).

CONTEMPORARY POETRY

St Francis and the sow

Galway Kinnell

*The bud
stands for all things,
even those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as St. Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of
the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking
and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.*

Jorge Carrera Andrade (1902–78) was an Ecuadorian poet, historian and author. He has been recognized as one of the most important Latin American poets of the 20th century.

Far-left chatter

Jorge Carrera Andrade

*Comrade-cicada
Is splitting her throat with a coda.*

*Instigating green nature
Against man's dictatorship.*

*And despite the branch broken
Her voice is unshaken.*

*Cicada, a far-left commando,
A Minister for Propaganda.*

*On a cabbage, your chirp as expressive:
"Life is hard, and the sun is aggressive"*

m
m
e
t
s

to torn terrain
lies prone panting
 eastern cottontail
no mere leveret but full-
 grown bloody
flanks quivering

'midst forest brought to naught
 dear ones defiled
side by side we sprawl
 shambled stiffening
 but even so
 gasping to know: why?

*

somewhere someway dozes developer
 so-called
doubtless dreaming dollars
 scheming ticky-tacky
 tracts to conceal
 stolen land
 stolen again
 again ceaseless
settler shell game

Proverbs of Earth

Greg Mikkelson

Greg Mikkelson is a professor with a joint appointment in environmental studies and philosophy at a university in Montréal, Québec.

Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without improvement are roads of genius.
- William Blake

With insects, birds, and hay, we share that cosmic Earth-bound unit, day.

Why live for the moment, when there's nothing going on?

And what if some screws were threaded the other way?

We lay down on our backs, and stared up at the trees, swaying not in unison but harmony.

Underneath a sinuous Virginia ridge, a farmhouse, lathered by the quiet moonlight, stands.

The toads come out at night to sit, each pointed toward a different distant star.

The pesticides are homicides.

The number of things left undone increases with age. May we all go out in a glorious flurry of unpaid debts, uncollected credits, and unavenged slights.

No eye-for-an-eye, but soul for soul.

Never was there a traitor greater than he who failed to pay enough attention to his dreams.

Life is long. The world is wide.

To learn grace, study water lapping over boulders.

Is a bayou, with her lazy curves corrected in concrete, a bayou really?
 Fog-rays cut by live-oak branches: Tractor beams to heaven.
 Early morning Ozark Mountain sunlight reddens rabbit's ears, held erect above the grass
 she munches.
 The doomed beauty of fallen maple leaves.
 Death should be Dionysian: Better to be gobbled down by vultures than to lie in coffins, so
 long separate.
 Car ownership in 2020: The moral equivalent of slave ownership in 1820.
 As we set this Rock on fire, who and what shall burn, for what return?
 There are still dragons in the sea. Life eats low-hanging entropy.
 All that was lost we never recovered. From all that was gained we have not been set free.
 When bubbles form on puddles, and then pop, ripples try infinity.

Precipitation

Briana Gonzalez

*nine at night and the
 notorious patter of sky-tears
 on the roof leaves sacredness
 tingling the tops of her arms*

front door swings open and slams closed

*she's engulfed in the deep sob of the clouds,
 she's hopping in the puddles, she's
 drenched in heaven's leftovers, she's savoring
 every slick, beady kiss from the upper
 troposphere, and it doesn't matter that the
 street lamps are dim
 or that she forgot her shoes,
 the pooling of wet warmth in between her toes
 and the damp stroke of the downpour in her hair
 is protection enough*

she spreads her arms and is blessed by the rain

*lightning strikes behind her house and a
 grumble of sky-sound sends her into a fit
 of giggles, she can't help but pinch her skin
 to double check that
 the rain
 and hot pavement
 the soaking grass
 the open embrace of night
 are real.*

Briana Gonzalez is a Hispanic, bisexual woman. She is a student in the English programme at Texas State University, pursuing a career in creative writing and teaching. Outside of crafting poetry, she enjoys reading, watching the night sky, and spending time with her loved ones.

Mark Goodwin is a poet-sound-artist who speaks and writes in various ways. Mark was brought up on a farm in south Leicestershire and now lives on a narrowboat just north of Leicester.

Miniature

Mark Goodwin

*a miniature
badger*

*in your palm
tiny sharp
badger-whiff*

*tiny badger
eye-glints*

*tiny sounds
of badger*

snuffling

*tiny claw
-prickle as*

badger

*scratches as
badger*

treats

you

*as well
as earth*

Sue Bayliss is a holistic therapist and trainer and also a priestess of Rhiannon. She's offered poetry writing workshops at Schumacher College and on retreats.

Crossing the Divide

Sue Bayliss

*Dark shape in the water,
Sliding through the waves,
With such ease.*

*Soul messenger, spirit guide,
Now you raise your head to see me,
And
I hold your gaze.*

*Teach me to be
Immersed in this eternal moment,
As you are in your element,*

*Teach me to follow
The wisdom of the deep,
Inscribed in your cells,
And in mine.*

*Teach me to love
With a heart
Unencumbered by sadness.*

*Selkie spirit,
How blessed I am
To feel your presence,
Your gift of loving
Curiosity.*

*And what am I to you?
Human figure stranded on the shore,
Peering across the watery divide,
Sensing the wild in me
Arising,
To greet
The wild in you.*

*Wading in the swirling waters,
I call to you across the crashing waves,
But you are gone.*

About this poem: Written on 13 June 2020 after visiting Waxham Beach and communing with a female grey seal.

The Bell that Hangs Above the Forest Tolls One Hundred Times a Day Daniel Hudon

*I asked my students to name a favorite
experience of biodiversity,
for this was the name of our course,
and hoped to hear some enthusiasm
for how they interacted
with the living world.*

*The greater bamboo lemur lives for now
in the rapidly dwindling rainforest
of Madagascar. Like the panda, it eats
only bamboo and as infants they
occasionally suck their thumbs.*

*Not one of them said they used to love
to look for frogs in the summer or
to hike through the autumnal colors.*

Daniel Hudon is an adjunct lecturer and writer. His recent book, *Brief Eulogies for Lost Animals: An extinction reader*, was named a Must Read in the 2019 Massachusetts Book Awards.

*The black macaque feeds all day on fruits
and greets other members of their species
with an embrace. It lives in Indonesia
and in forty years its numbers have fallen
eighty percent from habitat loss and hunting.*

*No one described peeking into a bird's
nest in the spring, or built a birdhouse
or helped plant flowers in the garden.*

*Deforestation has cut the numbers
of the Madagascar fish eagle
down to forty pairs.
The Vancouver Island Marmot
numbers less than forty.*

*No one was incredulous at the flame
of the red maples or remembered lying
in the grass to look at clouds –
the smell of grass.*

*The black rhino has been reduced
by ninety percent over sixty years.
One hundred Iberian lynxes
are left in the wild. The Yangtse
dolphin hasn't been seen since 2004.*

*If they ever enjoyed the parachutes
of dandelions or seeing rain-glistened
spiders' webs, even snorkeling
at the beach they couldn't say.*

*The beginning of wisdom, the Chinese
say, is calling things by their rightful names.
The beginning of the hecatomb
is a plunder of anonymous species.*

*They were freshmen; perhaps it wasn't cool
for them to wonder at the world, at life.
Perhaps they just never did.*

*A sign on the gate of the meadow,
on the gate of the forest, on the gate
of the bestiary: Closed due to extinction.*

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