

ECOPOETRY ANTHOLOGY 2019

S I N K S O P R I Z e

ECOPOETRY ANTHOLOGY 2019 The Ginkgo Prize 2019 Ecopoetry Anthology

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PREFACE

We are facing the most catastrophic threat to the future of our planet that we have ever encountered. The work you will find in this anthology is an acknowledgement of that environmental crisis and the result of sifting over 1,400 entries from all around the world. These poems range in length, style, perspective, and voice, yet each one tells us something unforgettable about our relationship with the natural world and the issues we currently face. Each one is outstanding in its own right and finds fresh language to speak of the crises of species loss, habitat destruction and the erosion of diversity in our ecosystems. Yet, hope can also be found in these poems' calls to action and the redemption we might just achieve if we act now.

Over the course of my Laureateship I wanted one of my headline projects to be a prize that recognised the resurgence of nature and environmental writing currently taking place in poetry, highlighted by the Ginkgo Prize. The new wave of nature writing in non-fiction has been well documented, but not enough attention has been paid to the equivalent rise of ecological thought in contemporary poetry, with current fears about the impending climate crisis clearly provoking this essential writing. The Ginkgo Prize is one endeavour that has sought to address this imbalance and acknowledge the crucial work being done in this area, as the extraordinary poems in this anthology so deftly demonstrate.

Part of my work as Laureate will be to join with Ginkgo in celebrating and rewarding this ecowriting by establishing The Laurel Prize, which will honour the best full collection of poetry with an environmental slant each year. I will donate my annual Laureate Honorarium towards the prize, in the hope that this project will inspire more of this important work and help further the discourse around our current environmental predicament.

— Simon Armitage, Poet Laureate

A Polar Bear in Norilsk

If I could find if I could rest here or here if I look if I could find the far edges of quiet of cold of ice if I could see nothing but blue-white sea-ice if I had not lost the sea the deep fathoms floes if I could walk on ice smell the sea if I had not turned away set out searching if I had strength if my feet were not sore from hard black-top if hunger were not driving me if the pangs of hunger did not clench my belly if I could feel if I could not feel if I should not fail fall fear would come if snow if I could find seashore sealife if I could swim feel the floe taste the salt of sea if I could hear the language of sea groaning of ice if I could turn away from this loud harsh roar of traffic sirens of factories this if I could shake this noise out of my head stench from my nostrils stench of fire of oil of smoke of of if I could breathe sea winds not this wasteland if I could turn from this go turn away if I could turn back go back go back

Once There Were Fish

Once, the rivers moved both ways, up through the one mind of salmon, silvered into many bodies, sweeping across the land like weather. I stood knee-deep in the last of it, Alaska the year the tundra burned, the year the old ones fell through the ice that always held. I saw an old buck, hook-jawed and mottled, sloughing off skin, nosing his weary way past my shin. Then I saw the river turn back its silted face, mumbling to its darling gravel along the shore. The gulls lifted and flung their white flags, their shrieks tearing holes in the rain. I tell you I saw it as it once was here and everywhere - the ground thundering thousands of hooves, wings darking out the sky, numberless animals spreading and gathering like storms. How salmon carried the sea's longing to return. I stood knee-deep in my own longing, casting along the edge of current and slack, dragging orange yarn tied on a hook across their path. And when the sockeye struck, the yank pulled both the oldest and youngest parts of me. And when

I pressed my palm on the flank, that golden eye – cold and steady as it stared where? Shelves of ice sloughing into sea, rivers running straight down the moulins. The rushing world, the melt. The fire.

The fish shuddering still under my hand.

Lammergeier

Until she's dead, no one can own her. She's altitude, the vulture

circling mountains beyond the tree-line, caught only in the back of a bird book,

red-eyed dinosaur, grey face ringed in greasy feathers. Through a lens

she's seen smashing bones into cliffs. Her beak digs for marrow,

her stomach acid breaks sheep femurs. In the Pyrenees, she's a shadow above us;

an echo of tail and scream in the Himalayas, of raw cliffs,

frost, long winds and marrow. Untouchable. But kill her,

her sun-bleached back spreads broken, her beak lolls open still sticky with blood

and marrow. Her wings held thin bitter air, cold sunrise, days of red skies,

now reduced to limp feathers, loose and wide as a grin. Hold her close.

Toll

Saturday 22 May 1993

We pulled away the razor wire, pushed the fencing flat, and we were in, then up, then on, all two hundred of us, swarming above the valley on the girders of their Bailey bridge.

All night we banged out rhythms with whatever tools we had to hand: we made the metal sing, brought forth a chime, a knell, a toll, a resounding reverberation, a peal; with measured strokes we struck the bracing frames as if they'd been cast from bell metal. From beneath our huddled silhouettes, all across the landscape you could hear the bridge finding the colour of its voice, rejoicing. The toll rings out across the valley still.

Waiting

The peaches were so good that year were so

translucent dense dewy sweet

their flesh so

velvet yellow insistent clinging

their flavour

at some holy nectar pinnacle.

They arrived in a row in a clear rounded box like a plastic bra.

They went out with a bang.

The planet was so good that year in places, was so

so extra blue and green could crack your heart in half with the way its sunlit branches lay outstretched, like hands full of offerings their trees standing solemn and occasionful like the best candlesticks; bracken high and hairy-shouldered –

we embedded in its mesh in our country in the north motionless in the ticking heat

from where we watched scrappy butterflies

more magnetic than ever

flash to and fro.

We just sat, watched, waited.

We realised the hedgerow and us were more or less the same thing. We ordered some chairs online. It was a good year for outdoor furniture.

That went out with a bang.

We rubbed grass seeds like ticks into our gums blinked

burdock, sneezed

cobweb.

The plums were so plentiful that year. So quenching.

We were just waiting for winter. And after winter. The things after that.

Night

I hold a strange bird the size of a little child or a large duck, my arms around her chest, the feathers firm and cool under my fingers, her beak rested on my shoulder; feel the pulse

in her neck throb against my own neck and we are flying, soaring away underwater spinning through salt spray, the glorious swoop like a dream of flying downstairs. When I think

'this is a dream' I wake in a small place where I stand alone on a rock with a bird the size of a baby but she's wooden and cold, her feet held rigid with wire. Recognizing

Case 20 in the display, where Harvey and Kirby and Davis passed the bird to Burkett who, with arsenical soap, cured this last skin of a young female 'not in good plumage'

I'm peering in. No, in the way of dreams, I'm both outside and inside, trapped by a case picturing bludgeoned birds crying and bleeding behind me. And then I wake, I really wake up this time,

with a shatter of glass on the museum floor, heartblood pounding my ears though we lost the great auk one-hundred-and-fifty years ago. No more sleep in the emptying night; no more sleep on this watch.

It Is the Trees

It is the trees who cry out for the day's weight to be cast off with only their holy riot of song, imagining their own birds,

brilliant with their own suns.

It is the trees who leap
in the sudden night, whose day-boughs
heavy with closed moth wings

light up and fill the streetlamps with escape and glory – do not believe in anything less. It is the trees who weep openly, who make the tarmac

run with grief, who summon mud and ruin from under their own roots in incandescent vengeance for breathing things and – finally –

it is the trees, only the trees, who hurl their unforgiving trunks, whole and indisputable, through our disbelieving, wind-smashed eyes.

Protection

I was so tired I thought the pigeon was a rat, for a second, grey against the pebbledash under the washing line and I nearly dropped

the pot of hot potatoes but no, just a bird, get a grip, feed the kids I told my furiously mashing hand while the radio

was saying that our lives will leave a skim on the planet, like the skin of an onion only made mostly of plastic. The day's crop

of nappies lay in juicy packets of guilt by the recycling and my toddlers drowned out the news. Rain

called me out to race against the sky, the pegs, the time it takes to topple from a high-chair. Then

a sparrowhawk thumped down, ripped through the pigeon and mantled her food, wings like a skirt

spread over blood. She stared straight at me. Her eyes were black night ringed by sun. The stillness between us

was the axis of galaxies but I had to run back inside to spoon mash into hungry mouths, brain

burning with the hawk-stare, a sudden seeing of the endless hunger we call life. I cloaked

the children in comfort and they slept, oblivious to my unravelling, warm bodies I could kill for. I fell asleep

on the clothes pile and woke from dreams of wings to a dull dawn, the feel of feathers in my mouth.

Ode to Fossil Fuel

Without you, no paper in reams, no books with spines to break with use, no shirt whose blue I love against my husband's skin, eyes, no button from another country, no stitches programmed down his sides, no machine measuring my mother's heart while they cut the cancer out, no tomatoes in winter, no cheap wine, no wandering another country's streets for a few days, no drug mules, no miles of highway, no fast enough to break a tumbleweed, no Christmas trees in desert, no rolling blackouts, no moving away from but still keeping family, no clean and running water, no toothbrushes, no antibiotics, no grandmother's face on the phone teasing my daughter, no ballet shoes, no hothouse flowers at our wedding, no train of my dress, no desire for a train on my dress, you have made us wealthy in goods and time, without you no cookbooks, no inflatable pool, no water guns, no smashing the bass at the end of a concert, no MTV, no Hollywood, no Hadron Collider, you have migrated the bees on the backs of trucks, you have made cement swimming pools, a million rubber ducks and most of the toys my daughter loves, without you no lifejackets, no mammograms, no gas masks, no napalm, no grandmother's farm in summer, no machines to replace bodies in the fields, no wind turbines on semis across the highways, we could have known who made every object in our house, no neatly cremated bodies behind the barbed wire, the buildings, no mercury rising through the city from their burned teeth, without you fewer mosquitoes, no almost instantaneous history of the world in light, no expansion to the coast, without you no mass-market guns, no 3D printers, no ultrasound of the baby's body, no landscape as a staging area for designer clothes & purses, no taking someone's acres to tunnel or poison, no carnival rides, no ice in drinks, no selling the oil & mineral rights to leave something to the next generation, without you no wonder, no photos of the war, the wedding, no piñata favors, no artificial heart, no snooze button, without you no body doused in flames for protest, no flying back to say goodbye to my grandparents, no flying for the funerals, no casinos, no poems scattered in dead hard drives, no soldiers on the ships and submarines sent to the sea, to war, no flag in the ice, no recording under the ocean of song, no birth control pill in its oyster pink box, no women on the factory floor, no flammable nightgowns, flammable water, oil slick, yellow bright wellies, train explosion, paintings that smell like horses, fish from the ocean's middle, no quick shower before work, no Madam Curie's laboratory, no man on the moon, astronauts exploding in air, no World Trade Center, no World Trade Center falling, no fires in the oil fields, no oil spill in the water, no time down to the second, no glut of information, no newspaper on my phone, no cold waiting rooms, no pieces showing what it all adds up to, here we are: an increased standard of living, fewer deaths in the factories, the mines, the fields, and now, bear down: the sixth extinction's crowning

How I Hold the World in this Climate Emergency

Sometimes I hold world in one hand, my life in the other and I get cricks in my neck as the balance keeps swinging. I walk uneasily.

Sometimes I am bent over with the sheer weight of world, eyes downcast, picking up useful things from the ground.

Sometimes one shoulder is pulling toward an ear as if it's trying to block the ear from hearing but can't reach.

Sometimes my body is a crash mat for world. I want to say 'I'm sorry I'm sorry!' but don't say it aloud.

I am privileged so I should be able to do something.

Sometimes I lie on my side and grasp world like a cushion. I'm soft and young, and don't feel I can change anything. I nudge world with affection, whispering: I know, I know.

Sometimes I build a cubby from blankets thrown across furniture. There is only inside, no outside. When I was a child, world was a small dome and change came summer by summer.

Sometimes I make a simple frame with my arms to look at world. I'm not involved directly. It carries on without me.

This way I can still love the sky, its patterns of clouds and contrails.

Sometimes I'm chasing world through the woods, bursting with hope and adrenalin. Oh God, am I running! I want to keep moving. My mouth is full of fire.

Some days are like bread and milk. I just get on with pouring and buttering. I want the little things to be what matters most again.

Sometimes I hold little: I'm limp and ill. Days barely exist. It's enough to make soup.

Eat Me

I sunlight over water, wink like herring-back,

mesh like kelp, and jellyfish with each sigh of tide.

Algae sheens me; seek its scent on bottletops and lighters – Open wide...

Ease me into the trusting gulp of your young. Watch one fail

to sick balloon-string from his throat and feed him further. Watch

not understanding why, dot-to-dot they clog to a stop.

I slick from the stomach crumple of whale, a foetal

scrag of albatross: artificial red blue green of polythene.

Twist in that line, that bag, that net. Feel my six-pack grip around your neck.

You cannot stop my skin-shed, cannot see me plague the chain

and chemical the flesh. You cannot see you pour me daily from your taps and drink.

Drink me. Eat me. Breathe me and soon you'll see.

*

The impact at the end of the Cretaceous Period, the so-called K-T boundary, exterminated 75 percent of life on Earth.

— Robert Sanders, 'Fossils Document the Hour After the Meteor Hit' (*Portside*, March 29, 2019).

Strange rain of molten glass, asteroid rock blown up, sky-high – Primordial fish hurled by the sea-quake onto sand once breathed, through gills, the shining drops that rained down, burning, even after they lay still.

*

Shocked quartz & shattered shark teeth; proto-mammals petrified; foot-long feathers; fallen tektites in the filaments of gills; a terrible lizard's three-horned carcass – proof of impact, ecocide.

*

Stellar traveler pulverized to rock-dust & iridium, you made oceans rise & sway, called acid rain & darkness down, sprayed rubble, ash & blast debris into the firestorm of the sky.

Who'll recognize the turning of one era to the next? Not the living things wiped out in mass extinctions of the past, nor we who, sifting relics, monitor apocalypse.

*

In the gleaming core of amber, hangs an insect caught in flight – In the post-Cretaceous layer, ferns, resurgent, fought & thrived. Bones like pages in a journal, fossilized, give up their light.

empties out its pockets on an intersection suddenly the world screels open Pushing at a hinge

the storm is rushing the block the town is hers like a young dog who delights in chaos at the corner of Flagler and Duval

makes out of them hungry she shrieks through streets to the harbour

tunnels of charged air flapped with a hard slap

demented head-butt

a tumbling sound as if the land's a carpet being

soon a mouth will grin with

and on she rails, no home

from a new hem.

pins

missing teeth, its gap our gap

blank face

posts to go to, wired, pulling out

the storm is a pen eroded the pen is writing down the storm expressions of the shore

jotting long sentences in a slanting hand

/ to be continued to reckon by

Amazonia

Beetles thrash a path, slipping, blisters burning shade before noon, feet slide, spider eyes burning.

Sunlit wings flutter in layers of philodendrons, wings ringed with blue are burning.

Legs splashed with mud march like ants virgin trees, ancient memories burning.

To walk, barefoot in morning dew tinged white clouds disperse burning,

turquoise flashes, grilled scaly feet stink bellies twist howling from tree to burning.

I choke on a blue sky streaked with loss. Warriors fall in pristine gardens, burning.

The Weather

The man is standing on the windy podium, his hair lifting like an orange halo. I won't say his name because all day my son has chanted it repeatedly the way he chants Minecraft! or McDonalds! He's five, and marinated in TV.

The man's mouth is moving. Whatever he's saying, I'm hearing him deny the weather – the forest fires, the deep Midwest freeze, an iceberg twice the size of NYC snapping off Antarctica. No use in sending him the letter

I've been writing in my head about the floods coming closer, the heat last summer which made us twist like worms under glass. No air. Too hot to think. We spent half of August on the high bleachers of the ice-rink.

Now recycling is a form of prayer. I'm watching his mouth move. The face with its perennial tan, the pink mouth sucking in air. When he denies, he's really saying, after I'm gone there'll be no *here*, no *there*.

I've been worrying at the weather for weeks when it should have been years. The hot spell in February. I pull on a summer dress, thinking if the weather girl is happy what's the harm? Inside, a shrill alarm

keeps going off. When my son asks will the earth last until infinity, I tell him no. He wants to know why. I'm sorting plastics while he marches the lounge chanting *infinity infinity!* and a winter fly buzzes madly at our balcony door.

FIRST PRIZE: Sue Riley, a retired teacher, has a keen interest in the environment, her garden and reading and writing poetry. Her work has been published in *The North, Stand, Brittle Star, The Interpreters House* and *Strix*.

SECOND PRIZE: Anne Haven McDonnell lives in Santa Fe, NM and teaches as an associate professor of English and Creative Writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She holds an MFA from the University of Alaska, Anchorage.

THIRD PRIZE: Rosamund Taylor won the Mairtín Crawford Award at the Belfast Book Festival in 2017. Widely published and anthologised in the UK and Ireland, she is a recipient of a 2019 Words Ireland mentorship.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS PRIZE: Emma Must was imprisoned for trying to stop a motorway being built through Twyford Down in Hampshire, near where she grew up. Her debut poetry pamphlet, *Notes on the Use of the Austrian Scythe* (2015), won the Templar Portfolio Award.

RUNNER-UP: Joanna Guthrie's first collection, *Billack's Bones*, was published by *Rialto* in 2007 and she recently completed her second collection, *Water Person Kit*. Her poetry has been published in *Poetry Review*, *The Rialto; Poetry Ireland Review*, *Magma*, etc. and her non-fiction writing in *The Guardian*. She is involved with Climate Cultures and Extinction Rebellion

RUNNER-UP: Jane Robinson's *Journey to the Sleeping Whale* won the 2019 Shine Strong Award for best debut collection by an Irish poet. She has a PhD in Biology.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:

Esa Aldegheri is a Scottish-Italian writer and academic, working multilingually in migration studies. Her work has been published by

Granta, Gutter, and others, and has featured on BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week. She loves trees and maps.

Ned Balbo's newest books are 3 Nights of the Perseids (winner of the Richard Wilbur Award) and The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots (Criterion Books), both published in 2019. His third book, The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems, received the 2012 Poets' Prize and the Donald Justice Prize.

Cath Drake was shortlisted for the Manchester Poetry Prize, came second in the 2017 Resurgence Prize with the Poetry School (now the Ginkgo Prize), and won a Mslexia/Seren poetry pamphlet prize for *Sleeping with Rivers*, which was a Poetry Book Society choice. Her collection *The Shaking City* is out in April 2020 with Seren Books.

Tim Kiely's poetry has been published in South Bank Poetry, Morning Star, Under the Radar, Ink, Sweat & Tears, and the Emma Press anthology Everything That Can Happen.

Hannah Lowe's most recent chapbook is *The Neighbourhood* (Outspoken Press, 2019). Her third full collection, *The Kids*, is due out in 2021 with Bloodaxe. She teaches Creative Writing at Brunel University.

Eleanor Page is a poet and artist from North Essex. She graduated in 2018 with a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Warwick.

Sasha West's first book, *Failure and I Bury the Body*, was a winner of the National Poetry Series. She is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at St. Edward's University.

Emma Woodford is from the UK but has lived all over the world. From her current base in Belgium she draws on these experiences for her poetry covering many subjects, including environmental degradation.

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"We are careening down a steep slope of extinctions, replacing the sea's inhabitants with plastic bits, razing forests, wreaking havoc on the climate, choking on poisoned air. The emergency is global, but we're playing Russian roulette with a planet now in intensive care."

"The Ginkgo Prize for Poetry is an international act of creative disobedience: bringing together ardent and courageous voices in support of the environment from all over the world:

bearing witness, demanding change,
insisting on being heard."

HOMERO ARIDJIS &

JEN HADFIELD, JUDGES

OF THE 2019 GINKGO PRIZE

FOR ECOPOETRY