

Human Colony

A Poetry Collection on the Natural World

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Thank you to Professor Frank Bidart, Professor Jonathan Adler, and Lauren Kahn

Dedicated to Max Gulassa

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Artists' Statement

Scanning the news headlines in the morning is not always the cheeriest way to wake up. I've been reading about an increased number and severity of climatic events such as hurricanes, droughts, blizzards, and heat waves. [7] Humans have fished over 90% of the large predators from the ocean (sharks, tuna, swordfish, etc). [2] Some believe that the collapse of western civilization could occur in part because of how we exploit natural resources. [5] The list is endless of the types of natural imbalances humans have caused.

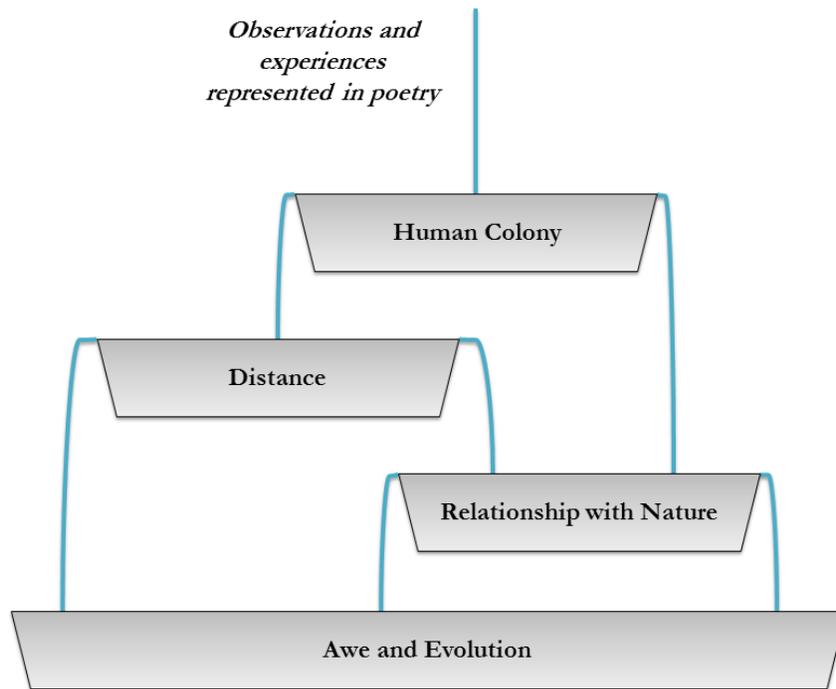
And yet, as informed and aware as I thought I was, my own daily interaction with nature is a rather far cry from living off the land. What implications does something as seemingly benign as being inside have for the natural world as a whole? Our individual habits and mindset have a lot more of an effect than we think.

Poetry has been an ideal medium for me in exploring this type of environmental writing. [3] My goal was to use relatively simple, accessible language in order to address complicated questions. [4] I think of each poem as a compact package containing many layers of content. For the most part, I used the poems to describe individual experiences or events that happened to me, [6] and use them to ask broader questions about how we interact with nature. This method seems to mirror how I believe sustainability issues should be tackled: by everyone applying their individual skills and experiences to work towards solutions. No "silver bullet" will solve all the large conundrums we face, of course. [1] However, many smaller-scale solutions will eventually add up, and at the very least will create a paradigm shift and cause us to approach sustainability issues in new ways.

The collection begins by introducing Dr. Sylvia Earle, a scientist, conservationist, and explorer-in-residence at National Geographic, who inspired me even before I began this collection. She has traveled all over the world with her "Mission Blue" cause to raise awareness and effect change surrounding ocean health. Many people (often including myself) worship her for good reason. But she is in many ways the same as you or I—the only difference being that she has experienced and can (quite literally) appreciate the forest for the trees. She does not take for granted either the global picture or the minute details of nature. She has dived large swaths of bleached coral reefs and witnessed ecosystem imbalances. She has also discovered the personalities of the individual fish she studied when she worked in an underwater lab for two weeks. My collection strives to reflect the importance of gaining many perspectives as Dr. Earle has in her lifetime. [2]

Next, the poems touch upon the meaning of the term "away". When I went camping this past summer, I found myself wondering if I was truly "away" from civilization. Is it possible to actually go away, now that humans have reached so many places on Earth? From a different angle, what happens when we throw something away; where does it go? What *is* away? The concept of away is tied to dependence, in that although it may feel like we are going away or throwing something away, we still depend on others to make it possible. For example, when I was camping I looked at the frying pan in my hand and realized that I could never have made it from scratch myself; I depended on many other human beings for access to this single tool.

The graphic below attempts to illustrate the collection's flow through a few different areas of thought, or "pools". Each poem can be described by at least one pool. The pools are as follows:



- Human Colony: I propose that we are all part of the human colony; we are so reliant on nature and each other for our survival (again, the frying pan example comes to mind). The term colony implies interdependence as well as distance from other groups.

- Distance: As close as we are in the human colony, we have also become disconnected from nature. We rely on natural resources for our survival, and yet I have observed many people showing disregard and/or indifference for those very resources. This attitude is apparent in poems such as “In Memory of Gus”, where a friend does not immediately understand my relationship with a creature.

- Relationship with Nature: Our relationship with nature is not all negative or indifferent, however. In fact we often appreciate beauty on a daily basis (i.e. a sunset, as in “Fall Bike Ride”), or long to spend more time outside (i.e. the employee gazing toward the bay in “Skyscrapers”).

- Awe and Evolution: I defined this pool last because at first I frankly wasn’t quite sure what it would become. Through observation and by writing the rest of the poems, I considered how simple awe of nature could contribute to the next step in our evolution toward sustainability. Appreciation of the simplest details in the natural world can make us realize our similarity to other creatures. Compassion and gratitude lead to caring,

and may spark a desire to reconnect with nature. Perhaps this shift in mindset could eventually inspire solutions to environmental problems. I believe that in order to bridge the distance discussed in the second pool, and to maintain a positive relationship with nature, we should slow down more often to take note of our natural surroundings.

This collection is about taking a microscopic view of macroscopic issues. I hope that reading this set of poems will give you the opportunity to pause for a moment to focus on and appreciate some piece of the natural world that you might normally overlook.

References

- [1] Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995.
- [2] Sylvia Earle. *My wish: Protect our oceans*, 2009.
- [3] Louise Glück. *The Wild Iris*. Ecco Press, Hopewell, New Jersey, 1992.
- [4] Jorie Graham. *Place*. Ecco Press, New York City, New York, 2012.
- [5] Erik M. Conway Naomi Oreskes. *The Collapse of Western Civilization*. Columbia University Press, West Sussex, New York, 2014.
- [6] Frank O'Hara. *Lunch Poems*. City Lights, San Francisco, California, 1964.
- [7] Gian-Reto Walther. Ecological responses to recent climate change. *Nature*, 2002.

I Dr. Sylvia Earle, Oceanographer

Fifty years ago,
she was too pretty
to be taken seriously,
too smart
to be ignored,
too ambitious
to be married.

To her ex-husbands,
all she cared about
was seaweed.

Now, she travels to god-knows-where
364 days a year,
signing policy,
taking pictures,
cleaning up our messes,
somehow giving weight
to each
and every
word
she says.

She never adapted to us;
she required us
to catch up to *her*.

We should know by now
to follow her,
because we certainly can't lead.

I had to smile
when I first shook her hand—
she was as short as me
in her loafers,
digging in her bag for her wallet
to buy coffee.

2 Away from it all

I went camping this summer
to get away from it all.

I pitched my tent in the Sierras—
Diablo Campground.

I woke up each morning to alien bird songs
and a need to feed.

I felt native
until breakfast:

I fried an egg in an iron skillet
that I'd bought on sale at Costco.

3 There is no away

Nothing ever goes away.
In a way, it can be out of sight though it is still right
There, everywhere, it is not away.

4 Deer Lake

Why does floating
in an alpine lake
suddenly make you feel
so wise?

You really aren't any smarter
than when you started hiking,
yet waxing philosophical
seems natural.

In reality all you gained
were sunburned feet,
frizzy hair,
dehydration...

And the backhanded blessing
of realizing your puniness
and dependence on matter,
compared to the indifferent buttes.

"Perspective," my father said.

5 In Memory of Gus

Gus, my praying mantis, was
full of surprises.

Gus was a girl, as I learned,
When an egg case suddenly appeared in her cage.

When I walked in the door,
She would turn and prance toward me.

When she wanted to go for a walk,
She would loudly scratch the door of her cage until I let her out.

When I placed her on my windowsill,
She would swivel her head left and right to watch passing cars.

When I set her in an alien place,
She would dance like a leaf, acting as if she was invisible

To any predator. When she didn't feel safe,
She would turn to me and reach out for my arm so she could crawl back.

When I proudly introduced Gus to my friend,
he approached her hesitantly.

His eyes widened when she pounced on a bumbling fly and naturally
Gnawed a chunk of flesh off its head.

With horror he watched her finish dinner, and muttered:
"Why would you keep this freak of nature?"

6 Wax

From this evening comes the smell of a home-cooked meal
And pleasant summer insect-sounds.

She serves the potatoes, he pours the drinks
They chat and make dinner-noise,

While the candle he set on the table for romance
Stews big-eyed insects in its molten wax.

Wet wings char and limbs bend wrongly
But it wasn't his fault they saw the light.

Mid-conversation, he impassively pours the wax-corpse amalgam
off the side of the porch, so they don't have to witness the carnage while they eat.

They share a laugh about something else far away
and relight the candle.

7 Feast

Trudging through mud-mulch,
He lifts his boot, repulsed, and
Unearths a worm's feast.

8 Fall Bike Ride

The road from Medfield to Millbrook was smooth, just paved last year,
Perfect for a bike ride in this late October six o'clock.

On your left, red-orange-yellow maples,
Dunkin' Donuts on your right,

Behind you, Boa Park with its still-green grass,
Royal Café up ahead (the proudest, oldest diner of both towns).

Frigid air gnaws raw red areas on your cheeks and nose.
You inhale impulsively to avoid stopping for a tissue.

It's six thirty now and sunlight scatters.
That familiar New England pre-sunset light,

So golden it makes even the junkiest buildings glow.
Dark royal plum clouds, just a few close to the horizon,

Mottle the gradient in the sky.
You stop at the elementary school at the top of the hill

To take a picture to bring back to your family
Who will be underwhelmed, unless they saw the sunset too.

A woman in a neon tracksuit jogs by
With an iPod and a determined look.

A few middle school kids staying late for some sport
Holler and laugh too loudly.

An old man in a brown cap smiles in greeting,
Looks up at the sky, smiles again, and ambles by.

None of them react to the faint coyote howl;
Too far away to be either intimidating or intriguing.

Looking through the viewfinder, the school's chain link fence
Obstructs your shot, and the colors are all wrong.

There will be another sunset tomorrow,
Which you may try to shoot again.

Or maybe next time you go for a fall bike ride,
You will brace the cold with more coats and scarves,

And leave your camera at home.

9 Skyscrapers

Grabbing a bagel
and a cup of coffee,
Exchanging a nod with the suited men briskly approaching,
Sharing your plight,
Gluing your eyes to your phone to know the time,
Thinking about the next street ahead,
Oblivious to the skyscrapers,

The skyscrapers!

Feats of engineering,
Architecture,
Design.

Rushing to your meeting,
Taking the elevator to the 17th floor,

Spacing out in a sleep-deprived, coffee-driven haze
Gazing out the window past the skyscrapers toward the bay

10 Yucca Moth and Joshua Tree

As usual, the plainest off-white yucca moth
Tucks pollen beneath her chin.

She delivers her golden blob to the Joshua flowers,
Which her young call home and dinner.

Joshua and moth have honed their bond
For 30 million years (give or take several million).

From a human perspective, how tender.
From a natural perspective, how practical.

I am a mechanical engineer by trade;
Oily engines, screeching cam systems, and complex drivetrains

Are familiar and natural.
But once in a while I wish I had the skill

To design the intricate, refined system
Of the plainest off-white yucca moth.

II Current

Wind on still, flat sea
Swirls particles deep below
Frenzied creatures swarm

Process Reflection

What a learning curve this project was! I have always loved to read poetry, however it wasn't until I started taking poetry classes with Professor Bidart that I realized how difficult it is to write. The most successful tactic I discovered was to think of an experience I had and what I learned from it. Then, succinctly and with attention to form and language, attempt to show (not tell) how the experience happened. By the end of each poem I aim to not only describe the experience, but also communicate what I'd learned. My poems are rarely "done" the first time (I might argue a poem is rarely "done" at all), though I realized I could come closer to meeting my goals for a poem through iteration. There are so many factors that affect the way a poem is read: spacing and shape on the page, where line breaks occur, punctuation, word choice and diction, and more. Changing just one of these variables can affect the meaning and emphasis of a poem. For example, here is a poem (not featured in the collection):

Physical First

Only for a moment
when the harmony
accesses your body
Your back tics
your hairs stretch

Under gently quaking skin
a trickle spreads
behind your ear
until you can't swallow
the song any longer

And when you try
it pushes its way
to the front of your eyes
You know this moment
before you know why.

Yeah you can recover,
attach some meaning
when it subsides.
But you know this moment
is always physical first.

That's how you know
what you really feel

I received the feedback that the point of each stanza was getting lost in how blocky the stanzas were visually. For the next iteration, I attempted to add more space to slow it down when it is read. I also shifted some of the line breaks to keep the points consistent. For instance, the line "Under gently quaking skin// a trickle spreads// behind your ear" is one cohesive thought, so it seems to have a gentler flow when one break is removed: "Under gently quaking skin// a trickle spreads behind your ear". I also replaced some words to make it simpler and more succinct ("when it subsides" can be replaced with "later"). Also, to add emphasis, I removed all punctuation except a single period after what I deem is the most important point of the poem: "You know this moment// before you know why." Here is the revised version:

Physical First

Only for a moment when
the harmony accesses your body

Your back tics
your hairs stretch

Under gently quaking skin
a trickle spreads behind your ear

Until you can't swallow
the song any longer

And when you try it pushes
to the front of your eyes

You know this moment
before you know why.

Yeah you can recover,
attach some meaning later

But you know this moment
is always physical first

That's how you know
what you really feel

In this project I not only learned about the poetry side, but also new ways to think of environmental issues. I did read a lot of books and articles, though honestly I believe I learned the most by interacting with other people. When people asked about my project, it often sparked a dialogue about sustainability. These spontaneous discussions were a pleasant unexpected consequence of the collection. They helped me learn about my own attitude towards environmental issues as well. Before, I had trouble understanding how some people simply did not care about the environment and it frustrated me. Getting a glimpse into other peoples' lives and where they focus their energy really opened my eyes. Some people care about nature but do not have time nor resources to take action, others simply do not know where to start, and some actively do not participate because they do not want to be labeled a certain way. Some of my poems (such as Skyscrapers) came from experiences that I did not personally have, but that came out through these discussions. Realizing these different points of view certainly influenced the language in my poems and the types of poems I wrote.

Overall, though the learning curve of writing poetry was steep, I had a very positive experience with the process of creating this collection. I truly believe it will alter the way I approach problems in the future, as well as how I personally interact with the natural world.