



***In Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*, Forrest Gander writes that he is ‘less interested in “nature poetry” — where nature features as theme — than in poetry that investigates — both thematically and formally — the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception.’ Write an essay on the category of ‘ecopoetry’ in relation to two poets on the module.**

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As poets at the forefront of contemporary ecopoetics, Kathleen Jamie and Forrest Gander both grapple with questions of the role of poetry and language in the context of a changing climate and a paradigmatic shift in the ways in which we interact with our environment. Although writing from opposite ends of the globe (Scotland and California respectively), both poets share a focus on the power of non-interventionist observation and the unobtrusive witnessing of nature. Unlike traditional ‘nature writing’ or ‘pastoral poetry’, ecopoetry does not simply describe elements of nature as perceived by the poet, but rather ‘addresses contemporary problems and issues in ways that are ecocentric and that respect the integrity of the other-than-human world’.¹ In particular, Jamie’s ‘Before the Wind’, ‘The Glass-hulled Boat’ and ‘Reliquary’, as well as Gander’s ‘Citrus Freeze’ and ‘The Thousand Somethings of Someone’, examine the boundaries between the human and the non-human at their intersection with anthropocentric notions of ownership and belonging.²

Like much of Jamie’s ecopoetry, ‘Before the Wind’ explores notions of ownership and belonging at the particular nexus of the human, animal and botanical realms. The speaker begins with the assertion that she must find the wild cherry trees soon, ‘or the yellow-/eyed birds will come squabbling//claiming the fruit for their own.’ By enjambling the two gerunds ‘squabbling’ and ‘claiming’ across stanzas, Jamie implies a simultaneity of and equivalence in the two actions, as well as a parallel between the birds squabbling between themselves for the cherries, and the wider conflict between the needs of the speaker and those of the birds. As noted by Moran, Jamie typically eschews use of the first-person pronoun in her nature writing, preferring instead to foreground the subject of her poetry without

¹ Ann Fisher-Wirth ed., *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (Texas: Trinity University Press, 2013) p.xxvii.

² Kathleen Jamie, *The Tree House* (London: Picador, 2004) pp.13, 21, 37; Forrest Gander, *Rush to the Lake* (Cambridge Mass.: Alice James Books, 1988); Forrest Gander, ‘The Thousand Somethings of Someone’ (poets.org, 2012) [online], available at: <<https://poets.org/poem/thousand-somethings-someone>> [Accessed 20 May 2021].

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excessive mediation through the human lens.³ ‘Before The Wind’ constitutes a deliberate subversion of this approach, with three distinct uses of the first-person pronoun reflecting the poem’s discussion of an individual human’s needs and desires vying with those of animals. Crucially, Jamie villainises neither the birds nor the speaker in this conflict, arguing instead through her interweaving of the two entities’ objectives that this is, in fact, the natural order of things: interspecies and intraspecies competition for the same resources. The competition Jamie imagines is on equal terms: within the poem itself, there is no mention of the speaker’s consultation of a guidebook, or the internet, or any other method of predicting the ripening of the cherries beyond observation of natural signifiers (the dropping of the blossom) equally accessible to the birds. Thus the species are placed on equal footing, with neither holding advantage over the other, and both equally eager to claim ‘the fruit for their own.’

The latter half of ‘Before the Wind’, beginning after the medial caesura of line 8, establishes a tonal shift: ‘A mouth//contains a cherry, a cherry/a stone, a stone/the flowering branch’. Now writing in the generalised and almost aphoristic present tense, as opposed to the subjunctive future tense of the opening and closing stanzas, and shifting from the definite to the indefinite article, Jamie sets up an awareness of a seemingly eternal natural cycle, spanning the temporal distance from seed to tree to fruit. The combination of Jamie’s use of verbal phrase ellipsis and her careful placement of line breaks leads to such isolated lines as ‘a stone, a stone’, the repetition of which (alongside ‘a cherry, a cherry’ in the previous line) replicates the physical repetition to which it refers: stone begets stone, cherry begets cherry. On a literal level, it is true that the mouth contains a cherry and the cherry a stone, but Jamie’s extension of the same ellipsis to include ‘the flowering branch’ elides the temporal distance between the three states of being, creating in the reader’s mind the surreal image of a flowering branch of cherry blossom emerging from a human mouth. It is tempting to read Jamie’s construction of such an absurd image as an implicit condemnation of human interference in a natural cycle, but, just as the human perspective of the poem as a whole could just as easily be that of one of the ‘yellow-eyed birds’, so too the mouth containing multitudes could be replaced with a beak, without affecting the cycle of growth and rebirth to which Jamie alludes. As Lilley asserts is characteristic of Jamie’s ecopoetry, ‘Before the Wind’ ‘resists the idealisation of nature by adhering to a principle of interconnectivity which includes the human’, in this case neither ignoring human involvement in the

³ Joe Moran, ‘A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing’, *Literature & History*, 23:1 (2014), 49-63 (p.56).

so-called 'natural world' nor foregrounding it, but instead imagining a functional, non-destructive co-existence of the human, animal and botanical.⁴

Conversely, the blossoming trees in Forrest Gander's 'Citrus Freeze' are not visited by humans and birds alike, but rather by an apocalyptic combination of frost and fire. As an example of early ecopoetry (published in 1988 in *Rush to the Lake*), 'Citrus Freeze' is characterised by its somewhat doom-mongering tone and content as well as its implicit conceptual separation of the human and the natural worlds. In the space of a single stanza of ten lines the poem spans six sentences, each of which, due to their brevity and the lack of connective words between them, reads as a discrete statement of fact expressed in economical, largely monosyllabic and unsentimental language. Unlike in 'Before the Wind', there is no lyric 'I' here, such that these discrete statements, many of which lack verbs, appear to be purely observational and detached in tone. This technique, which demonstrates Gander's interest in 'poetry that investigates — both thematically and formally — the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception', is epitomised in line 7: 'The news: nothing.'⁵ Gander's use of a colon as caesura in place of a verb compels the reader to supply their own: the news says nothing? *Is* nothing? *Does* nothing? Within the wider discussion of the extent to which ecopoetry is capable of effecting meaningful change, in this line Gander simultaneously introduces an element of the Anthropocene (its obsession with documentation and newsgathering) while highlighting its apparently wilful ignorance of both of the ecological disasters described in the preceding lines. The laconic 'nothing' may also carry a second meaning, not referring to the silence of the media with regards to this destruction, but instead representing the content of the news itself: the implicit end result of these disasters is that, where once there was life, there is now nothing. The poem invokes two opposing forces of fire and ice: the carelessly destructive accidents and degradations encapsulated in the 'thick breath of sludge fires', and anthropogenic climate change as manifest in the titular freezing of the citrus trees. Strikingly, the forces are pitted against one another in the poem, with the 'genie' of the sludge fires wishing that it could save the citrus trees from the climate-change-caused frost. The effect of setting the two forces in opposition, instead of arraying them neatly alongside one another as might be expected, is to dramatically illustrate the scale of the threat facing the natural world. The impact of the two opposing forces is so profoundly catastrophic, the poem implies, as to leave 'nothing' in the place of natural life. As opposed to Jamie, who in 'Before the Wind' suggests a scenario in which the relationship between the human and natural is neither destructive nor constructive but merely co-existent, in 'Citrus Freeze' Gander presents a pessimistic

⁴ Deborah Lilley, 'Kathleen Jamie: Rethinking the Externality and Idealisation of Nature', *Green Letters*, 17:1 (2013), 16-26 (p.16).

⁵ Forrest Gander, 'The Future of the Past: The Carboniferous & Ecopoetics', *Chicago Review*, 56:2/3 (2011), 216-221 (p.216).

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view of the past and present relationship between humanity and the environment it simultaneously inhabits and destroys.

Another aspect of this relationship between humans and their environment, that of scientific and poetic observation, is explored in Jamie’s ‘The Glass-hulled Boat’. The poem’s title itself introduces the very literal human-made lens through which the speaker is to observe the natural environment, in this case jellyfish and seaweed. Just as in ‘Before the Wind’ Jamie consciously includes the human subject in the poem’s narrative as a means of exploring the relationship between the human, animal and botanical in the context of the ecopoem, in ‘The Glass-hulled Boat’ the same relationship is explored through the use of anthropomorphising similes and the description of an encounter, albeit a less involved one, between these realms. Jamie twice compares the jellyfish to body parts, first likening them to ‘lost internal organs,/pulsing and slow’ and later specifying them as ‘vaguely uterine’. As a particularly pronounced example of Jamie’s use of novel metaphors and similes as, in Moran’s words, ‘a conscious corrective to nature writing’s pull towards pastoral’, these comparisons serve to characterise the jellyfish as simultaneously otherworldly (‘mauve-fringed, luminous’) and fundamentally biological, by means of a blend of typically poetic language with clinical and anatomical terminology.⁶

Juxtaposed with these similes are descriptions of the bladderwrack, first ‘swaying sideways and back/like half-forgotten ancestors/- columns of bladderwrack’ and later addressed directly as ‘you sorry inclining/pillars of wrack’. In describing the strands of seaweed in architectural terms (‘columns’ and ‘pillars’) denoting stability and strength of form, while at the same time undermining this dependability with the incongruous participles ‘swaying’ and ‘inclining’, Jamie sets up an image of this underwater world as recognisably human in its design, but fundamentally alien in its medium. At the same time, she reminds her readers of the doubly distorting lens (consisting of both glass and water) through which her speaker observes the sea life. Campbell writes that Jamie ‘engages Scotland’s seas and coasts as a membrane which blurs the threshold between human and nonhuman worlds’, but in ‘The Glass-hulled Boat’ the poet literalises this threshold: unlike ecopoetry centred around observing and interacting with nature on land, the poetry of ‘blue ecology’ involves an unequivocal boundary between the human and ‘natural’ worlds.⁷

⁶ Moran 2014, p.57.

⁷ Alexandra Campbell, ‘Sound Waves: “Blue Ecology” in the Poetry of Robin Robertson and Kathleen Jamie’, *Études écossaises*, 19:1 (2017), 1-16 (p.10).

It is only in the poem's final stanza that physical interaction between the realms occurs, as the churning of the boat's engine disturbs the water and its inhabitants: 'spun out, when our engines churn,/on some sudden new trajectory,/fuddled, but unperturbed.' In Gillis' analysis the object of this spinning out is the boat and its passengers, who are themselves left 'fuddled, but unperturbed' by the encounter, but there is undoubtedly a level of ambiguity in Jamie's language such that it is unclear whether it is the speaker or the jellyfish, or perhaps both, that is left affected and unaffected by the encounter.⁸ In this final stanza Jamie encapsulates the underlying contradictions of the poem: that the strange world beneath the waves is both conceptually analogous to the human-built environment and fundamentally alien to it, and that to observe nature, even from a passive distance, is also, inevitably, to alter it.

Unlike Jamie's observational ecopoetry, Gander's 'The Thousand Somethings of Someone' makes an explicit moral statement about the existing modes of interaction between the human and natural worlds: 'The/world of flowers is/for insects, not/us.' He thus fulfils the requirements of ecopoetry in its most basic definition: challenging 'the belief that we are meant to have dominion over nature'.⁹ Gander begins the poem in the past perfect subjunctive mood, imagining an 'otherwise' reality in which 'birdsong make us/nauseous. And/gigantic roiling sunsets/give us vertigo.' In itself, this radical reimagining of our appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of the natural world calls into question the perceived inevitability of the character of the relationship between the human and natural, in which we simultaneously appreciate and exploit our environment. It is thus notable that the examples of natural phenomena that Gander offers us in this poem are, for human purposes, materially unexploitable and thus valued solely for their beauty. The non-consumptive actions of listening to birdsong and watching a sunset deprive nature of nothing, but provide 'tonic' for the human observers.

Gander writes often of the ways in which his background as a geologist has shaped his poetry, namely in 'the constant going back and forth between the large scale and the very particular'.¹⁰ In this poem, he moves from the small scale of individual birdsong, which must be listened to at close range and with quiet attentiveness, to the broad scale of 'gigantic roiling sunsets', unavoidably visible and apprehensible from afar and with little focus. In positing a reality in which nature, writ both large and small, makes us nauseous and dizzy, Gander prefigures the broader message behind the assertion of the latter half of the poem, that 'The/world of flowers is/for insects, not/us.' In a shift from the past

⁸ Alan Gillis, 'Late Negotiations: Ecopoetry and Kathleen Jamie', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 14:2-3 (2020), 238-257 (p.253).

⁹ Fisher-Wirth 2013, p.xxvii.

¹⁰ Sucheta Dasgupta, 2020. 'You want to, but you cannot live in the past'. [online] The Asian Age. Available at: <<https://www.asianage.com/books/090220/you-want-to-but-you-cannot-live-in-the-past.html>> [Accessed 18 May 2021].

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perfect subjunctive to the aphoristic present tense, Gander moves from inviting the reader to imagine a world in which humanity is incapable of deriving pleasure from nature, to didactically asserting, through the metonymy of flowers and insects for the natural world as a whole, that the environment around us is not ours for the taking, neither in a passively appreciative nor a physically exploitative sense. In this way, Gander fulfils his own definition of ecopoetics as suggesting ‘ways of being in the world that might lead to less exploitative and destructive histories.’¹¹

Once again, Jamie’s examination in ‘Reliquary’ of the complex ways in which humans interact with their environment proves to be less direct and morally loaded than Gander’s. As in ‘Before the Wind’, in ‘Reliquary’ Jamie suggests a cohabitation of the human with the natural, the man-made with the organic, and, in this case, the modern with the ancient. The poem’s title denotes a shrine in which sacred relics are kept, automatically conferring hallowed status on the ancient settlements, the fibre-optic cables, and bluebell seeds alike. This sense of each entity’s equal right to belong in the same ground, as in ‘Before the Wind’, is reflected in the poem’s form: the two stanzas discussing the human and non-human effects on the land respectively are of equal length, and together comprise a single sentence. Jamie also uses form on a more subtle level, to echo the very ground about which she writes, with each line of poetry reminiscent of a geological stratum of earth, and the poem as a whole circumscribed by references to the ‘land’ and ‘ground’ itself, such that the settlements, cables and seeds are at once literally and formally enclosed in the earth. In thus interweaving content and form in ‘Reliquary’, Jamie creates a sense of an interactive and congruous relationship between the land and its various inhabitants, both human-made and organic, alive and dead.

A complicating factor in this exploration of earthly cohabitation is the added dimension of time, with Jamie’s persistent use of the present tense coming up against the poem’s broad temporal aspect from past to present. Just as in an archaeological dig (many of which Jamie has attended herself) strata of earth representing thousands of years of history are visible simultaneously in a cross-section of land, in ‘Reliquary’ Jamie makes visible at once the plague pits of many hundreds of years ago, the fibre-optic cables of the last decade, and the ‘August/bluebells’, signified by the deictic pronoun ‘these’ as belonging to the present moment.¹² As a result, the past and present, as well as the living and the dead, are imagined as taking up space in the same plot of earth, and at the same moment in time.

¹¹ Gander 2011, p.219.

¹² Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines* (London: Sort of Books, 2012), pp.43-71.

Wheatley writes of 'Reliquary' that 'the human comparison is incorporated in the poem but the primary focus remains the natural world'. However, this analysis fails to recognise a key aspect of Jamie's eco-poetry as a whole, and of this poem in particular: the fundamental unity of the human, animal, botanical and geological.¹³ In Lilley's words, nature writing is 'not about a 'nature' that is external, but about the interrelationship between the human and non-human elements that make up 'nature'.'¹⁴ The bluebell seeds of 'Reliquary' are buried in the ground 'like tiny hearts in caskets', like the centuries-old victims of plague, and like the fibre-optic cables, designed, after all, to provide greater connectivity between disparate parts of the land.

The poems of Kathleen Jamie and Forrest Gander represent two distinct aspects of contemporary eco-poetry, the combined effect of which is to compel the reader to reconceptualise the relationship between the human and non-human in all its complexities. Where Gander's poetry is typically pessimistic, and even apocalyptic in tone, with less immediately discernible literal meaning but with an unmistakable sense of moral didacticism, Jamie's work does not attempt to instruct the reader as to the morality of our existing relationship with the natural world, instead placing emphasis on the value of witnessing the environment around us. For Gander, the coexistence of the human with the non-human is necessarily fraught; for Jamie the two not only cohabit and mutually compose the natural world, but in fact belong to the same fundamental body of 'natural' entities.

¹³ David Wheatley, "Proceeding Without a Map": Kathleen Jamie and the Lie of the Land' in Rachel Falconer ed., *Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on Her Work* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018) p.54.

¹⁴ Lilley 2013, p.18.

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