

Communion in the Wilderness

Nature in Words poems for Pierce Cedar Creek Institute

by Patricia Schlutt

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Introduction:

I wrote my first poem at age 6. The experience is still sweet and sad in my memory. I wanted to immortalize my dying cocker spaniel, so I described him as "a wave washing up on the beach of my heart" and "the wind blowing away from me" and similar first-grade sentiments. What clings to my memory is that I could not describe him without appealing to the natural world. I loved the lake, the wind, the forests. Even at six, I felt that nature was not just outside of me, but that it was an essential part of me; my blood, bones, and marrow were a facet of the wild world that connected with nature in an instinctual way.

That feeling has never left me. Ever since my first poem, poetry has been a way to understand and communicate emotions. It has been an interaction between nature and the soul. I believe it helps people connect with each other on a level deeper than words, a level of what Rainer Rilke calls "blood-remembering:" it is a language we all understand that runs deeper than memory or language. It is, somehow, in our blood.

I wanted to explore this connection by the poems I wrote for *Communion in the Wilderness*. The intention of this project was to illuminate the natural world in ways that quantitative research cannot. My goal was to speak for the woods, marshes, and prairies through poetry to complement the way the other researchers at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute spoke for them through data, hypotheses, and conclusions.

I drew upon the understanding of poetry as a vehicle of interpersonal communication that is rooted in shared human experience of the natural world. That understanding of poetry is the simple understanding that I began to develop when

writing my first poem at age 6, an understanding that I believe is instinctual rather than intellectual.

In this collection, I embedded my experiences at the Institute as well as some of what I have learned. Although each poem is imbued with my personal experiences and ideas, I hope that each reader finds the voice of the natural world speaking directly to them.

Methods:

In order to create a cohesive and complete collection of poems, I intended to do more than just write; I intended to live a writer's life. This consisted of waking with the sun, praying, reading, writing in the mornings, revising in the afternoons, and spending time immersing myself in the world that I wrote about.

Writing in the morning after breakfast was a wonderful way to begin the day. Revising in the afternoons allowed me to return to work from the previous week with new eyes. At several points during the summer, revision received more emphasis in my daily life, but I tried to do a little of each every day.

Each day I walked in the forests and fields, even if it was raining or cold. Rain and

cold is an essential part of the natural world, and these rainy days resulted in poems that spoke to the emptiness of a sunless sky. My goal was to take advantage of every opportunity that would unite me to the land and to the life of the Institute, so I got involved in fieldwork whenever possible. I went rattlesnake wrangling, I checked raccoon traps, I sampled soil, and I did all the volunteering I could to attempt to incorporate myself into the lifeblood of the URGE programs and the Institute.

I read many selections from books, including excerpts from Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac (1966)*, assorted poems by Ted Kooser, William Stafford, Mary Oliver, Lorraine Niedecker, Jim Harrison, and others. My main reading, however, has been in complete collections. I was awed by the *New Poems (1907)* of Rainer Maria Rilke, and they provided insight into the joy that is in the mundane things of the natural world and in people. James Wright's *Selected Poems (2005)* provided a uniquely rough and raw insight into the beauty of things, and inspired me to experiment with irony. I tried to incorporate prose and widen the spiritual breadth with which I was learning about the beauty around me by reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road (1997)*, which inspired me to write about people and to see all the small things they do as reflections of what they are. I also grew by reading St. Augustine's *Confessions (1942)*, Mother Teresa's *No Greater Love (2002)*, Mary Oliver's *Blue Pastures (1995)*, Leanne O'Sullivan's *Waiting for my Clothes (2004)*, Robert Hass' *Time and Materials (2007)*, and many more books, which are all listed in the Readings section.

Summary:

This opportunity allowed me to experiment with form, rhyme, and meter. It also challenged me to interweave my life and experiences into the woods and forests. I grew as a writer and as a human being while working on this collection at the institute. My poems document the growth, introspection, awareness, and hope that characterized my summer.

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Prayer-Poem to the Summer

Now I forget myself
and live the life-blood
of Summer.

Let me be still and simple in the temple of the woods.

Let the wind bring me stories
and the wildwoods tell themselves through my fingers.

Let my words be green, efflorescent, blooming
with fresh light.

Summer, make yourself a home
in the sap beneath these letters.

I. Poems for the glory of life

Portrait of a Tree in its Third Year

Blushing with late summer
but still green with new things,
this tree is like a wildflower
that has overflowed her petals
in her haste and joy for the sky.

And the whole prairie is like this.

Even the weeds:
so hasty, so full
of earth and sky, so drunk
on the moment,

they hurl themselves out of the soil
into the blazing tufts of afternoon sunlight
as if burning into gold
was the only way to live through autumn.

On a Memory of Mother Reading *The Song of Hiawatha*

Far-off laughter in the forest
haunts me with the rhythmic singing
of those words in *Hiawatha*
that echo still and fill my being.

Those lonely words, when strung together
add form and substance to my memory,
they burrow deep into my marrow
with dreams and thoughts I lost in childhood,
all latticed in a four-part rhythm:

the happy water, Minnehaha;
and the musician, Chibiabos;
buzzing mayflies in the wetlands,
gentle birds that lull the morning:
break into my skin with new songs
songs that ache and dream of days gone.

A List of the Things I Found Today:

A garter snake. A sparrow just beginning
to decay. A butterfly broken from her chrysalis
fanning her wings in the sun.

A wild apple tree beginning to blossom.

Your prayers drifting these
seventy miles and kissing my hair,
my cheeks, my bright
eyelids. They have been coming to me all day
on the south wind. It must blow
through the orchard where you pray,
where you pull posts this afternoon, where you laugh
with your brother, where you mingle with the afternoon sun
and ask God to open each
shy, ivory blossom.

A dandelion in between yellow and ghost.

The hot, good sun. A wild turkey.

A snake that curled up and struck from the deep grass.

The one thing I lost: a fistfull
of apple blossoms.

I wasn't paying attention.

In the Pit of a Seed

There is a darkness like the darkness
before "Let there be light." And before
those words, a mouth opened to release them.
In the deep corridors of God's throat,
one word drew forth another, and those words
breathed and birthed and blossomed into the darkness,
pulling from their marrow a bright substance
that had never been seen before.

And in the depths of a seed, there is nothing--
sometimes for years. But one day there falls around it soil
and rich water, and something
sleeping in the deepest part of the seed
wakes into an overflow
of itself.

First the case cracks open
and from the mouth of it,
molecule draws forth molecule
until a seedling can lift itself
into the morning.

Reflection on the Mystery of Soil

Soil is where our bodies came from
and to where they are going. Even now
it feels like home.

From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks,
and from the fullness of the earth
wild phlox beams up
at trillium and white oak
and together they sing
a song of where they are going:
Glory to the overflow from which we came.

Portrait of a Caterpillar

Something was turning over in her
and she found it was her skin pulling away
from the spine and muscle, so she fuzzed at the feet
into the mayo jar and hung there, and a shell grew over her.

I sleep a few feet away from her chrysalis as she
breaks into cells and reforms through the nights
that cast stars down into the long, lonely meadows.

If our hearts, which so often
pause mid-beat
at a strange turning within us

could shell themselves and hang suspended in our chests--
if the cells could liquify and if
they understood the biological process of re-
membering themselves,

they would
unfurl into the blue,
open wings in the sun,
grow strong in the drying wind
and float away from us
to long meadows ringed
with starry flowers.

A Black Widow Spider on the Cedar Creek Trail

When I go out to look
for the spider that I saw yesterday, rain starts to fall.
There is a mysterious kind of light that comes glowing
out of the center of a raindrop. Once I take off my hood and smile
at the rolling sky, I glow with that ghost-light.
And wherever the spider is, she must glimmer
out of the water that is jewelizing her web.

Her belly with the stigmata hourglass
is hidden this afternoon inside the envelope of herself:
inside the places that are dark and soft,
misted with rain and time.

Toad

Rain fell all day
and darkness congealed in the gut of the forest,
where all darkness gathers first,
and I happened to be passing through

over red leaves mashed grey by winter
when the smallest toad I have ever seen leaped
and hit my ankle, landing belly-up in the decay of summers past.
It pawed the sky.

Rolling cloudlight streamed onto the forest floor and disappeared.
Toad threw itself over
and suddenly was facing me.
My face, white and veiled in fog and rain,
met his face, as small as the nail
on the finger that I had rested so carelessly
on the mud in his path, and his eyes
were not pitch as I had expected,
but held a molecule of blue morning in them.
After he leaped away, I turned to where he was looking
to see where the reflection of blue came from.
There was only grey, brown, and a splattering of a red budding spring.

I was alone in the deep of the April woods wondering
where the blue came from.

A Poem for the Meadow Waking at 5am

hush-misted moonlight
hovering pine-kissed at the edges
of what I see:
sink into the grey-green darkdust,
forget your stars, let sunrise split
you open and crawl out,
remember what you are (the interlude).

Moon: linger. You are the whitewashed bone
that remains while darkness decays,
and you are the seed that will fruit
and hang ripe again over meadowrush
crushed by sun and shadow-hung
in sleep as dark and heavy as a dream.

After Walking the Cedar Creek Trail into Dusk

Last night I lay awake
and felt the beat echoing in my neck--
the bipartite pulse, the heart

that is somewhere in the wilderness of my body
among the flesh, bones, blood-slick walls,
veins lacing organs, cells with whole worlds
blooming inside them.

And we cannot bloom them. We cannot
make things grow.
My heart will not beat at my command.

My body is only the soil
in which a soul can take root. God breathes out
and suddenly I find his breath in my lungs
like something I'd forgotten.

Now I keep that breath secret in my deep alveoli,
wrapped in veins and prayers.

When I empty my chest of air,
return to God his breath,
return to the dust
the molecules I have borrowed,

all that will be left are these words
that are like a trail left on the earth

tracing the line of my passage
like the groove a snake leaves on a riverbank

before it melts into the cool, dark water.

Moss

I cut my foot once,
deep into the muscle,
when we were lost
in forests fresh with spring.

You cupped my foot in your hand
and bound the split flesh there with moss and vine.
The moss swelled with blood but held.

Portrait of a Tree in Decay

In the old field
there is a tree twisted and fallen
grey along the path
shrouded in reverent moss.
She is beautiful in death,
wrapped in sunwashed grass of forgotten summers,
laced with a secret color inside the shy buds of wildflowers.

In the soil beneath her lies
a thousand dead things:
the white cages of mouse bones, the shells
of beetles, spiders withered into the clawed fists of their legs,
crawfish skeletons dropped by herons,
and one long, eerie deer bone
broken out of the earth.

Her arms are opened wide
enough, even in death, to take in all the sky.

Cemetery

On the side of the road
in fresh September,
Late flowers were
nodding sleepily over the graves
of Dowling Cemetery.

And one pale squirrel, basking
on flat marble headstone,
unfurled his tail like a
white banner in the wind.

Clouds crusted the sky
and evening arrived in my blood
as surely as December
and as quickly.

Stars

Last night we sat under
galaxies boiled and exploded
into symphonies of stars.
My veins that trickle with blood
became rivers surging with sky.
If you could have peeled off my covering
you would have seen the map
inside me, the topography
of one human life, the way rivers
flow into the ocean unceasing,
and that ocean is time.

Thunderstorm

A great dark god settled over midnight
and breathed wet, stale breath into our window.
In the forest: cursed, crackling light
exploded, and unleashed thunder's bellow.

In the lightning I could see
the wheat twisting, wet-wild, row after row,
like the bound hair of a woman set free
raging in the hot rain, eerie and aglow.

This darkness kisses earth with rain that dribbles deep.
She feels for long-forgotten heroes who reap
eternal rest within their tomb-caves of history.

And in the pit of me, I keep
the way my bones are steeped in mystery
to remember that there are great gods who are alive but are asleep.

In Cedar Creek/ On Death

I used to fear coming across death. But students
study it here, driving careful pins through the pulses of spiders,
dissecting the fat hours of afternoon research,
drawing out the blood of Massasauga rattlesnakes
to make slides of microscopic life and death.
Today I find a blue racer washed
into an unholy puddle by last night's thunderstorm,
oozing with decay and half-eaten,
naked backbone hooked
into the mud. The green seagrass fingers
of the dead are beckoning
from the creek's grave, the creek's belly.
If I look up, there is a meadow of corn stalks unfurling
burnt by summer sun.
As if from an infinite distance
I watch the straw fingers of the dead
waving from the field.

A Promise

I have nothing for you, reader-- I have no offering for you. My hands are stained now with silvery emptiness. I have been wrung out upon the words I kept in my pocket. Words were a washboard and I was a rag, already threadbare, raked over the metal until unraveling. I'm empty for you, reader. Are you satisfied? I drained the color out of the tree-leaves, the morning sun, the loam by the river, and used all of it for the ink in my pen. I bled for you, bled the sacred stillness of my soul. I bled the earth for you and now all things have lost their color and hang half-formed before me like people I might have known in another life. I want to ask a question or say hello. The muscles in my throat won't contract. I birth no sound, birth no promise, birth nothing. I was only a vehicle this wilderness passed through in a desperate attempt to dig itself a home, to burrow like a promise into your heart.

Portrait of the Writer According to Cedar Creek

The girl comes every day now
as if she needs the sunlight or else will starve.
She is sad-breathing, a fleeting heart.
I can tell her steps are numbered. She is
Little flower without roots
already fading away
while my body overflows with Spring and begins again.

Reflection on an Unearthed Deer Skeleton

In this deer skeleton, there is a circular universe
missing from each eye socket.

The sockets have become
gaping mouths
waiting to be fed.

The leg bones are breaking
like stalks from the loam,
long and streaked by the sun. Their ends
have the buds where muscle attached but
those buds will never flower.

And the ribs: hooked into the mud as if holding on.

My bones? I live inside a shell of bones and flesh.

And we stand together: bones, flesh, and soul,
to swallow like a medicine
this portrait of a finished life which is stained
by sun and scarred by rain.

I have questions but a breath comes and
settles them into
the deep of my lungs.

Depression

She went out to the garden

She walked the rib-raked rows

She watched the water flowing from the spigot of a hose

she smelled the fruit-buds growing

chewed fragrant by the deer

she watched the water flowing and she wept that she's still here.

March Morning

The fire is good company; she cracks and splits the dark
with star-stems glowing over the snow.

I think of the blood
that paints the sun-starved spaces
inside me with artwork I'll never see.

Overhead there are stars foaming with galaxies, stars
tamed into stillness by the atmosphere
which keeps them thousands of years away from me.

Winter, like a bedsheet billowing
over the hills, airs out in the March dawn.
Across the valley, a single blackbird is singing,
her voice still dark
with night.

Garlic Mustard, Purple Loosestrife, Autumn Olive and Anorexia

The calorie counts stem through
notebooks and curl into
grotesque black flowers that bloom 100's and 50's.

This seed blew in and grew wild and unchecked in me,
an invasive species that hybridized with whatever
good was growing.

Everywhere now there are number-heavy vines,
whole fields of them, growing on each other, choking out
what might have grown.

& nothing I can do now but kneel here,
where they are thickest,
and pull out the roots,
one by one.

Afternoon

Before the storm, gravity binds the earth to itself.
Everything becomes heavy, even the wind,
which tears
thick and dark around me: but I have become a stone.

One infinite cloud creeps over the charcoal tree canopy
and the ancient white oak above me
can't shake the black
mist that haloes her.

Becoming the North Wind on this Haunted Evening

I would like to rest
for just a moment
above the calcium bars of rib
inside which I beat.
If I could just separate myself from that beating,

I could become wind.

Where does the wind come from, anyway?

On the day that my grandfather died,
the wind was thick and grey with unspent rain.

And that whole night, it rained.
The parts of him that were left for me to hold on to:
the last bits of wisdom inside of snow
over which he had prayed, the footsteps
that could remember for me
his wandering,
the birdseed loose on the porch that would have fed
baby birds and squirrels and other
new things:

all of this was gone in the morning.

It was only the beginning of the erasing.

What An Empty Page Feels Like After Two Hours

I.

I am dredging the mud-depths for a body
that may or may not exist.

II.

I am raking a patch of thin grass out in autumn
and suddenly realize there is only
dust and some bitter golden strands of crabgrass left--
I have pulled out everything else by the roots
and they hang, tangled and chewed-over,
on the teeth of my instrument.

III.

I am digging for water in a desert.
How deep will I have to go? Is there
water beneath this sand at all?
An ache burns
in the back of my throat,
a sinister thirst lumping there
like the beginnings of a cancer.

IV.

While I choke on unspoken words,
the meadow grass waves darkly at my window
as she digests her dead children,
grasshoppers and voles
melting into the pitted earth.

Self-Portrait in Couplets

My reflection's dressed in black.
There's nothing wrong with that.

Behind her, green fields sputter out,
a squirrel jumps down to creep about,

the forest bunches like a dream
where meadows unsplit like a seam,

and in the mirror: my steely stare.
I wonder if there's something there

or just a hollow thing begat
and bundled up in clothes of black.

III. Poems for the unknown and the resurrected

Portrait of the Resurrection of a Tree

Lightning hit this tree and it split and clawed
over the burn like fingers curl
around a nail driven through the hand,
fingers that stiffen and die that way.
The tree is dead. But one green
stalk has unfolded
from the black decay of splintered stem.

Angel:

This is why we look for the living
among the dead: because all we know is death.
We've been living our lives
in the shadow of our deaths. We've been wandering the catacombs
of our hearts, believing that nothing resurrects
and darkness is the closing of the book of our lives.
We've wasted years of ourselves doubting Spring.

But our God resurrects
trees and the clawed hands
of dead things. And if this tree
is praying, it says: Your green goldened
and came forth out of the black earth.

The Weight of Stars

Tonight I think of all the people I've ever loved--

Where are they tonight
in this beat of heart, in this breath, under this star-scarred sky
that trades my oxygen for theirs even if they are far away and we no longer touch.

Time keeps carrying them away from me.
The days are adding and adding, summing themselves
to the weight of stars:
They weigh a million pounds
and someday they will add up to death and crush
my spirit.

The stars set into sunrise and beneath that shifting light
is a glory that unravels the forest.
Trees burn into gold from within
and the meadow casts off her garments
of wheat and wildflower.

And I
outlive each moment, shoulder
loss and time and go on
and on and on.

Three Memories of Thunderstorms

I.

Oar by oar, I pull myself
into the fermenting twilight
and lightning splits the sky.
The river reflects the splintering like a mirror
and the whites of my eyes are two stars
that stare back at me from the water's surface.

II.

Rattlesnakes lace the trampled grass into the marsh.
Their bellies taste thunder before it arrives
wet and dark in the sky.
I walk the marsh like a bird that has overgrown its feathers
and sense of earth. I am too far removed
from my origin to know
the weight of the storm. I know only
the heavy morning and the rattlesnake-eyes
that blink through the matted strands of swamp,
the black wise eyes,
lonely with flinted lightning.

III.

Eric told me to write about the day
we ran to the woods, away from school and final exams
and waded the stream before the storm:
found three broken lawn chairs, a mattress full of raccoons,
a whiskey bottle that we filled with rainflowers.
We lay in the marsh and prayed
and God came in thunder,
through our bones, through the ground and into
the empty spaces in our cells
and filled them
with hot rain, and we were washed like children
in mud and water.

Five Haiku for Summer

I.
Dark sunset blossoms.
Thundercloud petals open
and bloom in your eyes.

II.
The land breathes fresh sun
shadows like linen drying
and tossing in wind.

III.
Moon floating in stars:
the iris of God, staring,
is just as haunting.

IV.
The cemetery:
In firefly light, the souls
who dance and visit.

V.
Fat black spider with
her blood hourglass dripping:
how much time is left?

A Prose Poem for Sunday

I say “we shouldn’t spend so much time together” and you say “I have doubts” and I say “about what?” and you say “us. you.” and everything goes on as it has for a thousand years: crickets glittering in the dusk, green grass ripening into red summer, raccoons crawling into the mouths of their dens to die, long deadly mushrooms sucking up the night. Protists that live a whole universe inside a single drop of pondwater go about their business and I go about mine and write about it. Some things wax and others wane as God looks on at the green efflorescence he has made with his own hands and he lets one thing after another sleep and rot gently away. From the clay and nitrogen of rotting things and from the life-breath hidden within a seed, there unfolds a little leaf that has never before seen the light. And when it does see: it has no words. it has no doubts.

By the Creek Before a Storm

The oak tree tosses her leaves
in the wind like a horse troubled
by the subtle pressure change that means
a storm is coming
but is unable to bolt or shelter.
She must bear with her roots as the great winds come
and take everything temporary away.

I am a temporary thing
with death already in my marrow
beneath her branches that grow each year
one upon the other.

Succession Poem in Four Parts

I.

The field is scarred with sutures of prairie grass after a fire
that pitted pinecones and burst the seams of the earth.
Soil and charred trunks hang like intestines
that have burst out of foliage-skin
and rot in the hot sun.

II.

One year later: empty meadow
but for the tree-brothers unfolding from the earth,
tugging on the skirts of the wind, waving at the trees
that at the forest edge are unraveling summer leaf-beards.

III.

Years pile into the trunks
and ring around the tree-core as seasons pass through them.
The branches grow heavy and ripe with shadow.
The meadow, unrobed of its golden mornings, must drink the drippings
of sun that come down from the greenleaves.

IV.

Grass withdraws into its stalk. The stalk unflowers into a decaying bud.
The bud wilts into a stem. The stem becomes a stalk starved of sun
that rots and is forgotten while the green swell of leaves overhead
sing with the mouths of a hundred birds,
suck up rootfuls of nitrogen
as the meadow curdles and spoils in shadow.

Two Thoughts for Sunday

I.

Sunday is falling and falling around me
in droplets and thunder. Sometimes it is clear
for a moment,
but the rain begins again
with the same sad
whispering over meadow grass.
The sky can empty herself
but a west wind will fill her forever with unwept tears.

IV.

Mother Teresa said,
if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten
that we belong to each other.
I've been thinking
about it and I think it's true. Another thing:
my hand belongs to your hand, and to the rain,
and to the wind

which haunts the
distance between us.

6am

and I am
crowned in mosquitoes.

and the grass is dark with dew
like the night that sank into it and rests
among the drops. it left
some black haze and a few surprised stars
that cling to my shoelaces
as i walk to breakfast.

Two Reasons We Make Things

I.

We are bleeding.

I find myself dripping with words and visions.

If I stand in the forest long enough

I overflow my body from the wrists, crown, and then each pore.

I need pen and paper

to catch the blood from this stigmata wound.

II.

We don't want to be forgotten.

In my notebook there is a pollen stain

from a flower I pressed between pages and then lost.

I found a note to myself beneath the spot:

Soon this flower will be soil and so will you.

So leave a stain of words.

And I think I will devote my life to that.

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