

# 2022 Anthology

## WRITING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Foreword by Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts,  
Beloved Earth Community  
Edited by Luvon Roberson, Maitri Butcher, &  
Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight



An Education Ministry Small Group of The Riverside Church

## Messages from Clergy of The Riverside Church

Dear Friends,

Writing Justice. Writing Environmental Justice. It's becoming increasingly clear that these can mean the same thing. The borders they share are impermeable. If intersectionality means anything, it means we cannot separate the justice we seek for all, from the justice to be sought for the most vulnerable among us, whose plight includes subjection to the spoils of an economy that profits too few while imperiling the whole earth. To seek environmental justice for the residents of communities at constant risk from the chemical pollutants derived from the production of materials from the frivolous to the essential—is to seek justice for us all—at the same time. Environmental justice isn't just for some, it benefits us all—and our sacred Mother Earth. As one of the writers in this volume puts it, “We live on nature's generous gifts.”

These writings face head-on the folly of our appropriation of “nature's generous gifts.” We think we can get away with “privatiz[ing] space and commodify[ing] life.” We take for granted “the grace of the willow tree, the curve of a dogwood branch.” We refuse to see ourselves as the “environmental interlopers” we are. The planet suffers. Our future is compromised, if not subject to a fate that condemns our grandchildren to an unthinkable life—something more frightening than any disaster movie we've ever made—because what they will face will be real rather than celluloid or in these times, digital.

“A whole lotta storms be coming, nowadays.” Tru dat! They are here and on a bleak horizon.

Perhaps the deep urging at the heart of this writing and this work toward environmental justice is this, as another contributor wrote it: “Compelled by tomorrow, both child and trees shine the sunlight: all answering their call to life.” In these pages of creativity, insight, power, and truth, we are called to join the struggle for life.

Thank you to all those whose writing in these pages is a gift, a delight, and a warning. I pray we listen and act!

*Grace and peace,*

*Rev. Michael Livingston*

*Interim Senior Minister*



## Messages from Clergy of The Riverside Church

*“All across these lands, we know somewhere where someone can’t drink the water. Why so many, and why have they gone without for so long?”*

*~Autumn Peltier, an Indigenous Teen Water Activist, giving her address at the Global Landscapes Forum, UN Headquarters, September 28, 2019*

Writing for Environmental Justice is one of the most vital efforts to our very existence. The level of consciousness about our Environmental issues does not deter the negative consequences of our negligence. The courageous souls who engage in Environmental Justice Writing share perspectives on the significance of our environmental decisions and the role those decisions play in impacting our world. These writings also highlight powerful intersections of nature nourishing our lives and how we should nurture nature.

Like the writings of Autumn Peltier, the young indigenous Water Activist featured above, Environmental Justice writings illustrate life through generations of people that are dependent on our environment for support. Unfortunately, we also bear witness to some of the unintentional actions of our societies which are a detrimental force to our environment. These actions often arouse the intentional actions of Mother Earth as she answers with her mighty force.

When will we all learn that the impact of the environment directly determines our lifespan on this planet?

It is a calling to put on the armor of God as we embark on this battlefield of words, armed (figuratively) with our mighty pens. We shall be ready to write boldly on every wall in every room, every injurious action we allow to harm our beloved Mother Earth and challenge each living being to be a part of the restoration before it is too late.

With God on our side let our words be our swords!

*Rev. Charlene A. Wingate*

*Minister, Adult Christian Education*



## Messages from Members of Beloved Earth Community

Riverside Writing Group is pleased to collaborate with Beloved Earth Community on our third justice writing series, "WRITING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE," and to invite BEC members to comment – in no more than 250 words -- on any portion of the following:

1. What is one issue you are particularly mindful of about climate change?
2. How did you come to care so passionately about climate change?

Using the teachings and works of theologian and mystic Howard Thurman, I focus on the effect on all that lives in, on, or within the planet. Thurman believed that community is the whole of the living universe living in harmony, that every living thing has a purpose, and the loss of any one species can upset the equilibrium of the planet.

I am a strong believer of this idea of community as all parts of the living earth rely upon each other to be able to survive.

My focus is not on climate change in general, but the needless destruction of living things that inhabit our planet. Humans fail to understand how easy it is to disturb nature's delicate balance and the disasters which can result from ignoring that balance.

Most recent studies predict the likely loss of about 1/3 of species in the next 50 years -- over 1,000,000 animal and plant species! Just take the example of bees. They lie at the heart of our survival. Bees pollinate 1 in 3 bites of our food and are important to the health and prosperity of countless ecosystems. In North America alone, more than half of the 4,000 native bee species are in serious decline, with 1 in 4 species at the risk of extinction.

Every human, animal, fish, bird, insect, and plant is precious and has a part in the survival of our planet. We must stop being selfish and act responsibly to save our planet/community for future generations.

*David King*

I suppose you could say "Bill McKibben got to me!" I had for many years subscribed to *The Christian Century* when in 2013 I read an article in it by Bill McKibben. I had been somewhat hazily aware of what was then likely to be called "global warming," but that article effectively pulled the scales from my eyes.

It explained that oil and gas fuels which not only largely powered our roaring economy and that of most other developed nations but also emitted increasing amounts of carbon that had been heating up the planet at what would become a disastrous rate unless human beings changed their ways. If we failed to take action and change to carbon-free fuels these droughts, hurricanes, sea rises, and flooding would ultimately destroy our one and only planetary home and the many species it sustained, including our own. Prompt, effective action was a matter of life and death.

My horror at this reality was also fueled by my upbringing: memorable childhood vacations in the Welsh and Scottish mountains, the English Lake District --later reinforced by extensive travel to yet more astounding sites in the USA and Canada. And growing up in a Methodist Church left me in no doubt that this splendid world was a gift from God.

The terrifying prognosis was based on the very science that we brilliant modern human beings had developed. It remains to be seen if our all-too-human failings can be overcome so as to save our one wonderful planetary home.

*Susan Wersan*

## Messages from Members of Beloved Earth Community

The deepest reason goes back to my evolving spirituality. Besides being an activist, I'm an intellectual. Books have a big impact on me. In 1992 I read Sallie McFague's *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. There she said the Earth is "God's body." What? God has a body? She and other feminists depicted God as a spiritual energy flowing throughout the world, animating every creature, from one-celled life to human beings. Even rivers and mountains contain this energy. Psalm 139 depicts God in much the same way.

This view sees the world as the physical manifestation of the mysterious energy in every atom and cell. God has a body, and that endows the Earth with a holy quality.

A second book continued to expand my faith. *The Universe Story*, by co-authors Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, tells the 14-billion year story of the development of the cosmos, from the "Big Bang" down to the twentieth century and explains how each new stage was an answer to a problem in the previous stage. Thus each new stage was linked to the one preceding it, and the creatures which emerged later (including we humans) were only possible because of the ones who came before.

The result: the whole process of evolution is sacred, with miracles at each step of the journey. Everything is kin to each other. We humans are related to elephants and eagles and redwood trees, and yes, protozoa. Given this, how on earth can we even think of destroying this planet?

*Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts*

I became passionate about climate issues as I read Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*. Her book truly opened my eyes to how the world was being polluted with trash containing plastic bottles, cans, and paper of all types making our planet impossible to be free for quality air and clean water. As I began to look around me, I recognized how dirty water looks. All kind of objects floating in the water -- and the smell of the sea just turned my stomach. So I started to tell everyone that we must start to find ways to save our earth. Separating our garbage is a good beginning.

*Doug Miller*

Five years ago, on Thanksgiving weekend, my daughter and her boyfriend were just beginning their vegan journey. They came over and I didn't feel like cooking that year. We talked about it and we ended up getting catering from Jolo's in New Rochelle, a Vegan (Ital) Haitian, Caribbean inspired restaurant and it was wonderful!

That weekend she had me binge watch "What the Health, Forks Over Knives and Cowspiracy" on Netflix, and my life was changed immediately and forever. I had my aha moment of what we were doing to the animals, to our health and our food systems, and to our planet and our future generations. I had no choice but to change. I went from being a human rights activist to a human and animal rights activist.

I learned that deforestation, animal ag, and factory farming are major contributors to climate change. I was led to become a Riverside Beloved Earthling. I have been learning so much ever since. We are all connected and every action has a reaction. It's time for regenerating with love, peace, and justice. We have been doing damage for a very long time now but the more we learn, the more we can change the outcome. The world is changing, and God is inspiring me to be a steward for good change. I want to be on the right side of history.

*Mary Pasquini*



## Messages from Members of Beloved Earth Community

As a child, I was blessed with so many outdoor experiences —gardening, summer camp, family hikes, and tent camping vacations with family. To this day, I want upcoming generations to have similar experiences — the scent of a hike through a pine forest, an orchestra of bird song, snow angels and snowmen, the intense busyness and beauty of a coral reef, the rush of the springtime emergence of plants, snow-filled mountain caps, the magic of a field of fireflies, the babbling of a cool stream, a chorus of mating frogs, monarch butterflies visiting my garden as they migrate, the turquoise blue of the sea set against a cerulean blue sky.

Dana Minaya

In 1946, George Seferis, the Greek Nobel Prize winning poet and diplomat wrote, in his poem, “Thrush:”

*The houses I had they took away from me. The times happened to be unpropitious: war, destruction, exile.*

These haunting words describing people who lost their homes and their countries over 50 years ago apply as well to an enduring result of galvanizing climate crisis: the some 21.5 million people “forcibly displaced by weather-related events since 2008,” cites UNHCR.

As the seas rise around island and low-lying communities and cities; as encroaching deserts and drought consume ever diminishing agricultural land; as changes in sea salinity and millennium-established ocean currents cripple traditional fishing communities; as indigenous tribes in the Amazon watch in horror as the earth’s lungs, tropical forests, go up in flames, and unregulated gold mining poisons the rivers, while cattle ranches and soy farms and new highways swallow forests and leave fragile unusable soil, we are called to halt the causes of such widespread environmental degradation and human displacement.

Climate change sets off a vicious cycle for communities as they become unstable and vulnerable, As temperatures rise, the availability and quality of water diminishes, which in turn leads to increased disease, drought and failed crops. With their income and food supplies hallowed out, communities are propelled into social instability and conflict.

Seferis’s poem goes on to explain a certain “resentment”

*with those who stayed behind, with those who went away  
with others who’d come back if they could  
or others who disappeared, now that the world’s become  
an endless hotel.*

Frances Connell

## Messages from Members of Beloved Earth Community

I am mindful of everything pertaining to climate change. When I was growing up, there were no plastics. Suddenly they are everywhere blocking gutters and rivers, hanging on electric poles or flying in the air. The Dry Season is hotter. Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, had been experiencing persistent torrential rains, and in 2019, the highest recorded rainfall caused massive flooding and landslides resulting in loss of lives and property.

However, the one issue I am particularly mindful about is Corporate Colonialism. Examples: Africa is not a major producer of chemicals or plastics, produces only a minute amount of global greenhouse gas emissions; and it is widely acknowledged that Africa contributes the least to environmental change yet is most vulnerable to climate change and least equipped to cope with climate change.

But even as African countries are making great efforts to limit production, reuse, and recycling of plastics and to manage their plastic waste, American Chemical Council was lobbying to influence US trade negotiations with Kenya to enable the group to use Kenya, one of Africa's biggest economies, as a steppingstone "to enter new markets throughout Sub-Saharan Africa" -- that is, to make Africa a dumping ground for American plastic waste.

East African Crude Oil Pipeline, a proposed pipeline that would run from Kabaale, Uganda to the northeastern coast of Tanzania, includes plans to drill 130 oil wells and develop oil fields, displacing about 118,000 people, endanger the region's unique ecosystems, and threaten wetlands, wildlife, and fresh water sources that support millions of Africans.

*Milly Akinsulure*

When I first visited The Riverside Church, about 14 years ago, I came in search of a spiritual home. I was unaware of its storied history of social justice. I had worked as an attorney representing individual claimants in employment discrimination cases. However, I soon learned that winning cases for individuals had little impact on the evils that Dr. King described as racism, militarism, and materialism that plague our society.

As I worked with Beloved Earth Community and my faith grew, I learned that an entire community could be destroyed in a manner of minutes due to climate change. There is much that we can do.

However, I learned that the persons who deny the science of climate change, also support the societal evils that plague all of us. I have decided that these evils cannot be stronger than the drumbeats of the hearts of people of faith. These same hearts, within us -- empowered by our faith -- give us the strength, in the words of Dr. King, to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. I am more committed than ever to do all that I can.

*Regina Tate*

# About The Riverside Writing Group

For more than two years, the entire world has been held hostage by the COVID pandemic, which has thrown a black light on all manner of injustice, illuminating with glowing light for all of us to see centuries-old realities of inequity, brutality, disparities in health and wealth at the same time calling us as never before to see how – literally – we cannot live in this world without affecting (or infecting) each other. Planet Earth is the one home we all share. Humanness is our irrefutable bond.

So as to offer one pathway for Riverside Church and Friends to help build community in the pandemic and in a world of heightened awareness of generations of injustice and oppression, Riverside Writing Group was created by Luvon Roberson, Debra Bracey, Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight, and Maitri Butcher, with pastoral guidance from Rev. Charlene Wingate, Adult Education Committee. Rev. Bruce Lamb leads The Riverside Church Education Ministry.

Riverside Writing Group affirms our common human connection and invites all to join us in writing – in many different styles and genres – as a powerful tool for social justice: To write words that witness and speak truth to our shared humanness.

Each Riverside Writing Group series showcases a guest presenter -- well-known published writer -- who focuses on a writing genre in 40-minute presentation, followed by 20-minute Q&A from participants. Riverside Writing Group then invites participants to join in four weekly prompt-based writing sessions focused on the particular writing genre, after which they may choose to read their work at our OPEN MIC Night. When feasible, we publish an anthology of work submitted by writers who participated in any component of the writing series and we launch the anthology with a book party.

## **Our Mission**

The mission of Riverside Writing Group is aligned with particular aspects of the following:

### **The Riverside Church | Article II Mission (excerpt):**

Members are called to an individual and collective quality of life that leads to personal, spiritual, and social transformation, witnessing to God's saving purposes for all creation. Therefore, the Church pledges itself to education, reflection, and action for peace and justice and the realization of the vision of the heavenly banquet where all are loved and blessed.

### **Adult Education Committee of The Riverside Church | Mission Statement**

The Mission of the Riverside Church Adult Education Committee is to collaborate in the learning and planning of programs in an inclusive, interactive environment of sharing, that fosters spiritual growth, strengthens faith identity, and promotes social justice.

The key objective of Riverside Writing Group is to provide a welcoming, supportive forum for participants through specific genre-writing focus so as to express ideas, as well as voice, create, and share writings that bring to life and strengthen The Riverside Church mission and the Adult Christian Education mission.

- Riverside Writing Group Co-Creators & Planning Team

## About Our 2022 Anthology: Writing Environmental Justice

Our anthology is a curated collection that showcases the work of writers who participated in any of the four weekly prompt-based writings sessions and/or registered for Riverside Writing Group's kick-off virtual presentation on "Writing Environmental Justice" delivered on 4.21.22 by nationally recognized writer-scientist-environmental activist Dr. Beronda Montgomery. Our hands-on writing sessions were also inspired by Dr. Montgomery's *LESSONS FROM PLANTS* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

We invited those writers to submit their poetry and/or lyrical prose. We looked for contemplative, globally aware, truth-telling, and apathy-busting works, based on the writing prompts provided in the four weekly prompt-based writing sessions (via Zoom on 4.28.22, 5.5.22, 5.12.22, and 5.19.22).

We also invited the writers to join our private group page on Facebook, where they can find daily inspiration to write-justice in the supportive community of fellow writers.

Each writer is the sole copyright owner of their entry/entries. The copyright in the Anthology as a curated collective work belongs to the publisher of the Anthology, namely TRC/Education Ministry/Riverside Writing Group.

You are holding their environmental justice writing in your hands.

*-Riverside Writing Group Co-Creators & Planning Team*



## Foreword by Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts

This collection of writings on environmental justice was put together over the course of several weeks by a community of folks of different persuasions. What a wonderful mixture of sharings! You'll find a funny tale with a serious point (and a talking raccoon), some serious musing on how institutions can stifle the spirit of a young boy and how birds can teach us a lesson in overcoming obstacles, and even the street chatter of two trees on a corner. There is poetry and prose, wisdom and prophecy. So read and enjoy!

A presentation by a gifted plant scientist-professor kicked off the series, and the two leaders of Beloved Earth Community -- the environmental group at The Riverside Church -- provided prompts for writing, as did another Riversider in the final week. Guiding it all were Luvon, Maitri, and Vernay, the trio of women who organize these writing excursions into justice in all its dimensions.

You will find throughout these writings, hints or more-than-hints of the complex nature of environmental justice. How environment is not just about nature and wilderness (important as they are), but takes in the human realm too, and thus the justice issues of housing, food, and health. We are reminded that all creatures come from the same source and are interconnected in an ecological system of mutual dependence. Take one species away and the whole system crumbles. We hear of the wisdom and love of our ancestors, and of indigenous peoples, who practiced a simplicity of living that we need to return to. And perhaps we will even find a glimpse in these writings of the holy character of all life, indeed of the Earth itself, and its seas and mountains and forests. For sacred energy flows through all things and animates all of us. God is the one "in whom we live and move and have our being."

These writings are a gift: read them, be moved by them, get out into nature, team up with Beloved Earth Community or another organization, and work for environmental justice!

*Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts*

*Chair, Beloved Earth Community, 2019 - 2022*



## Introduction

With Earth Day 2022 only five or six hours away, Riverside Writing Group kicked-off our “Writing Environmental Justice” series with a presentation by nationally acclaimed writer-plant scientist-environmental activist Dr. Beronda Montgomery. And, we will never think of ourselves or plants – or indeed, any living Earth creation – in exactly the same way again!

Dr. Montgomery is that rare and gifted mentor: she is microbiologist, co-founder of Black Botanists Week, author of *LESSONS FROM PLANTS* (Harvard University Press, 2021), and a person who intertwines multidisciplines to champion justice, while joyously sharing her broad-ranging gifts to guide us in learning how to live on Planet Earth in-community.

Dr. Montgomery shows us both the scientific bases for living in-community as well as the humanity we share, which calls us to heed the call to justice, the core of community. She mentors us to look to plants as our mentors in seeing and building community. You will find her wise counsel seeded throughout this anthology.

You will find it in our collaboration with Beloved Earth Community for our fourth justice writing series on “Writing Environmental Justice,” as you discover each member’s witness to Earth kinship, to climate change, to saving our future. BEC’s Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts and Regina Tate were a constant presence in our writing sessions, inviting us to see with new eyes their spiritual journey and their need to fiercely protest so as to fight climate change.

Indeed, in his eloquent Message, Rev. Livingston tells us “we are called to join the struggle for life”; and Rev. Wingate reminds us, quoting an Indigenous teen water activist, “we know somewhere where someone can’t drink the water.”

As you read this anthology, you will be struck by the gorgeous writing about trees, plants, animals, people; by how the writers bring nature, cities, mountains, waterways to consciousness and protest; and by their warnings and hope, even belief, that humans must and can learn to be good stewards. Just some of the many lessons from plants.

In Dr. Montgomery’s response to a question about climate change and plant mentors, we see how the contributors to this anthology not only embrace her mentorship but also are now mentoring via their environmental justice writing:

**Q. You study how plants respond to changes in their environments. As the world grapples with radical changes to our climate, what wisdom can we borrow from our plant mentors?**

A. “Individual changes are not enough. We have to have ecosystem changes. Plants function in community and not just as individuals. I was talking to a friend who lives in a neighborhood with lots of walnut trees. His neighbor was agitated by the trees, because when they have a really good set of nuts in a particular year, all the black walnuts in an area will [release them] at the same time. It’s a coordinated effort, because if any tree decided to set fruit in a particular year, the birds may eat all of that tree’s nuts, and there would not be offspring. But when there’s this coordinated effort, the massive production means that some of the seeds will escape rotting or being eaten, and there will be the next generation.

## Introduction

The trees recognize that this may be an optimal year and there is communication and coordination among them that increases the likelihood that they continue to exist. You see that [among humans] with voting registration; that's when people understand the power of the collective. We have to bring that understanding into our daily lives to have an impact on climate change – but not just when there's a crisis and everything's about to fall apart. How do we bring pockets of that power to our lives more regularly?" \*

Let Dr. Montgomery's words – and passionate mentorship – seed our stewardship of Mother Earth and of our neighbors and communities. In this anthology, you hold inscribed many seeds of environmental justice. Now, go forth and spread them in-community!

*Luvon Roberson*

*Founder, Co-Creator, Planning Team*

*Riverside Writing Group*

*Post-script: Our community for our "Writing Environmental Justice" series also includes poet/writer Eugene Melino as well as TRC Communications Team – Rev. Jim Keat, Brian Simpson, MaryLennox Halfacre, and Jones Acquah.*

*\*<https://grist.org/fix/science/beronda-montgomery-resilience-community-other-lessons-learned-from-plants/>*



## Message About Anthology-Making

### “All Nature in Manifold Witness”

There couldn't be a more appropriate time to consider environmental justice! At this very moment we witness melting glaciers, wildfires, ozone depletion, water pollution, and many more assaults on nature. These occurrences are abundant not just in the news but right in our neighborhoods. Over and over, we see environmental degradation in our air, water, and within all living things. In case after destructive case, there are disasters and injustices attributable to lack of caring and/or unjust social policies and practices. Predictably, the negative consequences of these have a greater impact on those least able to bear them. As we witness these catastrophes, we can't be reticent. That's why this anthology is needed.

Of course the title “All Nature in Manifold Witness” is not my own. The phrase comes from the second stanza of the popular hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” written by Thomas Chisholm and William Runyan\* and found in many Protestant hymnals. This phrase within the hymn helps us realize the abundance of examples we see in the natural world that portray the faithfulness of God. The hymn has a melody and lyric so haunting and meaningful that it is played both at weddings and funerals. All nature in manifold witness also is a fitting way to describe the process of writing this volume and the resulting product. Here it refers to the diverse examples of environmental issues the writers want us to witness. They want us to learn, appreciate, and act in a wide variety of ways.

Many of the selections describe plant life. This is partially due to the encouragement of our keynote presenter Dr. Beronda Montgomery, a plant scientist. She gave us examples of how the health of plants depends on their environment and of how she witnessed her mother being a rescuer of sick plants. (I put myself in that rescuer category as well since I frequently shop the clearance racks in nurseries and garden shops to buy, at great discount, those plants given up for dead.) Also, the selection by Melva Lewis entitled “Teachers Are Always Around” is an example of an experience bringing life to a dying plant. Many of the authors bear witness to interesting plant phenomena such as: plant life and death cycles; friendships with trees; vine-like plant behavior twisting and winding around walls, fences, and anything else available. In addition to this plant-focused writing, the anthology also offers interesting submissions that speak about dogs, birds, a black cat with white feet, soil that hides a wild marketplace of microbes, a majestic raccoon, and even blue-eyed flies.

As you read the selections in this anthology, note that some are comforting, others provocative, and maybe some infuriating. Not all of nature's manifold witness can be positive. Let this writing remind us why we need to appreciate and sustain nature justly for all living things. This is a call to make environmentally-friendly laws, policies, and behaviors central to our thinking and actions.

*Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight*

*Bronxville, NY*

\*[www.lifeway.com/en/articles/the-history-of-great-is-thy-faithfulness](http://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/the-history-of-great-is-thy-faithfulness) (accessed on 07-25-22)



## April 28, 2022 Writing Prompts

**Prompt 1:** Choose one of the two seedlings (one flourishing; the other wilting) that Dr. Beronda Montgomery shared in her 4.21.22 presentation and write in that seedling’s voice about that seedling’s experience.

You may write in any genre or style you choose – poem, letter, screenplay, stage play, public address/speech, PSA, short story, Op-Ed, letter-to-the-editor, or any other type of prose or poetry.

**Prompt 2:** Is the Garden of Eden possible in the future or the past?

**Prompt 3:** Write about “leaves as solar panels,” which Dr. Beronda Montgomery discusses in her book LESSONS FROM PLANTS.

## The Garden of Eden, Then and Now

Before there was good  
Before there was bad  
There was Eden  
The Eden of dreams  
Where everything flourishes  
Flowers bloom, crystalline rivers flow  
The fruits are rosy, sweet, and ripe  
Animals gather, graze serenely  
Everyone loves one another  
Inhabiting peacefully  
In caring companionship

Time passes  
The snake's tongue hisses  
Venom, fake promises  
Many gullibly accept the hype  
See light where there's night  
See gold where there's mold  
Calamity leads to catastrophe  
Fear, famine, and anger abound  
Wars and pestilence proliferate

This Eden is a mixed bag  
There's love, there's hatred  
There's tolerance, there's prejudice  
Distrust for differences  
Naked craving for lust  
Destroys caring and empathy  
The strong want to be stronger  
The bully, a bigger bully

Invaders spread hateful propaganda  
Fire brutal missiles at freedom-loving citizens  
Pretend to be protectors, liberators of the oppressed  
Claiming they're bringing back peace  
They murder children, the old, the infirm  
They are slayers of potential, destroying futures  
Demolishing schools, homes & hospitals

## The Garden of Eden, Then and Now

They promote the BIG LIE—  
A guaranteed return to Eden  
False promise they know they won't keep

La pura verdad  
El Jardín Del Edén  
For the innocent, the young  
The elderly, the good people  
The peace and tranquility they long for—  
Their Garden of Eden  
Exists only in their dreams.

*Melva C. Lewis*

*Long Island, NY*

## Call to Life

Secure on Dad's shoulders, she's free to reach up; free to speak out!

Solidly grounded, he points the way and holds her up — up, where she can see and be seen; hear and be heard.

The soil underneath conceals a wild marketplace where microbes, fauna and flora exchange precious offerings of water and nutrients.

A living sculpture, the tree's very shape tells of its past: years of plenty and years of struggle.

Soft inner cambium never rests. Its xylem-phloem highway carries sustaining water and nutrients back and forth: from leaf to roots, to leaf, to roots without ceasing.

Foliage, with infinite shades of green, gracefully conducts the magic alchemy that spins animate matter from sunshine.

Compelled by tomorrow, both child and trees shine the sunlight: all answering their call to life.

*Paige Young-Murphy*

*Lakeway, TX*

## Our Green Inner Voice

The Garden of Eden is ubiquitous. So it exists in the past, present, and future. We do many things that destroy the Earth, just for our convenience. One could say we are giving into our temptations like Eve.

However, Earth is like a garden; it needs to be cultivated properly. Our ancestors took better care of Earth than we do today. It is clear that we have lost this gift of knowledge that has been passed down from our ancestors. A few of us naturally have the discernment to see where we are headed. Our green inner voice tells us that if we don't take care of the earth, we may have to relocate to another planet. So let's learn from Adam and Eve, and take heed of how our actions negatively impact our home.

*Joshua James Powell*

*East Orange, NJ*

## Trees in the Expanse of Life

My backyard has a tree drooping over from my neighbor's yard, providing me with the essence of summer fruit, the fig.

My front space shares a tree along with the street's lamp that serves as a marker for red light, green light, one two three.

That very same tree hides the street's lit lamp, serving as the evening warning. Time to go home.

I think trees protect me from the rain but learn that trees are a conduit for electricity when raining.

Trees still are lovely from the breeze I feel, from the paper that will contain what has been penciled in, to the chair that sits by the window. The tree's breeze sends summer comfort.

I'm drawn in by the continuing presence of trees, that change leaves with each season, that deepen their roots as they connect with fellow trees, that form a scalloped pattern across their canopied tops and beneath the subtle clouds.

I marvel at the newly discovered oak trees, proudly occupying titled spaces, showing me how to grow, to spread my arms as branches, reaching out to present beauty in all necessary places. I marvel at the depth of these roots that seem to send continuing messages of foundation, growth, necessity, health, beauty, purpose. I am completed by the tree panorama.

*Evelyn Seabrook*

*Eustis, FL*



## May 5, 2022 Writing Prompts

**Prompt 1:** What calls you to write about Environmental Justice?

Describe in an essay, prose, poem, memoir, or letter this heart-song, drawing on inspirational stewardship, such as Dr. Beronda Montgomery's mother, who was her community's plant whisperer, or write about your own calling – existential or specific -- if you are so moved.

**Prompt 2:** Lessons from the Teachers: Who are your notable teachers leading you into Environmental Justice?

Describe in an essay, prose, poem, memoir, or letter what lessons they have taught you that inform your justice writing.

## A Good Death: Part I

Let me share the story of my dog, Denny.

Denny was the last dog my first wife, Roberta, and I acquired. A rescue organization had picked him up off the streets, probably saving him from an early death. He was being boarded by a vet in Douglaston, Queens. At the time we were looking for a second dog, and so we decided to check him out. Denny was a young, medium-size, mixed-breed, with all black fur. When we met him and started talking with the volunteer about his history, we noticed he would lean against our legs, making physical contact with us. “He’s a leaner,” we were told.

Roberta and I decided to adopt Denny and brought him home. We learned to be careful around him and not move our hands too quickly or pet him too vigorously because he would sometimes bite. Nothing too serious, but still painful. We also had to watch him carefully so he wouldn’t chew up the sofa pillows. That’s how he acquired his name, short for Dennis the Menace.

As time went on, and Denny calmed down realizing he had a secure home, he became a treasured member of our family along with our other dog, Bear. He was fed and walked regularly, and taken along on some of our vacations. His rescue and our adoption constitute the real presence of environmental justice in Denny’s life.

When Denny was about six, Roberta suddenly and tragically died, and I was devastated. The presence of Denny and Bear in my apartment was a great comfort to me then, and the daily routine of walking them kept me functioning. A few years later I met Susan at Riverside Church, and soon she was visiting me in Queens. She would often go with me as I took Denny on walks.

Before long, Susan and I were talking of getting married and planning for me to move to her apartment in Morningside Gardens, close to the church. One problem was how Denny would get along with Susan’s two cats. (Bear by this time had died.) I brought him over for a visit, and it was clear from both his and the cats’ reactions that this would not work.

Denny had developed cancer in the previous year but had surgery and recovered. In the mystery of God, as we prepared for my move to Manhattan, there was a recurrence of the cancer. It seemed to affect his rear legs and ability to get up, though we were still able to go on short walks. One Saturday, as Susan and I prepared to take him on his walk, Denny was unable to lift himself off the slippery linoleum floor, so I tried to drag him by his leash toward the nearby rug where he would have more traction. Bad move! My pulling on his collar must have choked him a bit and he went into a seizure. I felt horrible. But the seizure stopped, and we went for a walk.

*Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts*

*Upper Westside, NY*



## A Good Death: Part II

As I lay in bed that evening, with Denny at the bedroom door, I kept watching him for fear of another seizure. It came and continued for a long period. I panicked, seeing my dog in pain and not knowing what to do. I called an emergency vet and was told “bring him in!” Susan and I wrapped him in a blanket and carried him to the car.

We reached the car and somehow got Denny into the front seat, but with his head on the floor and his body crumpled on top. At the animal hospital they took him into the back while Susan and I waited out front. We knew the options were not good and tried to prepare ourselves. The vet finally came out, told us Denny had been sedated and was now resting quietly. She said the prognosis was poor, and told us we could choose an expensive medical treatment which might not work or he could be euthanized. Susan and I conferred briefly and chose the latter.

The vet said they had a nice room in the back where we could be with Denny and say goodbye to him. They brought Denny in and laid him between us; he was obviously happy to see us. He was calm and relaxed from the sedative and did not seem to be in any pain. What a difference from the way we had brought him in!

Susan and I started petting him gently and telling him what a wonderful dog he was and how we loved him. We had been told we could take as much time as we wanted; what a blessing that was! As I petted Denny’s head and moved my face close to him, he raised his head and licked my face several times. Tears started flowing freely down my face. No less than 5 or 6 times did Denny do this — two fellow creatures saying goodbye to each other! I do think on some level Denny knew what was going to take place.

The vet came in and inserted the needle into Denny’s leg and slowly injected the additional sedative. Susan and I kept loving Denny and petting him as he lapsed into unconsciousness until finally the vet signaled it was over.

Whenever I think about that night, whenever I write about it, I start to cry. Denny blessed me with a loving goodbye despite the rough trip to the vet. He himself was blessed with a good death, free of pain and embraced by love from his family. Considering his beginnings as a stray, would one not say he had a full measure of environmental justice? May we all be blessed with such a death.

Denny’s death solved the conundrum Susan and I were facing in my move to Manhattan and bringing Denny with me. In some strange way, in the unfathomable mystery of God, it is almost as if Denny knew and eased my way into the next chapter of my life.

*Rev. Dr. Alan Bentz-Letts*

*Upper Westside, NY*



## Tribe of Muses

It didn't spring from nothing, this love of the wild, the free. and the beautiful!

No, it took a tribe of muses to show the way:

A family that went camping (before REI): Get out! Listen! Watch where you walk.

Church camp counselors marveling at the vast night sky: Look up! Raise your voices, "For the Beauty of the Earth!"

Friends of adventure: Yodeling doesn't cause avalanches! These rapids are fun!

Reverent watchers: That little bird is putting on quite a show: it wouldn't be right not to stay and watch! See the grace of the willow tree, the curve of a dogwood branch. Smell the exquisite rose.

And being so blessed, it's only fair to show a friend, a child, or even a stranger, the world I've come to see. And -- with them -- to get out! To listen! To have fun! To celebrate Creation!

*Paige Murphy-Young*

*Lakeway, TX*



# Teachers Are Always Around

*Even if others give up on you,  
never give up on yourself. —MC Lewis*

She looks dry

I give her water

She seems weak

I give her nourishment

Seeing no change

I lose hope

I don't have the heart to throw her away

I put her outside, in the corner

Of the small landing, below

The kitchen window, next to the

One-legged barbecue grill

What is meant to happen will happen

Riding home on the subway

My thoughts are of her

Day in and day out

I climb the stairs to our second-floor apartment

I gaze at her, dry, weak— unchanged

My heart constricts

My vision blurs

There's no life in her

## Teachers Are Always Around

One evening after work all I want to do  
Is walk inside and go to bed  
Reaching the landing  
Out of habit, I look at the corner  
And see a bit of green—a tiny bud  
All tiredness leaves me, joy fills my heart  
Day by day she grows greener  
A groovy green

Since then, my walk home is different  
I have pep in my step  
A grin above my chin  
I whisper muchas gracias  
Remembering the lesson a plucky plant taught me.

*Melva C. Lewis*  
*Long Island, NY*

## My Tree, My Teacher

You, my tree, my teacher, would wait for me beside the lake.

Displaying all the power, your nature could muster,  
you remained faithful and strong throughout the years  
of fierce hurricanes, tornadoes, ice, heat, and rain.

Despite the deprivations and assaults the natural world hurled at you,  
you managed to overcome all adversity,  
albeit with the subsequent scars you carried on your body during your life.

From my years as a young girl to those as a young woman,  
you waited for me with open arms, ready to impart all the essential lessons  
you knew I'd need to conquer the hardships my world would send me.

My friend waited for me when I'd ride down the big hill in front of the lake,  
gliding with my bicycle, feeling the wind in my hair, secure in knowing that my friend, my tree waited for me, ready  
to give me sage counsel and support.

Holding my stories of trouble and travail close during each visit,  
you healed me as you listened to the beat of my heart  
from your home beside the lake.

My tree, my teacher, patiently heard my sorrowful and sometimes joyous  
stories of youth during my hot summer teenage nights when cool winds  
refused to relieve the enveloping humid air around me.

You renewed my fading breath as I choked down the oppressive heat being thrown at me.

## My Tree, My Teacher

Dear sweet teacher, my beloved tree, you lead by example, standing beside the lake without deviation, teaching me about the power and perils of the world from the strength of your resolved presence.

Even if I cannot be near you now for I have grown into an adult,  
with so many years and miles between us, I remember  
how I felt safe and secure wrapped under your tender green leaves.

But where are you now?

Have I lost my path to the lake?

Will I find a way to endure and lead others as you did for me -- even in the face of your tremendous obstacles?

My friend, my tree, I must find my way back to you.

I must remember your just counsel and support,  
welling up from the strength of spirit  
of your strong branches and roots.

And if I can do this I will live true to the memory of our friendship,

I will remember how to honor our precious planet Earth.

I must.

*Isabella Calisi-Wagner*

*New York, NY*



## Blight Doesn't Last Always

Endless queues of trees of blight appear beneath their sisters' canopy as we navigate the highways.

Branches covered in the cotton like film of fungus from season to season yet seems to disappear when fall arrives.

No autumn leaves.

Blight is covered by frost.

Spring comes and blight has diminished, only to reemerge to remind us of neglect or an overlooked cycle of care and sorely needed attention.

The cycle of blight diminishes. The strong healthy trees remain. The tainted trees recede and become mulch and compost for their stronger brothers and sisters.

Will the tainted trees have time to reroot? Will they rejuvenate? Will they grow?

They have served a purpose.

They will repurpose and serve again.

*Evelyn Seabrook*

*Eustis, FL*

## May 12, 2022 Writing Prompts

**Prompt 1:** If you look around your neighborhood/ community/ town/city today, what progress toward environmental justice can you see now that wasn't present 10 years ago?

How/why did it happen? Tell about this in any writing genre you choose.

**Prompt 2:** What are the dilemmas for you in trying to make a more environmentally just society? Does anything hold you back from achieving whatever goals you have set? Tell about this in any writing genre you choose.

**Prompt 3:** Who bears most of the burden for toxic soil, polluted water, and environmental disasters that disadvantage some populations more than others? Write about this in any genre you wish.

**Prompt 4:** Has the pandemic caused any changes in our fight for environmental justice? If so, how? Write about this in any genre you please.

## Arbor Day Talk on the Corner

Look! Dere that couple!

Yep! Seen them come out that building with all that graffiti: “Save Our Planet” and flowers and all like dat.

See? They carryin’ some kinda signs just like da otha times.

Guess they goin somewhere, fixin to do some kinda thing, huh?

Could be it somehin’ to do. See, be seen, and all like dat!

Why you say somethin’ like dat fo? Well, no matter ‘cause they headin’ North toward me. You can’t even see they faces.

Ok. Score one for you. So, tell it!

Wait for it. They just a few feet ... Ok. I got a close look. Fast walkers these two!

Well?

Hold on! You showin those nettles, sho nuff! Ok. So one of ‘em wearing some kinda “Love Earth” cap, pulled so low I couldn’t make out...

Wait a minute! What they mouth look like? You see the mouth, right?

Too busy tryin’ to make out the other face. But like Mama always told us:

“You can tell a true heart by the mouth they wearin.”

She sho nuff did use to say dat. Sho nuff did.

Well, face look kinda slept in, and dem eyes look red ‘round the rims, like when they cry or rub they eyes.

They best rub they eyes, all that soot and all kinda mess flyin round here! Hold up! Wait just a dang gone minute!

What?

How the heck you done seen all that?

Sho nuff seen ‘nuff them with they no-sleep faces, they red-rimmed eyes. You seen it, too!

Got dat right! Ok. I’ll look out for ‘em on they way back.

Fine. You do that ‘cause I seen that cat again.

Which one dem cats?

That black cat with them white feet.

Oh. Ok. I done lost sight that dere cat. You seen it now?

Yep, sho do! Slinkin’ under that gate to da alley.

## Arbor Day Talk on the Corner

Ooooh, wee! Sho is! Garbage in that alley.

*Well, won't be seeing that cat no time soon, I betcha that!*

Why? Super done put down poison again?

*Mo' like them sanitation trucks not comin' round here fo anotha week, if then. You know how they be this part of town.*

Got dat right!

*By the way, seen your love lately?*

Depend on how much wind we get.

*Well, feel like a storm comin, so maybe then?*

Could be. A whole lotta storms be comin, nowadays. These old limbs can't stretch 'round this corner like they used to do – for a quick hug or even cop two!

*Look! Sun at 15 hun'red – Don't mean to cut you off – But looka here! Look at 'em runnin' and screamin'! They just like a storm, too!*

Oh, Lord! Don't want to lose no mo' nettles – I mean it! They always pullin,' grabbin,' pluckin'! One of 'em done hauled off and kicked me da other day!

*Well, we safe today, right?*

Wish it mo'ren jus' one day, tho!

*Yep. Sho do. Sho nuff do.*

*Luvon Roberson*

*Harlem, NY*



# Being in Harmony with Nature: Part I

*There is a curious paradox  
That no one can explain  
Who understands the secret  
Of the reaping of the grain  
Who understands why Spring is born  
Out of winter's laboring pain...\**

Creating conditions of environmental justice is not always easy or popular. Often it creates dilemmas and paradoxes as the following four vignettes demonstrate.

## I) Try and Try Again

As managers of an under-funded community feeding program, we accepted donations from a multitude of sources. At one point we decided to become as environmentally friendly as possible. We established compost heaps; recycled cardboard and containers; eliminated the use of most plastic; and talked to our hungry participants about how all of us could be environmentally responsible. So, imagine our dilemma when a local wholesaler sent us a “gift” of 1000 Styrofoam plates. “Styrofoam is one of the least environmentally friendly substances.... It doesn't degrade or break down over time.” \*\* In the end, since we needed plates desperately and since throwing them away unused wouldn't get rid of the Styrofoam, we used them but redoubled our efforts to teach people how these kinds of substances pollute the environment. We informed all of our supporters that the program attempts to be environmentally friendly.

## II) Is It Really Impossible?

Nine-year-old Jordan lived in a blighted urban area. When he played outside with his friends they were on sidewalks and in alleyways. The local park offered a green space with trees, lawns, and a pond teeming with wildlife. Jordan wondered about the geese and frogs he knew were there, but he and his friends couldn't go there because of gang activity. When a regional nature camp offered summer scholarships to urban children for a two-week adventure in environmental activities, some of us who attended the same church as Jordan's family helped Jordan's grandmother fill out the application.

Everyone, especially Jordan, was elated when he was chosen to receive a scholarship. But as the school year ended, Jordan's grandmother received notice that he had failed math and would have to go to summer school in order to pass third grade. Church and family members offered a variety of solutions to make it possible for the boy to both pass third-grade math and attend nature camp. Those of us who were certified to teach third grade math volunteered to tutor Jordan over the summer even if we had to drive to the camp or use a room in the church during the evenings. The school district would not accept any proposed solution neither would the camp alter its schedule to accommodate the tutoring.

We were immensely frustrated as Jordan's family turned down the scholarship and sent him to summer school. He should have been able to do both! Nature is full of mathematical relationships. Why can't we teach math through environmental activities? In a world more reflective of environmental justice and less bureaucratic red tape, Jordan would have been able to learn mathematics by exploring nature. JUSTICE FOR JORDAN!

*Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight  
Bronxville, NY*

\*Jerry Orbach (Lyrics: The Fantasticks) <https://www.flashlyrics.com/lyrics/jerry-orbach/there-is-a-curious-paradox-57> (Accessed on 6.6.22)

\*\*<https://www.insider.com/guides/home/is-styrofoam-recyclable> (Accessed on 6.6.22)



## Being in Harmony with Nature: Part II

### III) Check Yourself

As an avid traveler I journeyed to far-flung cultural and historical sites bringing home souvenirs to display or give to my less-travelled relatives and friends. At some point I learned that close-up observation of sites I had visited, such as the Greek Acropolis, are closed to close observation and visible only from a distance. I had been to these places at times when one could walk on, see and touch items directly. Now the environments in and around them are ruined because of millions of footfalls, food stains, and fingerprints on the grounds, floors, walls, and artifacts.

I felt sorry for those who would visit going forward. They would only get distant glimpses from afar. Then slowly and painfully the realization crept into my understanding that the environmental changes that caused the sightseeing prohibitions were because of ME. My pride as a traveler momentarily concealed from me the fact that this was my fault. For years, I was one of those environmental interlopers. GUILTY!

### IV) A Curious Paradox

Weavers know in order to make a strong woven product you need “warp” and “weft.” The warp is strong foundational strands that are laid out, usually vertically. The weft fibers are the ones that are guided in and out crosswise between warp strands to create the woven cloth, basket, etc. When warp and weft are positioned correctly, we see that familiar over and under pattern of a woven product.

Birds know this relationship as well. In nest-building they use sticks or heavy straw to act as the foundation of the nest, the warp. Then they find more flexible constituents, like vines or straw to be the weft. They weave these softer materials in and out between the warp they have already put in place.

In the city where buildings, train stations, and bridges abound, architectural planners and health workers attempt to keep birds from congregating in certain places. Bird droppings make an ugly site and unhealthy environment on walkways. Therefore, gadget-makers have devised spiked devices that look almost like upside-down nails that are cemented to horizontal spaces with the sharpened end sticking up in the air. These are supposed to discourage birds from landing there lest they get stuck by a sharp spike.

Through the wonders and ironies of nature, I have observed at some of these places that birds have built nests in the very spaces that humans tried to keep bird-free. Amazingly, the birds find ways to avoid being pricked by the spikes. They gather soft materials and weave them in and out of the spikes. Essentially the birds build nests using the spikes as their warp and proceed to weave weft between the spikes of the very device that is meant to keep them away.

Who is environmentally smarter, the humans or the birds? Which one has most violated the environmental justice of the other?

*Dr. Vernay Mitchell-McKnight  
Bronxville, NY*



## To a Late Special Oak

I have wondered if others on the bus  
Noticed or in passing beneath your  
Encompassing shade as much as  
Glanced in your direction. (For many,  
All such as you, are "...just trees.")  
Never!

I found you irresistible, looked with  
Anticipation to see you each day.

The variety among you in our tree-  
blessed area, identified and named  
For me early in life by Father who  
Claimed kinship with you.  
There, I studied, listened, talked  
To you, became appreciator,  
Observer, and protector.

Here you were also, dominating the  
Narrow scape of a lot in the big city.  
I noted your changes over time.  
While some attempt symmetry,  
Your kind do not seem to bother.  
Your broad, straight trunk  
Branched to a perfect Y, that Y  
Branched in arcs with smaller  
Branches extending ever upward  
And outward, distributed in  
Filigreed circumference. You then  
Elongated your branches toward  
Optimal sunlight, zigzagged,  
Twisted and crisscrossed them by  
Necessary route or proximity to  
Neighbors. Marvelous, those  
Strategies designed for production  
Destiny: Foliage and acorns.

Tough throughout weather extremes,  
You triumphed in roller coaster  
Winds, encasing ice, broiling  
Heat. I also thought you bold as  
Your energy left your closest

## To a Late Special Oak

Neighbors lopsided. I scolded  
You for that; wishing now, I had  
Not. Regardless, I am grateful  
To have benefitted from your  
Presence, had the many visitations,  
Opportunities to admire your beauty,  
To recognize your inestimable value.  
In spirit speak, I told you all of this.  
I thanked God for you.

There came that fateful  
Morning when during my ride  
I scanned as usual to see you.  
To my gasped astonishment,  
Neither you nor your neighbors  
Were there: obviously cut  
Down and removed.

Now, only months later  
There is a parking lot, smoothed  
Over, greasy, oily, reeking and  
Infusing the air with fumes that  
Poison, when not long ago, you  
Glorified the area being all that  
You were and emitting life  
Sustaining oxygen for all  
Within your purview.  
Magnificent, special you.

*Hylde Clarke*

*Harlem, NY*



## Tree Testimony

Not much has changed around me  
though much needs to change around me.

My tall guardian pine trees still  
greet me with bowed heads  
as Carolina storm winds, blow. Their grey moss beards sway sweetly in vigorous breezes as I walk what used to be  
back-roads, in the golden hour before predicted rain torrents, fall.

Weather-app-on-tap flash warns from its hidden electronic face, buried in my pocket. I pass by my favorite magnolia  
tree, whose dead leaves fall like brittle tear drops watering my path. She is oblivious to the sizzling silence of electrical  
wires slicing through her hair. I wonder if the delicate white blossoms bobbing on her branches, will survive  
the coming storm.

© 2022 Verneda (“Rikki”) Lights

*Port Royal, SC*

## Who's Railway Carriage: Yours or Mine?

*"A smoker and a non-smoker cannot be equally free in the same railway carriage."*

OK...spot on George Bernard Shaw

But please, pray, tell who will decide if smoking is permitted in the railway carriage?

If smoking indeed will be permitted everywhere

Who will decide?

If smoking indeed will be permitted

somewhere

Who will decide?

Will smoking mean freedom for some but not freedom for all?

Will no smoking mean freedom for some but not freedom for all?

What is freedom if you can't do as you wish.

Oh, George Bernard Shaw come back

Hear the lyric that never made it into

SHOWBOAT ninety-five years ago

But was a chart-topper for THE PLATTERS in 1958

Look out, listen up:

SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

They all sang it, all the singers you cutout so early you couldn't hear

I will name names: Sarah Vaughn, Jo Stafford, Charlie Parker, Dinah Washington

But don't forget 'the King' himself, Nat Cole.

Mr. Cole knew how to ascend an octave in the first few bars

He knew his rendition was sweeping dance floors, radios and studio glee clubs with all-out giddy syncopation.

But hold on: what's that lyric?

"When a lovely flame dies

Smoke gets in your eyes"!

Why talk George Bernard Shaw about dying?

You were focused on railway carriages, not coffins.

How has the destination shifted to chaff in the melody maker?

No tobacco in wheat no longer

No wheat in tobacco ever?

Who is the 'they' that asked maybe even me

How I knew my true love is true?

Still thrilling and trilling: "I am without my love..."

Only to realize smoke gets in my eyes.

## Who's Railway Carriage: Yours or Mine?

I implore you exit that railway station in the sky  
Drift amidst the second-hand smoke crevices  
See how stiff and swift your arteries morph Old Man  
Just as if you had the cigar or hookah in hand.

Banish the restrictions now in common passageways to every single square foot  
Of every single floor  
Throughout every single apartment  
Indeed extend the smoke ban to every floorboard and slim shady shaky rooftop.

That's precisely what had happened since July 2018 in all NYCHA Properties  
All the way out 25 feet beyond the circumference of the entirety.  
Smoke-free is no longer the exclusive province of the new high-end Condominium  
Or the newest cooperative sliver Building.

NEW YORK CITY SMOKE FREE AIR ACT  
is in the Hood, your Hood, my Hood, our Hood.  
Guess what, Georgie?  
We finally figured it out: your breath has to be as good as my breath  
Or neither of us is breathing at all.

You leave me breathless for more fresh air.

*F.E. Scanlon*

*Flushing, NY*

## May 19, 2022 Writing Prompts

**Prompt 1:** How are you part of “environment”? How might you write eco-poetry or eco-prose?

Using one of the three images provided by Eugene Melino who led our prompt-based session on eco-poetry/eco-prose, write about how you are part of, how you exist alongside, how you are in-relation to other living creations in “environment”:



## A Note About Eco-Poetry & Eco-Prose

### What is eco-poetry/eco-prose? \*\*

Focuses on the interrelationship, interconnectedness, and interdependence between the human and nonhuman realms.

In eco-poetry/eco-prose writing, moods range from celebratory to anxious to outraged.

Raises to consciousness the relationship between nature and culture.

Looks critically at technology, capitalism, Western notions of progress.

Explores cooperation/harmony vs. domination/conflict.

In eco-poetry/eco-prose writing, the focus is eco-logical vs. ego-logical.

Encourages and teaches environmental and ecological literacy.

### About Eco-Poetry/Eco-Prose in This Anthology

“We Are Nature, Three Generations” offers strong images and specific details.

“A Curious Paradox” this section of “Being in Harmony with Nature” uses weaving in an original way to show the interconnection between the human and nonhuman realms.

“Intruder Who? – A Cautionary Tale” transcends the human-centric perspective, something eco-poetry/eco-prose always tries to do.

*Eugene Melino*

*Poet, published in Contemporary Ghazals, Poeming Pigeon, Poetry in Form (Medium), Blue Lake Review, Burningword Literary Journal, and Grape Press*

*Facilitator, Riverside Writing Group, prompt-based writing session on Eco-Poetry/Eco-Prose, in our Writing Environmental Justice series, on 5.19.22.*

*\*\* Also known as co-poetics or eco-poesia. See, Forest Gander, “What Is Eco-Poetry?” <https://www.sierrapoetryfestival.org/sierra-poetry-social/2019/1/29/what-is-eco-poetry>*

## Intruder Who? – A Cautionary Tale

THE FOLLOWING IS A REPORT BY REGINA M. TATE, REPORTER FOR YOUTUBE, STATED TO HER BY GEORGE DEFOREST, HIS WIFE MILDRED, AND THEIR THREE-YEAR-OLD SON KIT.

ALL NAMES OF THE PERSONS STATED HEREIN ARE FICTIONAL. THE NAMES HAS BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE INNOCENT AS WELL AS THE GUILTY. MOREOVER, NO HUMANS OF ANIMALS, OF ANY KIND, WERE HARMED IN THE COLLECTION OF EVIDENCE CONTAINED IN THE STATEMENT, BELOW.

My name is George DeForest, this is my wife Mildred and our three-year-old son Kit. I wish to report to you a very strange incident that happened to us last night. We did not know what else to do!

I, along with my wife, and Kit were just about to start eating dinner when we heard a loud bang! The sound came from our backyard. We jumped up and ran into our yard.

When we got there, we were confronted by a large, majestic raccoon who was sitting on top of our overturned garbage cans! I shouted:

“You, there, you, intruder! Get out of my yard!”

To our surprise, it stood up on its hind legs, put its paws on its hips, (if it had any) snarled at us and said:

“I am not the intruder! You are! I, and my ancestors, have lived on this land in peace for hundreds of years, until you humans arrived. You have pushed yourselves into our land, torn down our trees -- so that we have no place to sleep -- paved over our fields, and filled up our ponds with dirt. I am not the intruder, you are!”

I turned to my wife, Mildred and said:

“My God, He speaks English! Before Mildred could reply, the raccoon said:”

“Of course, we can speak and understand English! Just because you cannot speak raccoon, does not mean that we cannot speak English.”

At that, Mildred looked at the raccoon and then said to me:

“He looks as large as our son Kit!”

The raccoon said, snarling at us,

“I am bigger than he is! I am 38 inches in length and weigh 38 pounds.”

He appeared to be beaming! Our son is 31 inches tall and weighs about 30 pounds. We were stunned.

“Raccoon, you must leave!” I stated again.

## Intruder Who? – A Cautionary Tale

“That’s Mister Raccoon to you!” the raccoon said. “And, just in case you didn’t know, our name comes from a native Powhatan word meaning ‘animal that scratches with its hands.’”

He then said gravely:

“You forced the Native Americans off their land and took their homes, it will be harder for you to do that to us! And now our planet is angrily rebelling. So much damage you have done!”

*Mr. DeForest looked at this reporter and said:*

I was aghast at this whole conversation. Kit, being curious, walked toward the raccoon. Mildred grabbed him and said:

“Dear, humans do not play with animals.”

The raccoon, clearly annoyed said:

“Oh, your lie! We saw you all playing with that dog!”

We just gasped and Kit started laughing. The raccoon said,

”By the way, our babies are called kits, your baby does not look like a ‘kit’ to me.”

*Mr. DeForest looked at this reporter gravely and said:*

“We did not know what to do! It spoke English to us and told us that we had actually engaged in the destruction of the land when we had our house built. We simply wanted to enjoy the great views from our home, so we had to tear down a good number of trees. They were just in the way!

However, Madam, the raccoon was not persuaded that we humans were good stewards of the land. This argument went on for over an hour.“

*Mr. DeForest shook his head and said: “What are we to do?”*

*Mr. DeForest also asked Mr. Raccoon (he wanted to be called that) how was he always able to get into the garbage bins. The raccoon beamed again. “We have fingers too, you know. We can turn door knobs, and open jars and latches. We also teach our kits how to do these things. We have seen the inside of your house.” Mildred nearly fainted.*

*After a while, Mr. DeForest said they had run out of arguments, and the raccoon had finished his dinner that he had gotten from the garbage and fed his family.*

*This reporter was told by the DeForest family and by the raccoon that both slowly returned to their homes. The raccoons to a nearby tree and the DeForest family back into their house. Further, Mr. Raccoon and the DeForest family are scheduled to meet for talks again next week.*

*This reporter concluded that the struggle between man and nature would continue for some time to come.  
Respectfully submitted, Regina M.Tate*

*Regina Tate*

*Brooklyn, NY*



## Who Am I?

We are  
a product of our environment.  
We have  
an influence on our environment.  
And vice versa.

Our environment  
is impacted by our actions.  
Our environment  
has an impact on our actions.  
And vice versa.

Everything in life is interconnected,  
just like our bodies' cells, organs, bones, muscles,  
and 39 trillion microbes and bacteria.

If only I could free myself  
from mental slavery,  
then I'd be as vast as  
billions of galaxies.

If only I could free myself  
from my ego,  
then I could love everyone, equally,  
without expecting anything in return.

If only I could transcend my physical limitations,  
then my mind could reflect life for what is,  
and not for what I think it ought to be.

Only an idiotic fool, full of confidence,  
could ever believe  
that he can privatize space and commodify life.  
This is exactly why  
he unconsciously destroys Mother Earth.

## Who Am I?

An emotionally intelligent person,  
full of love, knows that Mother Earth  
belongs to everyone,  
just as everyone belongs to her.  
This is exactly why  
she consciously takes care of Mother Earth.

A spiritual person, full of wisdom,  
knows that all life comes from the same source,  
This is exactly why they are destined  
to know who we are, and where  
we are.

*Gary Bogle*

*Brooklyn, NY*

## We Are Nature, Three Generations

### 1. *New York City, May 2022*

*Waste nothing*, the family mantra called.

*We live on nature's generous gifts.*

The bean, dampened overnight in the paper towel  
pressed against the window to eat the sun  
sprouts like a long-legged spider.

At 4, my grandson, raised by master gardeners  
chatters to me about "germination."

At the Climate March, he chomps on fresh kale  
plucked from his father's urban farm.

They'll plant the bean, then nurture it until it twines.

### 2. *St. Louis, MO, May 1960*

The lilacs stood like sentinels

In mother's coffee-ground fertilized beds

regal purple steeped in gold ribbons

dense as ancient stands of Douglas firs and pine.

Aloof, roses and morning glories climbed walls and archways.

But she shared her spotted pears and peaches, fallen apples

with squirrels, possums, robins, and bobolinks,

then steamed up the kitchen to can left fruit,

turn them to winter sauces

to feed our human neighbors.

### 3. *Outside Brenham, TX and Houston, TX, June 1956*

Again, in memory, the child

digs by the persimmon bush in the porches' shade

beside generations of lazing cats and dogs

at the grandparents' farm.

Inside the grownups splatter words

in rapid Low German:

voices rising, settling

like the blue-eyed flies

circling the dog's mush in the Texas heat

## We Are Nature, Three Generations

Childhood was an ancient place  
where blackberries burst on the alley vines,  
where wind-bent pine trees tall as cathedrals,  
called to be climbed,  
bark sappy on young fingers clutching the limbs

Butterflies danced their gossamer wings  
grey-blue, orange-black, Monarchs and swallowtails  
painted ladies, species common as the city's torrential rains  
and Houston's lack of zoning regulations

Above,  
a sky spread azure like distant seas  
still unpolluted by oil.

*Frances Connell*

*New York, NY*

# NOTES



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*Riverside Writing Group*

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