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# Echoes Of Nature: Exploring The Intricacies Of Existence And The Environment

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**Echoes of Nature:**  
**Exploring the Intricacies of Existence and the Environment**

by Lena Massengale

Swarthmore College

This anthology was created for “Ecopoetry and the Climate Crisis,”

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with support from Prof. Peter Schmidt

Department of English Literature

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## **Introduction**

In this anthology, the works from highly skilled authors allow the reader to peek into the existential through a celebration of the natural world. Featuring the unique writing styles of **Charles Simic**, **WS Merwin**, and **bell hooks**, the reader is transported into a world of eco-poetry that aims to touch on more than earthly space. Transcending the rigid bounds of environmental scholarship, these authors incorporate their personal experiences in their interpretation of environmentalism. From the spiritual and ancestral ties to masked social critique, my anthology “Echoes of Nature: Exploring the Intricacies of Existence and the Environment” invites readers to explore the diverse world of eco-poetry.

## “Appalachian Elegy,” section 6

By bell hooks

Read the poem online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148751/appalachian-elegy-1-6>.

“Appalachian Elegy” is an ode of appreciation to the natural world commonly identified with the traditional American landscape. bell hooks transcends popularized notions of ecopoetry as she uses identity and culture to analyze creative explorations of the natural world. Born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky in 1952, hooks’ understanding of the world was shaped by her surroundings. In addition to the environment in which she grew up in influencing the formation of her poetic voice, hooks’ awareness of her social positionality as a Black woman remains a constant theme in hooks’ work. With the support of influential women in her life like her mother and her 5 sisters, aspects of hooks’ identity are woven into the words of her poems and further realized by the origin of her pen name. Using her great-grandmother’s name for what has become synonymous with her identity as an author, bell hooks not only wrote about the ancestral but fully realized the significance of honoring those that shaped your existence. With her first publication being a poetry book called *And There We Wept* released in 1978, there is no doubt that hooks was dedicated to establishing her poetic craft. Following the release of her first poetry book, hooks transitions to a sociological genre that analyzes the social and the economic as it affects one’s perceived identity. Establishing the term “oppositional gaze” in her 1992 essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” and “White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy” in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks was also a leading scholar of Black feminist theory. The skillful and creative ways that bell hooks writes in every genre are evident in the ways that these concepts intersect through her poetic examinations of the Black experience and how it manifests in nature.

The poem titled “6.” in *Appalachian Elegy*, published in 2012 establishes several themes around environmental appreciation, Black ancestry, and familial ties. To establish the tone of familiarity and comfort, hooks begins the poem by addressing the reader as a “little sister.” With femininity acknowledged in the call to the reader, a divine undertone emerges as the poem continues. The inclusion of “angels make their home here” influences how we are meant to perceive the Appalachian landscape that hooks is writing about. Although incredibly beautiful, the large stretch of dense forests and mountains has a contentious relationship with American history. What was once a space of moral atrocity through the southern slave industry is now home to generations of vibrant Black communities, including hooks’ own family. The poem continues with the author’s voice guiding the reader through the hills as she emphasizes the importance of listening and moving with intention to not intrude upon the spiritual aura that exists in the environment. Further emphasis is placed on ancestral ties in the following lines of the poem, “all the holy ones / embracing us / all our kin / making home here.” In using holy ones and kin to describe the past and future beings who live in Appalachian land, hooks bridges the connection between present life and the metaphysical forms that we can take on. Through the description of those alive and dead interacting with the reader and the author as they make their

way through the land, hooks is clearly acknowledging the existence of a spiritual realm while also bringing attention to the Black people who have passed on. hooks also ensures that the reader knows that the spiritual plane in which they enter the Appalachian environment is for everyone and lived in by all who roam there, including the “renegade marooned” and “the lawless fugitive.” Individuals with pasts that are commonly frowned upon like the isolated traitor and those escaping persecution are also embraced in the openness of the land. The poem ends with phrases that suggest a need for community. Continuing with the religious undertones, hooks writes, “we have earth to bind us / the covenant / between us / can never be broken.” If we consider the time and memories invested in the lands that we cultivate to be important, then we should place substantial value on the earth as a binding contract with each other. bell hooks’ “6.” is a thoughtful examination of Appalachian space. Unlike many eco-poems that fully embrace the positive aspects associated with the natural world, hooks’ “6.” confronts the challenging historical aspects of an environment while inviting a different perspective of it. The poem allows for us to welcome the memories established by a reality of harm and look to one another, alive and dead, for comfort in the spaces we take up. We are called by our inherent earth ties to all walk together as we reimagine futures for the land and subsequent generations.

### Study Questions

1. How can we embrace the idea of bell hooks’ earthly “covenant” and move with intention within our relationships with each other and nature? “Covenant” is one of the key words in the poem. Look up the word’s meaning, including its biblical contexts, then discuss how these would apply to those who sought refuge and made homes in Appalachia, including hooks’ own family. Note: Appalachia in the eastern U.S. is often associated with poor whites and their history, but one of hooks’ points in her “Elegy” is that Appalachia’s racial history—especially involving Blacks and Native Americans—is more diverse and complicated than many assume. Which leads to question #2:
2. Why does bell hooks use the concept of the “lawless fugitive” to establish that the historical Appalachian environment is home to all? Why does she use the word “marooned”? Look up the history of “maroons,” both in the US and in the Caribbean, then explore how that word’s history enhances your understanding of hooks’ poem.

## “Stone”

By Charles Simic

Read the poem online: <https://t54poets.weebly.com/blog/Stone-by-charles-simic>.

Listen to Simic reading “Stone”:

<https://whyy.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/pe11.rla.genre.poetry.simStone/Stone-by-charles-simic/>.

“Stone” by Charles Simic is a reflection on the naturally occurring mundane that often goes overlooked. Simic analyzes objectivity through a projection of self into a physical Stone. Interested in its mystery of serenity and near indestructibility, “Stone” is a look into Simic’s imagination as he fully embraces a Stone’s form. Charles Simic’s exploration of the natural world goes far beyond his critically acclaimed “Stone” poem. Born in Belgrade, Serbia in 1938, Simic’s early childhood was shaped by Europe’s relationship to the political consequences of World War II. After emigrating with his mother and brother to the U.S. at 17 from Yugoslavia in 1954, Simic embraced his interest in creative writing. Thirteen years later, Simic wrote his first volume of poetry titled *What the Grass Says*. Inspired by imagery from a rural European landscape, Simic began his lifelong examination of the natural world. With both the existential and physical space a point of interest for Simic, he also wrote *The World Doesn’t End* in 1989. Consisting of stories that push the bounds of realism, Simic’s poetry on divinity and the supernatural later helped him win the 1990 Pulitzer Prize. As we consider Simic’s legacy of ecopoetry, we can look to “Stone” as one of Simic’s first published examples of his interest in the natural world.

Composed of three stanzas, “Stone” takes the reader on the journey of becoming a Stone, the resilience of its form, and its hidden potential. Welcoming other perspectives, Simic acknowledges the potential of perceived irrationality in his choice of becoming a Stone yet remains steadfast in the decision. Furthermore, the poem poses a tension regarding the Stone as an aspect of the environment. “From the outside the Stone is a riddle: / No one knows how to answer it.” Most of nature’s objects succumb to the earth’s natural processes and ultimately result in quick deterioration, but Stones have a different cycle. Since a Stone is not a living organism, it cannot technically die, but it can break down. Although they are susceptible to that natural process, Simic makes the point that they will remain undisturbed. Using the actions made by living beings like a child, cows, and fish to the Stone, Simic establishes a space where the inanimate is no longer opposite to the living. In the third stanza, the reader is witness to the beauty that the author originally saw in the Stone. With pressure and force, the Stone changes and creates something new, in this case, the “sparks fly out.” Simic writes, “So perhaps it is not dark inside after all; / Perhaps there is a moon shining.” Although this line speaks to the inner workings of the Stone, this is also an allusion to promise. Whether it be individual promise or environmental promise, the idea that something is exactly as it presents on the outside is entirely wrong. Using an ecopoetic framework, Simic employs the metaphor of the Stone to find a commonality between nature and self-perception. Essentially, we may not be inanimate with near

indestructible qualities but our desire to be like a Stone is enough evidence to recognize our inherent kinship with the earth.

**Study Questions**

1. How does writing about a Stone inform the ways that the reader should interpret the hidden powers in the environment around us?
2. In what ways does Charles Simic's "Stone" allude to an individual potential and depth? (So that, in imagining the Stone's qualities, including its hidden ones, we can discover something about ourselves too?)

## “After the Dragonflies”

By WS Merwin

Read the poem online: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/07/24/magazine/ws-merwin-after-the-dragonflies.html>

As a practicing Buddhist and ecologist, William Stanley Merwin undoubtedly had a fascination with the environment. Born in 1927, Merwin grew up on the East Coast during a tense global political landscape. With the start of his childhood on the cusp of World War II, the American social normalities during national engagement in a worldwide conflict shaped the way Merwin viewed not only human connection but the world around him. Writing over fifty works throughout his career, Merwin's poetic voice shifts seamlessly to incorporate his morals and interests in preserving the natural world. *The Lice* published in 1967, features poetry meant to respond to the atrocities of the Vietnam War. The celebrated short and spare style of his poetry can be seen in his poetic reflections on the horrific political moment. Merwin's inclusion of “When the War is Over” in *The Lice* captures his obvious distaste for military violence combined with an acknowledgment of how war disrupts the environment. With the lines, “The dead will think the living are worth it we will know / Who we are / And we will all enlist again” Merwin hints at the idea that the end of a war is an illusion meant to distract from the predatory nature of forced compliance with military rule. Other lines say “We will be proud of course the air will be / Good for breathing at last.” Merwin does not view the earth as a space to be used by humans and especially not for destruction; rather, he recognizes that their symbiotic relationship requires care for both the environment and those which inhabit it. The consideration of human life with thriving environments is a consistent theme present throughout Merwin's concise writing style.

“After the Dragonflies” begins with a declaration of the connection between the frequency of dragonflies and sunlight. To grasp the significance of the statement, we can consider the role of sunlight in a broader environment. Sunlight not only allows for the continuous growth of life within nature, but it is also a warming source that can also be associated with spiritual health. Merwin uses a comparison to naturally occurring resources to establish a sense of normalcy in regard to the dragonflies. Merwin also uses “memory” to describe the transient nature of dragonflies, something that is often appreciated through a childlike lens. The tone of the poem switches when adults are brought into the narrative. “Now there are grown-ups hurrying / who never saw one / and do not know what they / are not seeing.” Although the poem does not explicitly mention the idea of adulthood as an isolating stage, there can certainly be an argument made for it. Given Merwin's eco-political background, a critique of adulthood as lacking curiosity is entirely possible. The poem continues with another deep-rooted connection to light and the dragonfly form. Alluding to the dragonfly somewhat representing light, the poem ends with the lines “when we appeared in their eyes / we were strangers / they took their light with them when they went / there will be no one to remember us.” Connecting this idea of remembrance to the “memory” written earlier in the poem, Merwin tries to equate the lack of attention paid to the natural world, or in this case dragonflies, to a lack of wonder and



care for the environment. Furthermore, Merwin is calling upon the reader to feel stronger about our lack of collective memory lost in the transition to adulthood. If we do not care for the seemingly insignificant, then we become unimportant ourselves. Using an eco poetic examination of WS Merwin's "After the Dragonflies," we can discover a multitude of meanings through what someone might otherwise consider a banal topic. The poem's parallels between human life and the environment remain consistent with the principles of eco poetry.

### **Study Questions**

1. How does the line, "who never saw one / and do not know what they are not seeing" go beyond the context of dragonflies?
2. Based on this poem, what is the significance of the dragonfly form?
3. How does WS Merwin's writing allow the reader to see the range of creative explorations in eco poetry? Consider also the ways in which Merwin's work extends to the lives of people.