

FOREWORD

Despite the efforts of writers over the centuries, poetry staunchly eludes definition. English Romantic poet William Wordsworth famously propounded the idea of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” More than one-hundred years later, however, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges hesitated to venture a definition, instead characterizing poetry as “something that cannot be defined without oversimplifying it. It would be like attempting to define the colour yellow, love, the fall of leaves in autumn.”

Like a spectre, poetry haunts the margins of consciousness. Poetry is dreamlike awareness anchored in felt experience. It is bodily sensation that surges forth like water from a wild spring. If we consider the etymological basis of poetry in *poiesis*—the ancient Greek term for transformation and emergence—then poetry reflects Heraclitus’ assertion that “you can’t step in the same river twice.”

American writer Wendell Berry understands nature poetry as that which “considers nature as subject matter and inspiration.” In the tradition of Wordsworth and other Romantics, nature poetry grapples with ideas, emotions, memories, or images related to nature or wilderness. Poets investigate states of mind that are part of our universal response to nature as human beings.

In the present epoch of ecological degradation, poetry—or, more precisely, ecopoetry—has become more crucial than ever. *Eco* stems from the Greek *oikos* for “household” and, in the broadest sense, signifies the ways we make the earth into a home. Ecopoetry conveys ecological messages about the environment, human-nature relations, and issues such as climate change, water pollution, and biodiversity loss.

Ecopoets take interest in animals, plants, agriculture, climate, water, soil, food, environmental justice, and social change. Flattening the longstanding hierarchies between life forms,

ecopoetry views the human world and the natural domain as indisputably interconnected. This mode of poetic creation rejects anthropocentrism (or human-centrism) and embraces ecocentrism, biocentrism or, even, phytocentrism (plant-centrism). As American poet James Engelhardt suggests, ecopoetry remains grounded in the world in a way that implies ethical responsibility.

In these contexts, Ajanta Paul's *Earth Elegies: 60 Poems* celebrates the mystery and beauty of nature while decrying its despoliation. In their focus on environmental concerns, many poems are ecopoetic through and through. The collection also draws attention to subtle moments of appreciating nature as well as to our emotional responses to places. At the same time, ecological awareness threads through the collection. Such interconnections surface in the redolent line "of sap and sapience" from the poem "A Late Flowering." Here the poet implies that sap *is* sapience.

Consider, as well, the visual language of "Moon Gazing" in which the "pockmarked face" of the moon leers at the speaker. The moon is a "golden pancake / Skewered on the bough's upturned fork." The poem reminds us that sight has been regarded as the most complex, highly developed, and important sense for human beings. Sight is closely linked to processes of thinking and acquiring knowledge about the world. The precision of sight is also linked to scientific knowledge as evident, for instance, in the identification of species through their minute visual features.

Earth Elegies, however, is by no means limited to the visual. Set on an arid planet, "What is it all about?" evokes the disrupted sonic experience of weather likened to "the closing cadences / of a dying dirge." Anticipating "aubades that augur / new awakenings / in a changing climate," the poem nevertheless remains steadfastly hopeful. As the biosphere changes, so too does our aural experience of it. Sound waves are made by objects vibrating. The vibrating object pushes on the air around it. The three main qualities of sound—volume, pitch, and timbre—record various transformations in our interactions with the natural environment.

Closely associated with the limbic system of the brain, olfaction shares a powerful connection with memory and emotion. The French novelist Marcel Proust claimed that “after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but enduring, more substantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering.” In the spirit of Proust, Ajanta Paul’s “Earth” is a poem of olfaction in which the earth smells of rain and “crushed stone / in hushed geological gossip.” In the narrative, smell becomes a sensory portal into the earth’s deep evolutionary memory.

Some poems in *Earth Elegies* address non-human beings as communicative subjects. “Talismanic Tree,” for instance, foregrounds the felt encounters between people and plants. The speaker retreats into the “natural, capacious arms. / Our safe and loving anchorage!” To be certain, there is a lexicon for touch—hard, soft, rough, smooth, slick, tickling—but also the idea of being moved, affected, or impacted positively. As Margaret Atwood writes in no uncertain terms, “Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth.” Ajanta Paul’s poetry engages touch in both senses: of skin-to-skin contact with trees but also of the encounters with the arboreal world that transform us profoundly.

Other poems adopt the perspectives of non-human beings. A persona poem uses the first-person “I” to speak from the viewpoint of something else. A nature persona poem, then, is told from the perspective of an animal, plant, leaf, rock, water, or even the sky. In these poems, the writer tries to become nature. This shift of perspective is evident in “Rainforest Dialogue” with its opening “You cannot breathe / because I’m choking somewhere, / far away, falling prey, every day.” Encouraging empathy for the more-than-human world, the rainforest speaks to the reader of its desperation.

Sensorially textured, ecologically aware, and ethically grounded, *Earth Elegies* represents a distinctive addition to the ecopoetics of India, South Asia, and the world.

John Charles Ryan
Academic, Editor & Poet