

# The Animacy of Fossils & Other Nonhumans

by Maya Chowdhry

In this workshop we'll explore the challenges of writing the non-human voice; how can we use all the tools of poetic language to both imagine a conversation with our natural world and vocalise it, without completely anthropomorphising it.

We'll use all of our senses to explore how we perceive nonhumans and attempt to translate these sensory experiences into lyrical language.

To assist this exploration we will listen to poets who have written non-human voices such as Alice Oswald, Les Murray and Vahni Capildeo, and explore the writings of Camille T. Dungy and what Robin Kimmerer calls 'The Grammar of Animacy'.

## **Preparation:**

Before the workshop:

Read the poetry and writings at the end of this document. Make notes and come to the workshop with ideas, comments and questions.

## **Introduction:**

Where to start with the challenges of writing the nonhuman voice in poetry, it is such a vast and boundless area.

Some questions I have been unable to answer in my poetry are:

How can we speak as nonhumans rather than on their behalf with our human language?

And if we are able to discover these voices how do we use this to interrogate our relationships with the nonhuman elements of our world?

In this workshop we'll explore a few strategies that poets have used and explore and evaluate how we can use these in our writing.

I'm hoping this workshop will be an adventure we'll journey through together to find some new discoveries and voices.

With the exercises approach in your own way, you might want to choose one nonhuman object and take through the whole workshop, or choose different ones so you come away with a series of poems/text/writings.

## **Feeling the voice - warm up**

### **EXERCISE - 5 min**

'Coral Love Story: Chapter #1 | Getting Acquainted', Kasia Molga:  
<https://vimeo.com/211299558>

Watch and listen to the film, turn the sound up, make it full screen. Imagine you are the human; your skin vibrating with the movements of the coral, feeling the sea, merging into the life of coral. Imagine you are the coral sensing the sea, and through your data merging into the skin of the human.

Do a free-write, write what you feel.

## **Writing the voice of the unknowable and the idea of the 'itness' of things**

Sarala Estruch Interviews Vahni Capildeo  
<http://estruch-notebook.co.uk/2018/12/sarala-estruch-interviews-vahni-capildeo/>

Sarala Estruch:

"I particularly loved how you brought animals, objects and 'things' to life in this collection, giving 'voice to the voiceless' in a more literal way than we usually mean when we use that expression. Can you tell me a bit about this? What drove you to write about 'things' in this way?"

Vahni Capildeo:

"The drama between an 'I' and a 'you' in poetry is always accompanied by the drama between an 'I' and an 'it', or an 'us' and a 'that'. Even in an intense love lyric or solipsistic monologue, human speakers often call on, or decry, the non-human elements of their environment: stars, aeroplanes, grains of sand, guns. I became fascinated with the notion of these elements deserving and having poems of their own. Personally, I also experience non-human animals, objects, and places as having overwhelming vibrancy; they are compelling and unknowable."

When I asked Vahni what her most nonhuman poem was she said:

"'Inhuman Triumphs' is my most non-human work. It's a sequence in Measures of Expatriation in which the poet-speaker 'becomes' a series of objects such as a melting ice cube. This was my attempt to think away from the 'I' and into 'itness', the lovely alterity of the non-human, and in that way it was a preparatory exercise for the next book, Venus as a Bear. The last poem in the 'Inhuman Triumphs' sequence goes beyond words and consists mostly of asterisks and a little Dante, as the poet becomes the loving cosmic dance of the night sky. More than human and other than human and not foregrounding the human even when inclusive of the human!"

Lets listen to Vahni Capildeo reading 'Inhuman Triumphs':  
<https://youtu.be/IAIYwXD4GUw>

**Questions/comments?**

**2 mins sorbet exercise**

### **EXERCISE 15 minutes**

Choose an object in your room that you want to be transformed into, e.g. a table, a plant or tap.

Place yourself in front of the object

Create a series of about 5 field recordings with your object, each sound should be at least 1 minute duration.

For example:

downthedrain.wav

tap.wav

To make field recordings create all the sounds you possibly can with your object (you can use another object to produce the sounds, e.g. a pencil, a jug).

Record a series of these sounds on your phone.

On an iPhone use 'Voice Memos' app and on an Android phone built-in audio recorder app

Listen back to the sounds on repeat, preferably with headphones on, and write to the sounds - bringing into mind the object as you listen to the different qualities of the sound - tone, rhythm, intensity and pitch.

### **To 'be a bay' learning the grammar of animacy**

In her essay 'Learning the Grammar of Animacy' Robin Wall Kimmerer discovers:

"A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. "To be a bay" holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. This is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.[...]

This is the grammar of animacy."

### **Questions/discussions**

If language dictates our relationship to the nonhuman elements of our world how can we free ourselves to write these voices without anthropomorphising?

### **19:50 - break - 5 minutes**

including 2 mins sorbet exercise - music

Stand, move, sit, listen. How are the notes, tone, pitch of the music communicating with you?

### **EXERCISE - 10 minutes**

Write a list of about 5 nonhuman nouns  
put 'to' in front of each noun, e.g. 'to bay'  
'to leaf'  
'to table'  
'to doorway'  
'to light'

Allow your nonhuman object to become alive, write as if you are that object bringing to it the wonder described in the extract above by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Some nouns might work better than others, e.g. 'to light' is less interesting to me!

You might decide to continue the exploration of the object in your field recordings, or choose a new object, maybe something that is not in your room.

## **The human in relationship to the non-human world**

INTERVIEW in Pear Trees Review by Jewel Pereyra:

Question:

“Ecopoetics appears to be a huge world of poetry that is emerging in the works of many 21st century poets. Is it mostly environmentally conscious work? Can you try to explain your understanding of it?”

Camille Dungy:

“My idea about what ecopoetics can be is that it is poetry that is ecologically-engaged, is engaged in a sort of question of a web-of-life, not an up-down pyramid, or hierarchy of life, but a connected web-of-life, and that implicates the human in relationship to the non-human world. The non-human world has its own validity and viability that need not have anything to do with the human world. So, the nonhuman world doesn't exist as a foil for us to understand ourselves. It just exists and that gets super complicated because we are there. The moment we're observing it, we've changed it. The other super interesting thing about ecopoetics is that it admits meditations that seemingly are not directly linked to what we've come to understand the categories for nature poetry. So, ecopoetics can admit poetic experiments with math, science, economics, histories, genealogies and can talk about things that seem to have nothing to do with trees, frogs, birds, but because we all live in this linked web, everything that we do—economic decisions which have no green labeling to them whatsoever—directly affect the nonhuman world and the human world's interaction with them. In this kind of poetics, we can marry those kinds of investigations in a more radical way than we have traditionally. “  
<https://peartreesreview.wordpress.com/2013/09/24/interview-camille-dungy/>”

Think about your own writing and how it features (or not) the nonhuman.

## Questions/comments

### **Possum's Nocturnal Day by Les Murray**

This poem is from Murray's 1992 collection *Translations from the Natural World*.

'Presence'—the longest section of that book— contains forty poems written from the perspective of animals, vegetables and minerals.

"Poems in this sequence range from whale-life ('Spermaceti') to eagles hovering over a highway ('Eagle Pair') to sunflowers standing in a field ('Sunflowers'). In each poem, Murray also offers a distinctive 'translation', modulating the voice, tone, and grammar of his poetry in order to draw out the special character of his subject. Each 'presence', it turns out, requires a different style and mode of translation, as though, in moving through the natural world, Murray were also moving between languages, entering the distinctive sounds and cadences of foreign tongues.

For all its inventiveness, however, Murray's collection raises a number of questions: what might it mean to 'translate' from the natural world? How does the poet come to 'learn' the language of the other? And how might the poet speak that language without domesticating it?"

*"Presence and the Mystery of Embodiment: Les Murray's Translations from the Natural World"*

Michael Malay

[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-70666-5\\_4](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-70666-5_4)

### **Feedback on poem and Questions/comments**

#### **EXERCISE - 10 minutes**

Go to :

<https://www.naturesoundmap.com/>

Explore the map

Find a sound you relate to.

Listen to the sound for about 1 minute, then rewind and listen again.

As you listen to the sound write what you hear, try to do this instinctively.

You can try writing on paper, making whatever marks the sounds evoke in you.

You can write with your eyes closed if this helps

For example:

Inf, iginuff, inf, igninuff inf, igniuff.

§::§ §::§

Pwweee, wweep er rerdy

### **Discussion - comments in chat, any feedback**

- what do you notice about what you've written
- does it appear non-human language or not?

### **Many voices into one poet's voice**

Listen to the sample from 'Dart' by Alice Oswald:

<https://www.audible.co.uk/pd/Dart-Audiobook/B01FIHVOCW>

### **Summary**

Over the course of three years, Alice Oswald recorded conversations with people who live and work on the River Dart in Devon. Using these records and voices as a sort of poetic census, she creates in Dart a narrative of the river, tracking its life from source to sea. The voices are wonderfully varied and idiomatic - they include a poacher, a ferryman, a sewage worker and milk worker, a forester, swimmers and canoeists - and are interlinked with historic and mythic voices: drowned voices, dreaming voices and marginal notes which act as markers along the way.

### **EXERCISE 10 minutes**

Write about a landscape or environment, for example a particular moor such as Ilkley, or the sky over Morecambe Bay, from the point of view of a species. For example, how Lapwings would relate to and speak about the sky over Morecambe Bay, or how plants would relate to and speak about the soil in your garden for example.

I use the word 'speak' loosely here.

Perhaps incorporate some of the techniques and ideas we've explored throughout the workshop.

You might want to make some notes about your chosen landscape before you begin.

### **EXERCISE 15 minutes**

Have a look at a few poems submitted via the chat

### **READINGS**

**Learning the Grammar of Animacy** by Robin Wall Kimmerer:

<https://xenoflesh.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/robin-wall-kimmerer.pdf>

### **Abstract**

Puhpowee translates as the force that causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight. Biologist Robin Kimmerer was stunned that such a word existed. For all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no word to hold this mystery. You would think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life. But in Western scientific language, terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed. A citizen member of the Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer immersed herself in a Post-it note world of words from this almost-lost language and unexpectedly crossed into an unsuspected grammar of verbs—and a connective new worldview.

### **Inhuman Triumphs - Vahni Capildeo**

*For Nicholas Laughlin*

(i)

The Poet Transformed into a Box Hedge

it was a small snail  
on a rainy day  
it was a small snail  
a petal vertex  
it was a small snail  
nestled ascendant  
the heart of a rose  
an apricot rose  
and for a small snail  
on a rainy day  
the sea was beating  
about my heart; O  
love, beating about  
my green heart of hearts

(ii)

The Poet Transformed into a Double Vodka

Accuse me, before I start,  
of seeking forms to shatter -  
at the icy least, to overspill -  
you, meantime, pouring out me  
on the rocks. MAN DRINKS MERMAID  
MISTAKING HER FOR LIQUOR!  
Seizing my mirror, make up  
wars for islands that aren't cold;  
you grin; I chill; water wins my heart,  
an alien drop in my interior  
and into whom I'm melting,  
a cubic volume of undrunk spirit; O

love, wrapt in glass wrapt in a set of bony fingers...  
Air, how does it transpire that we are from each other?

(iii)

The Poet Transformed into a Heat Haze

& it was not a hot country; but occasionally  
hot, though not by decree nor description; even a day  
like this, where it rained fiercely on sheets of sun, jubilant  
about heat, but denying hotness; not a hot country.  
& it drove the insects in droves, it drove drivers off roads,  
drove drivers into whatever grows on the sides of roads  
& roads became what happened to be passing by, because  
I melted them; & beggars died too shy to beg for drinks  
because it's stupid to feel the heat, admit to feeling  
the heat & to not liking it & not to liking it  
but to feeling everything twice as thick, feeling at all;  
the stream sucked it up, milled on wordless; the trees rebelled, O  
love, voted with their roots, forgetting how to vote, vowing  
their all to - as a leaf double, shape, shade, light - a stitch-up -

(iv)

The Poet Transformed into a Piece of Painted Fabric

That night laid hands on my back,  
ironing out a castle,  
finding no body, is true;  
that night's pursuit turned up  
a green sleeve flat as a wall,  
that's true as well; sky & I  
locked eyes; who called curtains first  
no journalism could tell. Shall this  
poem turn to the wrong side?  
A fine seam of gold stripes me;  
righteous buyers mutter, *mined*;  
mine, I said to night. And O  
love, night kept going round in circles,  
trailing a moonless shower, lyrid threads.

(v)

The Poet Transformed into Space

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*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*  
*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*



*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*  
*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*  
*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*  
*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
*sphere gas gravity heat radiation collapse*  
*luminosity colour temperature location*  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\* \* O  
 love, \*

Vahni Capildeo, *Measures of Expatriation* (Carcenet, 2016)

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**Poosum's Nocturnal Day**

by **Les Murray**

The five-limbed Only One  
 in bush that bees erect as I curb glare-bringing mistletoe  
 can alight, parachute, on any bird's touchdown,  
 perch eating there,  
 cough scoff at other Only Ones, drop through  
 reality and flicker at tangents clear to its crown  
 but then, despite foliage,  
 my cool nickel daytime bleaches into light  
 and loses me the forest genes' infinite air of sprung holds.  
 My eyes all hurt branchings  
 I curl up in my charcoal trunk of night  
 and dream a welling pictureless encouragement  
 that tides from far but is in arrival me  
 and my world, since nothing is apart enough for language.

<https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les/poems/possums-nocturnal-day-0560294>

**animacy**, n.

1. The quality or condition of being alive or animate; animate existence; an instance of this.
2. Grammar. The fact or quality of denoting a living thing; classification or ranking of words or their referents on this basis.

<https://oed.com/view/Entry/248721>

Workshop Playlist:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1pZ9b62UqOXnHeSDzJrwlo?si=ic3wjhH9SfebU6mMxpwXEw>