

## UNDER A BRUISED SKY

"I spoke the lifespan of air" –Nicholas Samaras

In this class, we will play with the environment to communicate all of our inner states, exploring how we can use poetry and language to marry ourselves to the natural world.

Can we separate ourselves from the constantly changing natural world? We are an individual species, yet all one body, one life, one planet... How do we embody the physical, natural world(s) that surround us — how do we become the speaking body of nature, translate what we see, become what we see to understand its existence? Our bodies are the counterculture! And, eclogue, bucolics (Virgil) is our first language as poetry begins in the body—let's invent and investigate eco-poetics as it is tied to our bodies and our imaginations. Personification, transmogrification, and the personal art of the senses will be some of the tools that can bring us closer to our environments.

Elena Karina Byrne

### Preparation:

Before the workshop, *if you have time*, please read as many of the poems and extra materials as you can.

### During the workshop

#### Introduction:

Welcome! I will introduce myself and say a few things about the workshop

#### Exercises:

1. Read a few of the poems in the handout. Look around you (in your mind or location).  
Spend 20 minutes.
2. Among other things, poetry is a supreme act of attention.

- Make a list of the concrete details you see, smell...
- Now make a random, abstract list of emotions and concepts that you think might belong (Don't worry about matching them)
- Make a list of action verbs (verbs share a descriptive force)
- Make a list of your body parts, unique details (the ordinary and the more unusual, the better) It's ok if you have to look up a part, ie., occipital
- See if you can find 6 unlike, geographic locations (bathroom cupboard, Tonga Trench, The Giant's Caseway, grandmother's basement, wisteria bird-walk, estuary, "dead zone, under the bed, and etc")

3. I will describe this in detail, in class. You will notice a relationship of likeness, once all the elements are laid out.

—Choose a line from any of the sample poems for your TITLE

—Make a poem using as many of the elements from your lists.

We discuss the exchange that happens if we substitute abstract-concrete, human-thing in nature

**Mythology:** Apollo / Daphne

*"a heavy numbness seized her limbs, thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy. Only her shining beauty was left."*[8]

Even this did not quench Apollo's ardour, and as he embraced the tree, he felt her heart still beating. He then declared:

*"My bride," he said, "since you can never be, at least, sweet laurel, you shall be my tree. My lure, my locks, my quiver you shall wreath."*[9]

## **EXTRACTS**

Terminology, quotes for inspiration, and links

### **trans·fig·u·ra·tion**

/trān(t)sɪfɪg(y)əˈrɑːʃ(ə)n/

*noun*

1. a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state.

### **os·mo·sis**

/ɑːzˈmōsəs, əsˈmōsəs/

*noun*

- 1.

### **BIOLOGY•CHEMISTRY**

a process by which molecules of a solvent tend to pass through a semipermeable membrane from a less concentrated solution into a more concentrated one, thus equalizing the concentrations on each side of the membrane.

- 2.

the process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas, knowledge, etc.

"what she knows of the blue-blood set she learned not through birthright, not even through wealth, but through osmosis

**John Ruskin's term:**

### **pa·thet·ic fal·la·cy**

/pəˈθɛdɪk ˈfæləsē/

*noun*

1. the attribution of human feelings and responses to inanimate things or animals, especially in art and literature.

### **Jane Hirshfield Contemporary Practices EcoPoetics**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MZl5mdCzuY>

ancient poetry to now, how do we write about nature? what is your central awareness?

Interview with **Johnathan Skinner**, “Jonathan Skinner on observing the goings-on in your backyard and why ecoPoetics isn’t just for writers.” By Maria Hetman

*I grew up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the shadow of Los Alamos, about thirty miles away. It’s one of the most beautiful places in the world. It’s sort of ironic that the builders of the atomic bomb chose this very spot. ... I grew up with the awareness of what actually happened there, and I think it planted in my consciousness this relentless sense of the tension and the contradiction in our relationship to landscape and environment...*

ECO Poetics

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/58639/from-understory>

Lucie Brock-Broido’s poem-excerpt from “How Can It Be I Am No Longer I,” energizes what is lost by what is found and becomes a body-palpable entity that endows the fabric of emotion with action:

I was a flint  
To bliss & barbarous, a bristling  
  
Of tracks like a starfish carved on his inner arm,  
A tinding of tissue, a reliquary, twinned.  
  
...  
That I would be— ... fanatic against  
The vanishing...

Oddly, this became her self-elegy, the predictive precipice ledge the poet could lean out over in order to risk, to hear her own voice come up from the cliff’s updraft. How can we no longer be ourselves? With each love and each loss, we feel ourselves begin to vanish. “Bristling,” should we also re-animate ourselves? With our “forehead against the wall” (David Foster Wallace), be fanatical in our writing? And “bliss” ourselves through language, “barbarous,” make efforts to gamble against all things vanishing? Embrace the vertigo? I think we know the audible answer. **-EKB, my essay excerpt**

Description is made more moving and more exact when it acknowledged that it is inevitably INCOMPLETE. **-Mark Doty**

Excerpt Quotes:-----

What do we call this chimerical creature  
possessing hair of a dog, rabbit foot,  
shark fin, elephant tusk, and rhino horn?

**–Harryette Mullen**

F is for feeling fundamentally fine when standing alone at the sea– Anne Carson

“We must uncenter our minds from ourselves. . . unhumanize our views a little”

**–Robinson Jeffers**

“Say the stones, say the fish.” – **Theodore Roethke**

What matters most, we say *counts*. Height now is treasure.  
On this scale of one to ten, where is eleven?  
Ask all you wish, no twenty-fifth hour will be given.  
Measuring mounts—like some Western bar’s mounted elk head—  
our cataloged vanishing unfinished heaven.

**–Jane Hirshfield, from “Ledger”**

“There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”

**–Hopkins from “God’s Grandeur”**

We laughed at the hollyhocks together  
and then I sprayed them with lye.  
Forgive me. I simply do not know what I am doing

**–William Carlos Williams, from “Variations of a Theme”**

At nights birds hammered my unborn  
child's heart...

her lungs pestled  
loud as the sea I was raised a sea anemone

**–Ishion Hutchinson**

“Here on the edge of what we know, in contact with the ocean of the unknown, shines the mystery and beauty of the world. And it’s breathtaking.” **–Carlo Rovelli, from *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics***

‘Twas like a garden full of snow;  
When snow began to melt,  
‘Twas like a ship without a belt.

**–Anonymous**

“He who buries a treasure, buries himself with it.” **–Gaston Bachelard**

“longer than my life the sky isn’t blue” **–Dan Beachy-Quick**

For the environmental crisis should make it dramatically clear, as perhaps it has not always been before, that there is no public crisis that is not also private.

**–Wendell Berry**

I try to make my art about what I’m concerned with, which often tends to be survival

**—Jenny Holzer**

Sorrow is my own yard  
where the new grass  
flames

**–William Carlos Williams**

We are animal  
in the broken ecosystem

*her head smells like milk on my breast*

**–Tess Taylor**

**–from Molly Bendall’s book *Watchful* (Omnidawn, 2016)**

You need  
A comb through  
In the wild  
Hundreds of us

Were bounding over  
Sand dunes, beyond air  
Beyond  
Any wreckage we know

- **from Alan Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra"**

I could still hear your leaves rustling like the sleeves  
of a black wool coat— the coat of a preacher or a  
watchman

or a pallbearer.

- **from This: Beside the Arno, Margo Berdeshevsky**

Now, the Fascists have come to power sleekly  
as the river rats. Will there be an April? Come she  
will. Alive while blood suns lower where they swim—

**POEMS:**

Remember the sky that you were born under, know each of the star's stories. Remember the moon, know who she is. Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the strongest point of time. Remember sundown and the giving away to night. Remember your birth, how your mother struggled to give you form and breath. You are evidence other life, and her mother's, and hers. Remember your father. He is your life, also. Remember the earth whose skin you are: red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth brown earth, we are earth. Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them. They are alive poems. Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the origin of this universe. Remember you are all people and all people are you. Remember you are this universe and this universe is you. Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you. Remember language comes from this. Remember the dance language is, that life is. Remember.

— Joy Harjo, [\*Remember\*](#)

***A Bird Came Down the Walk* by Emily Dickinson**

A bird came down the walk: He did not know I saw;  
He bit an angle-worm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw.  
And then he drank a dew  
From a convenient grass,  
And then hopped sidewise to the wall  
To let a beetle pass.  
He glanced with rapid eyes  
That hurried all abroad, —They looked like frightened beads,  
I thought;  
He stirred his velvet head  
Like one in danger; cautious,  
I offered him a crumb,  
And he unrolled his feathers  
And rowed him softer home  
Than oars divide the ocean,  
Too silver for a seam,  
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,  
Leap, plashless, as they swim.

— Emily Dickinson, [\*A Bird Came Down the Walk\*](#)

### **The Furrow**

- W.S. Merwin

Did I think it would abide as it was forever  
all that time ago the turned earth in the old garden  
where I stood in spring remembering spring in another place  
that had ceased to exist and the dug roots kept giving up  
their black tokens their coins and bone buttons and shoe nails  
made by hands and bits of plates as the thin clouds  
of that season slipped past gray branches on which the early  
white petals were catching their light and I thought I knew  
something of age then my own age which had conveyed me  
to there and the ages of the trees and the walls and houses  
from before my coming and the age of the new seeds as I  
set each one in the ground to begin to remember  
what to become and the order in which to return  
and even the other age into which I was passing  
all the time while I was thinking of something different

—Theodore Roethke, from various poems

Once, I was a pond.

. . .

By snails, by leaps of frogs, I came here spirit

. . .

I was pure as a worm on a leaf; I cherished the mold's children.

Beetles sweetened my breath.

I slept like an insect.

. . .

*I keep dreaming of bees.*

*This flesh has airy bones.*

*Going is knowing.*

*I see; I seek*

. . .

The shrunken soil

Has scampered away in a dry wind.

. . .

I'd say it to my horse: we live beyond

Our outer skin. Who's whistling up my sleeve?

I see a heron prancing in his pond;

I know a dance the elephants believe.

. . .

But a kiss widens the rose

. . .

My heart sways with the world

. . .

A breath is but a breath: I have the earth.

. . .

The fury of the slug beneath the stone

. . .

...he dares to live

Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings

Against the immense, immeasurable emptiness of things.

## **ORCHIDS**

They lean over the path,

Adder-mouthed,

Swaying close to the face,

Coming out, soft and deceptive,

Limp and damp, delicate as a young bird's tongue;

Their fluttery fledgling lips

Move slowly,



Drawing in the warm air.

And at night,  
The faint moon falling through whitewashed glass,  
The heat going down  
So their musky smell comes even stronger,  
Drifting down from their mossy cradles:  
So many devouring infants!  
Soft luminescent fingers,  
Lips neither dead nor alive,  
Loose ghostly mouths  
Breathing.

–Theodore Roethke

### **BLUE MOLES**

–Sylvia Plath

1

They're out of the dark's ragbag, these two  
Moles dead in the pebbled rut,  
Shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart ---  
Blue suede a dog or fox has chewed.  
One, by himself, seemed pitiable enough,  
Little victim unearthed by some large creature  
From his orbit under the elm root.  
The second carcass makes a duel of the affair:  
Blind twins bitten by bad nature.

The sky's far dome is sane a clear.  
Leaves, undoing their yellow caves  
Between the road and the lake water,  
Bare no sinister spaces. Already  
The moles look neutral as the stones.  
Their corkscrew noses, their white hands  
Uplifted, stiffen in a family pose.  
Difficult to imagine how fury struck ---  
Dissolved now, smoke of an old war.

2

Nightly the battle-snouts start up  
In the ear of the veteran, and again  
I enter the soft pelt of the mole.

Light's death to them: they shrivel in it.  
They move through their mute rooms while I sleep,  
Palming the earth aside, grubbers  
After the fat children of root and rock.  
By day, only the topsoil heaves.  
Down there one is alone.

Outsize hands prepare a path,  
They go before: opening the veins,  
Delving for the appendages  
Of beetles, sweetbreads, shards -- to be eaten  
Over and over. And still the heaven  
Of final surfeit is just as far  
From the door as ever. What happens between us  
Happens in darkness, vanishes  
Easy and often as each breath.

### **Some Questions About the Storm**

–Hilda Raz

What's the bird ratio overhead?  
Zero: zero. Maybe it's El Niño?

The storm, was it bad?  
Here the worst ever. Every tree hurt.

Do you love trees?  
Only the ginkgo, the fir, the birch.  
Yours? Do you name your trees?  
Who owns the trees? Who's talking

You presume a dialogue. Me and You.  
Yes. Your fingers tap. I'm listening.

Will you answer? Why mention trees?  
When the weather turned rain into ice, the leaves failed.

So what? Every year leaves fail. The cycle. Birth to death.  
In the night the sound of cannon, and death everywhere.

What did you see?

Next morning, roots against the glass.

Who's talking now and in familiar language? Get real.  
What's real is the broken crown. The trunk shattered.

Was that storm worse than others?  
Yes and no. The wind's torque twisted open the tree's tibia.

Fool. You're talking about vegetables. Do you love the patio  
tomato? The Christmas cactus?  
Yes. And the magnolia on the roof, the felled crabapple, the topless  
spruce.

## **GREEN to ASH**

- **Terese Svoboda**

The no-cloud-at-all sky, the whisper of never in weather as in—  
the mind blanks.

Night, that cloud

but it's hot even under the moon, the furrows  
lie fallow under, and the dust plumes and plumes,  
even the weeds lie flat in the morning,  
the deep green of the last drop turns a scum

dried black at the tank,

the tank ringed where hope evaporates.

The birds leave off circling and pant  
under the curled leaves of the sagging trees,  
the sun bare but innocent, everywhere

rippled stalks so light light fills them with empty—

As of some terrible massacre has occurred,  
no one goes outdoors.

**-from CA Conrad's** *ECODEVIANCE (SOME)MATICS for the FUTURE Wilderness*  
(Wave Books, 2014)

## **TWO**

i don't offer  
frayed blooms while  
caring for the center  
i love my liver  
my gallbladder  
pat them good  
morning through flesh  
i want to show my  
kidneys this sunrise  
they deserve it working  
hard take them out OUCH  
see the pretty red  
and pink OUCH sky  
love you love you  
sew you back  
my spirit starts  
chiming into the wind my  
craving for wonder

**-from "how the Fuck do I Get Out of this Place**

pattern in the  
wilderness is to  
jostle us out of  
forgiveness it  
just cuts  
us loose

**Faster Than a Lightning Flash**

**-Huang Lihia, trans by Ming Di**

The river courses like my blood.  
Its aware of my thirst  
when I'm on the road. Run.

I run away from poverty.  
The forest is becoming green again.  
What else has moistened my shirt?

Run. The forest flies up  
My heart quivers and shakes off its fatigue.  
My life as short as a lightning flash—  
before I have time to grieve.  
I'm pushed along. Run.

**from "winged Hussars" by Sandra Alcosser**

Once we were swan feathers—  
Eagle Vulture Ostrich Goose.

O the beauty of our fear—

**from "Bloom" by Chad Sweeney**

The bees are dying toward Beverly Hills  
The bees are dying into the sun

At midnight it is the day of bees

**-from Magnifying Glass by Tim Seibles**

— the heart  
spending  
what blood, what  
prehistoric nudge  
on that  
handsome,

brittle head.

- Ellen Bass, "Waiting for Rain" (Like A Beggar, (Copper Canyon 2014)

## Waiting for Rain

Finally, morning. This loneliness  
feels more ordinary in the light, more like my face  
in the mirror. My daughter in the ER again.  
Something she ate? Some freshener

someone spritzed in the air?  
*They're trying to kill me*, she says,  
as though it's a joke. Lucretius  
got me through the night. He told me the world goes on

making and unmaking. Maybe it's wrong  
to think of better and worse.  
There's no one who can carry my fear  
for a child who walks out the door

not knowing what will stop her breath.  
The rain they say is coming  
sails now over the Pacific in purplish nimbus clouds.  
But it isn't enough. Last year I watched

elephants encircle their young, shuffling  
their massive legs without hurry, flaring  
their great dusty ears. Once they drank  
from the snowmelt of Kilimanjaro.

Now the mountain is bald. Lucretius knows  
we're just atoms combining and recombining:  
star dust, flesh, grass. All night  
I plastered my body to Janet,

breathing when she breathed. But her skin,  
warm as it is, does, after all, keep me out.  
How tenuous it all is.  
My daughter's coming home next week.

She'll bring the pink plaid suitcase we bought at Ross.  
When she points it out to the escort  
pushing her wheelchair, it will be easy

to spot on the carousel. I just want to touch her.

### **Water Devil**

BY [JAMAAL MAY](#)

Source: *Poetry* (January 2016)

Spout of a leaf,  
listen out for the screams  
of your relentless audience:  
the applause of a waterfall  
in the distance,

a hurricane looting  
a Miami shopping mall.  
How careful you are  
with the rain-cradling  
curve of your back.

Near your forest,  
all are ready to swim  
and happy to drown  
in me: this lake of fire  
that moats the edges.

From my mouth,  
they come to peel the flames  
and drink their slick throats  
into the most silent  
of ashes.

**–Cathy Colman from “Dear Water” *Time Crunch* (What Books Press, 2020)**

The sky is now an interrogatory blue  
like mother’s opal, her music of St. Petersburg  
marking another drought year.

...

Sometimes you feel part monster, part witness to the climb  
of global heat

**“Little Sur” by David St. John**

**Little Sur**

As in the beginning the early tide at last collapses  
& recedes as porous knuckles of rock

Shoulder their way above the foam where cormorants  
drift & settle & as the day begins inhaling

These last wisps of morning fog & rags of sunlight  
lift into the redwoods rising up along

The canyon walls & in the inlet below us elephant seals  
announce their daily dawn arguments

With those lessons of pre-history & your hair floats across  
the bed as easily as strands of the ruby kelp

That just yesterday rose silently beside the kayak as you  
carved a singular quiet along the waking bay

**from the Anthology *Fire and Rain: Eco-poetry of California***

<https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9780976867692/fire-and-rain-ecopoetry-of-california.aspx>

“Eco poetry is not simply a depiction of nature, but how you feel about and politicize it.”

— Tony Barnstone

**check out Tony Barnstone’s**

***Republic of Apples, Democracy of Oranges: New Eco-Poetry from China and the United States* (University of Hawaii Press, co-edited)**

<https://medium.com/green-horizons/poets-in-china-cross-cultural-environmentalism-and-literature>

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**I normally don't want to share my own work but these to show variety in approach:**

**DUMMIES WE ARE**

**-for Thomas Lux, after 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami**

and other such lessons taught  
in the classroom, your Professor not telling you  
why Hart Crane died, but why  
you must drown with him, language tied around  
your ankles and wrists, for a moment  
or for eternity, take your pick. Pick  
the lock, you can't,  
but you can carry a doorknob  
into the next life.  
After all, you are a dummy  
among graduating dummies, some who  
never lose the title because of Descartes' *malin génie*,  
evil spirit immune from doubt  
who would make him give assent  
to the mathematical propositions,  
(let's imagine, say, who is likely to die first)  
which are in fact false  
as the last words you wrote  
to end a bad poem about water.  
Because tsunami is not a wave  
but an act of the god of middle earth,  
a hot-headed being in charge of moles, worms and  
root knots and ancient dust carried centuries on the back  
of a hunchback whale. Or somebody's god  
behaving badly, cleaning  
the clocks, cleaning out the philosophical  
garage, wiping the earth's floor  
with a few hundred thousand souls, just so  
the dummies can learn something  
and the dumb can learn even more.  
Yet, we are told  
we are not stupid, just not ready,  
brain in a vat, rat  
behind the walls gnawing for his life  
and you, you, standing in a torrential storm  
somewhere you don't recognize,  
at the side of a dark road looking for a ride  
away from shore, dry pen  
in one hand, thumb out on the other, waiting  
for the intelligent answer.

***Poetry International & No Don't*, (What Books Press, November 1, 2020)**

AN OCTOPUS CAN SEE WITH ITS SKIN, MASAYO FUKUDA!

-Kirie (切り絵, literally 'cut picture')

I have to...

*Kirie* there where this skin swallows rain, where propeller-cut whales  
drown if down too long, my own head extinguished by smell of gasoline, its neon-  
lit station next to our house when I was four. But all time is like 50,000 spiders per  
acre in your year, those moon-blue fields rocking them, rocking them in the dry  
mouth of wind where

a parliament of white owls watches, where ants never sleep.

Let me chew arsenic from apple & pear seed, become pale with goldfish kept in  
the dark too long, lose my balance from kindness, like a moth have no stomach,  
sleep behind one Japanese paper screen with toothpick boxes filled with  
Meliboeus beetles, lie on cardamom & coffee grounds with a dervish-numbered  
language of reason at the back of my throat like gemstones, cold from the

cutting. Just let me gillyflower from memory's chestnut on a fire, your fishing line tied  
around my ankles, scissors shining under black's water. Not be bouquet mooring-light  
down in the box flowers' barbarity colors only, or in negative space surrounded by all-  
white, frail incandescent salt-outburst from swimming the ocean's rocking coffin, her  
black-haired doll's wardrobe left eaten by flint silverfish, so lace-light shines through &  
freckles this floor under us until

we cannot stand...

***Black Renaissance Noire & If This Makes You Nervous (Omnidawn, October 2021)***

ANDY GOLDSWORTHY'S STICKS & STONES

*I climb out of my fear.*

*The mind enters itself, and God the mind,*

*And one is One, free in the tearing wind.*

—Theodore Roethke

You are alone. You are alone naked

in a forest, surrounded.

Alone, surrounded by a live ossuary of trees, shed twig, spell

of oval stone. You are separate from hours in a forest of small,

yet perpetuating sounds. No one will hear you breathe. You are alone, bare hands like large up-curling leaves still soft from the falling. Your expression sheds itself into the ground next to rounding stone, the numberless past tense of soil breathing. You are alone. From end branches, light mows down on you in the forest, oncoming wind's almost words between its trees' teeth. Spell freefall memory far forward from your mind to make nothing happen like those nothing spaces between the rooms you left behind, left alone to be alone, unaccounted for. No one can hurt you now. Your face, hands in the synonyms of leaves, hair caught combing pinecone, like a pulled potato a child of you

knew how to be

here alone, falling out of your house made from cut down trees...

**Image and *If This Makes You Nervous* (Omnidawn, October 2021)**

**Elena Karina Byrne**









