

## POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE: AMERICAN ECOPOETRY

Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, eds. *The Eco-poetry Anthology*.  
Trinity University Press, 2013.

*John Sitter*

Wallace Stevens's phrase "the poems of our climate" grows starkly literal. Greater understanding of our "Anthropocene" era, as the anthropogenic nature of "nature" grows more evident, brings a new understanding of poetic possibility. Climate change changes everything. This shorthand observation means both that the threats of serious climate disruptions must change our priorities and that the connection of these future threats to past and present human activity changes our sense of the division between culture and nature. If major new works of art change the older ones, as T.S. Eliot argued nearly a century ago in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," readers of poetry experiencing a natural/cultural crisis as epochal as ours will likewise "not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."

This timely and valuable anthology thus takes our contemporary plight as its telos, constructing an American tradition the book might better have been called "The *American* Eco-poetry Anthology" that leads up to contemporary poems engaging ecological peril. As Robert Hass puts it in his splendid historical introduction, "some time at the end of the twentieth or beginning of the twenty-first century—because of climate change, growing population, a rising tide of extinctions among plant and animal species, the shrinking of the last wild places that harbored them, the acidification of the ocean, and the rapid spread of industrial technologies around the world—a new level of crisis was already approaching or had already been reached."

The editors and publisher deserve warm praise and thanks for eliciting a 25-page introduction by Hass, representing 207 thoughtfully chosen poets in 570 handsome pages of text, and doing so at a price (\$24.95) that actually allows readers to buy and teachers to assign it in courses. All of this is such a Good Thing that it is best to get the inevitable churlish complaint over with: the book's scope means that poets get on average about two and a half pages each. Sensibly enough, many poets are given more space than that, which means that many others are represented by a single short poem. For those of us who find it almost impossible to open to an unfamiliar poet on such slight acquaintance, needing more time to at least begin to hear properly his or her idiolect, a succession of single poems may blur by like

an accelerated slide show. On the other hand, most readers, even those who follow contemporary American poetry closely, are likely to meet new poets here, or encounter familiar ones in an unexpected context, and resolve to look—and listen—further.

*The Ecopoetry Anthology* groups its poets in two sections, one “Historical” and one “Contemporary.” According to the editors, Hass first suggested the book have a sampling of earlier poetry, Whitman to the early 1960s—“just thirty pages” or so. This section grew to 128 pages and includes 31 poets the editors regard as “precursors to American ecopoetry.” Many are surely expected: Whitman, Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, Denise Levertov, for example. Others are possibly expected: Emily Dickinson, Charles Olson, Lorine Neidecker, say. Still others are interesting surprises: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Stephen Crane, Stephen Vincent Benet, Wallace Stevens, Langston Hughes, for instance.

The border between the anthology’s Historical and Contemporary sections seems somewhat arbitrary. Most of the 176 poets in the latter are living, which is a pretty good criterion for most of us for being contemporary; but eleven have died, some decades ago. Thus, the rationale seems less than clear for labeling Richard Hugo (d.1982) and Audre Lorde (d. 1992) Contemporary, but William Stafford (d. 1993) and Denise Levertov (d. 1997) Historical. Perhaps a tacit judgment has been made about the quality or trajectory of the late work. If so, such an estimate seems wrong in the case of Levertov, for example, whose collection, *The World Around Us* (1997), brought together her “Selected Poems on Ecological Themes” (the book’s initial subtitle was soon softened by the publisher to “Selected Poems on Nature”), many of which were written in her last years.

But more important than the exact border is the capacious Contemporary country that Fisher-Wirth and Street have laid out and managed to populate. They use “ecopoetry” as a broad term, broad enough to prompt the acknowledgment that “In a sense, poetry has always been ecopoetry, in that the origins of poetry are embedded in the natural world and poetry has traditionally foregrounded nature in a way that drama and fiction have not.” More particularly, however, they find it tending toward a “way of thinking ecocentrically rather than anthropocentrically” (xxxviii). And they see it since the 1960s as dividing loosely into three kinds. *Nature poetry* “considers nature as subject matter and inspiration” (a definition adopted from Wendell Berry). *Environmental poetry* is “propelled by and directly engaged with active and politicized environmentalism.” (“*Environmentalist poetry*” might be a better label here.) *Ecological poetry* is more experimental than either of the first two varieties, engaging “questions of form most directly, not

only poetic form but also a form historically taken for granted—that of the singular, coherent self.” The editors characterize nature poetry as primarily “contemplative,” environmental poetry as “activist,” and ecological poetry as “self-reflexive.” These divisions of labor are clearly too neat (as the editors recognize, a “single poem may participate in multiple categories”) but suggestive nonetheless.

In one light, the arc of American ecopoetry from the mid nineteenth century to now can be grasped by starting with Whitman’s assimilation of the environment in “Song of Myself” and “There Was a Child Went Forth” and ending (for the time being) with Juliana Spahr’s hauntingly celebratory and elegiac poem, “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache” (2011), parts of which are included in this anthology. Like Whitman’s poems, Spahr’s evokes the child’s growth through anaphoric accumulation and paratactic repetition. Here are a few lines from the second of the poem’s five parts:

We came into the world at the edge of a stream.  
 The stream had no name but it began from a spring and flowed down a hill into  
 the Soto that then flowed into the Ohio that then flowed into the Mississippi  
 that then flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.  
 The stream was part of us and were part of the stream ...  
 And we began to learn the stream.  
 We looked under the stones for the caddisfly larva and its adhesive.  
 We counted the creek chub and we counted the slenderhead darter...  
 We put our heads together.  
 We put our heads together with all these things...  
 We loved the stream.  
 And we were of the stream...

But in Spahr’s fourth section the theme of incorporation turns sinister, as we “let into our hearts” the stream’s toxic pollutants as well as its beauty:

We let the run off from agriculture, surface mines, forestry, home wastewater  
 treatment systems, construction sites, urban yards, and roadways into our  
 hearts.  
 We let chlorides, magnesium, sulfate, manganese, iron, nitrite/nitrate, alumi-  
 num, suspended solids, zinc, phosphorus, fertilizers, animals wastes, oil, grease,  
 dioxins, heavy metals and lead go through our skin and into our tissues...  
 These things were a part of us and would become more a part of us but we did  
 not know it yet.

In “Song of Myself” Whitman asked, “Who need be afraid of the merge?” For Spahr that is no longer a rhetorical question.

It is not surprising that an elegiac river should run through the imagina-

tive landscape of our moment, and we catch sight of its movement frequently in *The Eco-poetry Anthology*. “All fades to elegy,” writes Nathaniel Tarn in the nonetheless fiercely celebratory *Ins and Outs of Forest Rivers* (2008), a generous part of which is included here. Jessica Fisher’s poem called simply “Elegy” reprises and revises Stevens’s meditation on beauty for the dawn of the age of The Sixth Great Extinction:

What was is no longer  
 The fieldnotes record    In Thoreau’s Walden  
 Rose lilac and buttercup    Gone from the woods...  
 The skeletal shape    Of the world we knew  
 A carcass of sorts    I see with eyes closed  
 Or is death the mother    As Stevens wrote

Carolyn Forché’s “Morning on the Island” is mourning the island as well, as the speaker listens for the its last owl, himself “listening for the last of the mice and asking *who* of no other owl.” Susan Stewart in “The Forest” labors hard to conjure up the woods of childhood but concludes haltingly, “Once were lost in the woods... / but the truth is, it is, lost to us now.” The title of a recent volume of Ed Roberson’s poetry sums up the elegiac moment, and mission: *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2010).

Overlapping with the ecological elegy is a kind of ecological devotional poetry, one strain of which perhaps owes as much to Gerard Manley Hopkins, who finds sacramental grace in natural beauty, as to the nineteenth-century Americans. In “Inversnaid,” his poignant poem about a Scottish waterfall, Hopkins had asked, “What would the world be, once bereft / Of wet and wildness?” before concluding with a prayer: “Let them be left, / O let them be left, wildness and wet; / Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.” In “Prayer for the Everglades” by Lola Haskins the what-if questions go unanswered, as the poem balances between nostalgic description and proleptic mourning:

But what if were not true? What if the glades  
 were a dream, ancient, written on the walls  
 of caves...  
 What if none of it were true? What if  
 you and I walked in all our afternoons under  
 smoke and never saw beyond?  
 ...Look up, friend, and take my  
 hand. What if the wood storks were gone?

One of the most significant quasi-religious ecological poems, Levertov’s “Forest Altar, September” (1972), is not included here, but many poems by

others echo its embrace of the green world over withdrawal into heavenly abstraction:

not upward  
 searching for branch-hidden sky:  
 I'll look  
 down into paradise.

Robert Wrigley similarly invokes an altar grounded: “let us open the mud book and pray.” And Linda Hogan speculates in “Moving the Woodpile” that

Maybe our human sin is not enough  
 of us get on our knees and ever see  
 how everything small and nearly gone  
 is precious.

There are not only many more poets represented in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* than one review can even mention but also many more notable developments. One of the most significant has been the incorporation of scientific ideas and diction into poetry, a development in which A.R. Ammons is so important from the 1960s on and Pattiann Rogers from the 1980s to today. The joining of science and traditional linguistic resonances may turn out to be the most fundamental effect of increased ecological awareness on 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century poetry. (Thus Forrest Gander combines the Psalms and paleogeology: “You made me to lie down in a peri-Gondwanan back-arc basin...”)

But perhaps *social ecology* will come to loom as large as ecological science. Social ecology refers to a general orientation in which the exploitation of the natural world is seen as an extension of the exploitation of human beings. Muriel Rukeyser’s poetry of the 1930s reflects this analysis before its articulation by theorists such as Murray Bookchin. Along with Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, parts of which are included here, one of the most powerful imaginings in this light is Robert Hass’s recent “Ezra Pound’s Proposition,” also included. It begins in Bangkok with a child prostitute, “not more than fourteen,” soliciting a visitor and ends with this stark analysis:

Here is more or less how it works:  
 The World Bank arranges the credit and the dam  
 Floods three hundred villages, and the villagers find their way  
 To the city where their daughters melt into the teeming streets,  
 And the dam’s great turbines, beautifully tooled

In Lund or Dresden or Detroit, financed  
 By Lazard Frères in Paris or the Morgan Bank in New York,  
 Enabled by judicious gifts from Bechtel of San Francisco  
 Or Halliburton of Houston to the local political elite,  
 Spun by the force of rushing water,  
 Have become hives of shimmering silver  
 And, down river, they throw that bluish throb of light  
 Across her cheekbones and lovely skin.

Hass's analysis is all the more powerful for his careful avoidance of analytic diction and his use of paratactic rather than hypotactic syntax. No connectives stronger than "and" hold the 103-word explanation together. Its run-on construction mimics the reports *of* children while connecting the dots *about* them.

*The Eco-poetry Anthology* offers a rich landscape of modern and contemporary American poetry of the environment. Readers wishing to explore contemporary environmental poetry through the work of still more experimental poets of our climate can complement this text with the excellent and also affordable anthology edited by Joshua Corey and G. C. Waldrep, *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral* (Ahsakta Press, 2012).