

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
SHOULD “I QUIT // MAKING THIS POEM”?

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The Eco-poetry Anthology
Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, editors
Trinity University Press, 2013
672 pages; \$24.95

The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral
Joshua Corey and G. C. Waldrep, editors
Ahsahta Press, 2012
576 pages; \$28.00

The coyotes woke me very early that morning. I had fallen asleep around midnight on the floor in front of the fire while reading a book about Keats, and my waking dream was a vast, vivid conflagration of images from the prior evening’s hunt: the caramel colored rump of an elk I had stalked morphing into the face of a grizzly bear onto whose prints I’d walked last week; the scaly surface of the early winter river transforming into the wash of my scent that spooked the elk; and, from the apex of a ponderosa, an immature bald eagle’s laugh-like cry becoming the cries of the coyotes that woke me.

I sat up and stumbled to the window for a look outside, but I’d forgotten to put my glasses on—the outer dark a misty blur. I imagined the small pack romping down our little paved street, a bushy-tailed five or six celebrating the blood on their tongues. Since my family and I live at the interface of what one might call “suburban wilderness,” complete with trash-digging black bears and mountain lions loitering underneath the playground swing sets, the pack’s feast could as likely have been poodle as fawn, but I wagered the latter as I restocked the fire and slumped back down on the floor, returning the Keats book to my chest: the weight of the book on my sternum as the weight of the soil on his chest, I thought—the warm hearth above like the world that endures long after the body returns to earth.

Sometime during the pre-dawn hours I must have half woken and jotted myself a note, because I had written the following on the back of the 3x5 index card I'd been using for a bookmark: *However slight disappearance of the self; recognition of one's minute place in the grand interconnectedness of all things; acknowledgement of life's extending beyond its original physical manifestation; to enter wilderness, to touch the pure land with every step.* Of whether I'd been listing the chief reasons I read poetry or the reasons I hunt, I am uncertain.

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Edited by Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, *The Ecopoetry Anthology* is the most expansive and best anthology of its kind. Period. If the reader shares with this reviewer a love of poetry that is both engaged with the physical world and conscious of our complicated human interfacings with our nonhuman coinhabitants of this spinning spherical mass of water/rock/greenery we call Earth, then *nearly* everyone she might hope to see in the table of contents is present—from Jeffers to Levertov, Ammons to Niedecker, Clifton to Snyder. Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" is here (99–101), as is Roethke's "Meditation at Oyster River" (85–7); Hughes is present, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (72), as is Williams hinting of the flowers that grow at roadside in spring on the way to the contagious hospital (33), and Harjo detailing the horses she had (296–7). Levis reminds us that the oldest living thing in L.A. is an opossum (384); Galvin lives where "distance is the primal fact" (268); Gander totes his "Field Guide to Southern Virginia" (270–1); Perillo revisits her shrike tree and the birds that hung there "back when I could walk, / before life pinned me on its thorn" (426); Kwame Dawes walks the reader through Sun City post-genocide, where "a man wakes / to the truth that sometimes God's / word smells like the rotting flesh / of murdered bodies scattered" (225).

And so on. Containing almost 600 pages of poetry, *The Ecopoetry Anthology* is so thorough and dense as to recall the elephant to which the speaker in Tony Hoagland's "Lawrence" compares D. H. Lawrence: Lawrence's cocktail party critics, he says, are like "pygmies with their little poison spears / [who] strut around the carcass of a fallen elephant. / 'O Elephant,' they say, / 'you are not so big and brave today!'"¹

¹ Tony Hoagland, "Lawrence," *Donkey Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998), 31.

And thus it is with Hoagland's metaphor of Lawrence in mind that I reluctantly begin my own nitpickings of *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. To start, where for art thou, Jim Harrison ("The rivers of my life: / moving looms of light"²)? Eric Pankey ("Words are but an entrance, a door cut deep into cold clay"³)? Melissa Kwasny ("New thoughts flit through a nation... and absolve us of our responsibility for the weather"⁴)? Kay Ryan ("The egg-sucking fox / licks his copper chops"⁵)? Sherwin Bitsui ("I map a shrinking map"⁶)? Todd Davis ("A young boar (*Ursus americanus*) rests his rump // on the pliable beam of a devil's walking stick"⁷)? Sandra Alcosser ("It looked so harmless at first / roiling in its own spit, / I think I shall call it / a gossip bug"⁸)? Maurice Manning ("when you push the clouds so close together Boss / I think you're stuffing sheep into a chute"⁹)? Jon Davis, with your prescient prose poem, "The Hawk. The Road. The Sunlight After Clouds."¹⁰

I could continue in this line of questioning for quite some time. My point, though, is that if this anthology were only 300 pages, I wouldn't quip about a few folks who didn't make the varsity, but the bigger the book, the smaller the excuse for such omissions. Further, the work of my shorted-list writers is consistently engaged with the natural world, and the difficulties of that engagement both literal and linguistic. My

2 Jim Harrison, "The Theory and Practice of Rivers," *The Shape of the Journey* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1998), 303.

3 Eric Pankey, "See That My Grave Is Swept Clean," *Cenotaph* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 3.

4 Melissa Kwasny, "Yellow Warblers," *The Nine Senses* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2011), 60.

5 Kay Ryan, "Theft," *The Niagara River* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 27.

6 Sherwin Bitsui, *Flood Song* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2009), 1.

7 Todd Davis, "The Poet Stumbles upon a Buddha in Gamelands 158 above Tip-ton, Pennsylvania," *In the Kingdom of the Ditch* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 80.

8 Sandra Alcosser, "Spittle Bug," *Except by Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998), 63.

9 Maurice Manning, "XXXIII," *Bucolics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 36.

10 Jon Davis, "The Hawk. The Road. The Sunlight After Clouds." *Scrimmage of Appetite* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 1995), 53–55.

chief beef (grass-fed, of course) with the table of contents—divvied into “Historical” and “Contemporary” sections—is that the editors seemed to go to great lengths to include work by the “quintessential” American poets, even if the representative work by some of these poets engages “ecologically” on quite a tertiary level, as Donald Hall does in “Digging” (295). Finally, as with any six-hundred-page book, there’s bound to be some unevenness, and *The Ecopoetry Anthology* is no exception. There are numerous instances that make me wish the editors had added by subtracting; when the reader encounters Larry Levis’s seminal “Anastasia and Sandman” (385–8), for instance, he doesn’t need any more horse poems.

Despite its omissions and oversights, *The Ecopoetry Anthology* correctly asserts that many of our best poets are “eco-poets”—the inclusion of Merwin and Levertov, of course, would surprise no one, but Ashbery and Schuyler might hoist a few eyebrows—or have at least written “eco-poems,” defined in Street’s introduction as poems that apprehend our “real biological selves (as opposed to fantasy selves) inhabiting this planet along with us,” a combination of “negative capability and empathy expressed with the cadence, imagery, and wit to make [the poems] visceral, so that [they] lodge in our neural systems and cultivate the environmental imagination that is analogue to the crucial biodiversity of the rainforests and our intestines” (xxxvii).

Perhaps a talisman example of just such a poem is Gary Snyder’s “Burning the Small Dead,” included in the anthology (497–8) and quoted in full at the outset of the preface by Robert Hass (xli). Though, at thirteen lines relatively brief, this poem incorporates great specificity, transitioning from a campfire made of “whitebark pine” to a consideration of the surrounding mountains’ substance, including “sierra granite” and Mt. Ritter’s “black rock twice as old,” to a vision of the stars: “Deneb, Altair // windy fire.” It’s a, by now, well-known poem of Snyder’s, but one which, Hass has asserted in his introduction (which partially reconstitutes his contribution to Dana Goodyear’s 2008 *New Yorker* profile of Snyder¹¹), requires a fair

¹¹ Dana Goodyear, “Zen Master,” *The New Yorker* 84: 33 (Oct. 20, 2008), 66–75.