Four Poems
by Jennifer Atkinson

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Introduction

During the last forty years, the increasing awareness of environmental threats has given rise to a new literary genre known as ecopoetry. Ecopoems take the whole planet into consideration, investigating how various ecosystems adapt and evolve. Differing from traditional nature poems, ecopoetry engages directly with environmental issues and emphasizes the interdependent relationship between the human and non-human world.

Jennifer Atkinson’s third book of poetry, *Drift Ice*, examines such interdependence using complex spiritual and intellectual wonderings. The collection includes a sequence set in Prince William Sound, Alaska, fifteen years after the infamous Exxon Valdez oil spill devastated the area’s ecological balance. Atkinson traveled to the Sound to see with her own eyes the environmental recovery. Speaking of the sequence, she says, “Among the drift ice and the icebergs, I considered the nature of ‘nature’ and how my poems might reflect that thinking. I’m continually astonished by the variety and quiddity of live, evolving things and systems and am challenged to find formal ways to acknowledge that dynamic interdependence.” When she translates her seeing and thinking into poetic forms, Atkinson recognizes that each poem is itself an ecosystem, in the sense that every line and pause, the text and the space, must be made into an interrelated whole. The four poems featured here, taken from the Prince William Sound sequence, show the poet’s keen attention to both nature and language itself.

In the first poem, “In Plain Sight,” we visualize the poet standing by a glacial landform, taking in the awestricken landscape. Her eyes wander, come into focus, and wander off again as her mind patches together images of both the seen and the unseen, present and non-present—“Alder with an appetite for meadow, / meadow with a hunger / For rain, rain with a passion / for thunder, fire, whatever comes next.” Nature is perceived as cyclical, with its various elements intricately connected and ceaselessly evolving around one another. Yet, its immensity defies human knowledge: “what I know wouldn’t fill an acorn cap.” Acknowledging her limitation in knowing, she directs her gaze to the “plain sight,” the inexhaustible details of her surroundings: small animals, human traces, and finally, a dead skunk. As she zooms in on it, she sees the skunk’s “black eyes alive with ants.” Focusing on the thingness and nowness of the moment, she conveys the “nature of ‘nature’” as at once ever-transforming and non-sentimental. Atkinson frequently uses fragmentations and dropped lines in this poem to mirror the pausing and lingering of her eye movements and their corresponding emotional undercurrents. The abundant white space between and around the text creates a spatial silence that draws us in to participate in the poem’s ecological musing.

In “Lures,” a couplet poem, the poet looks out from the starboard bow at the ocean just before dawn. Her eyes come to settle on a lion’s-mané jellyfish that “hangs in the slack tide, its stringers trailing like lures.” The metaphor that seems to have emerged out of her mind subliminally leads us into the poet’s interior world: “Nothing out there to note—thank God— / The crank-up and fly-wheel jerked pulse of my own noisy mind.” Nature is at peace, yet the mind imagines chaos and danger. In vast and indifferent nature, her sense of disorientation, desire to anchor, and intrinsic need for meaning-making burst into the two fundamental human questions in the next couplet: “What is it I long for? What is it I have?” And as if looking outside herself for an answer, she turns her inward gaze to the horizon and sees sunlight “the color of raw salmon flesh” and the “knife edge of ridge line, ice honed.” Nature is captured at a moment of rawness and impenetrability. While the nature of nature is non-dualistic, the relationship between man and nature is seen otherwise. Dualities exist between the quietude of nature and our “noisy mind[s],” between the boundary of our vision and the boundlessness of knowledge. In addition, the awareness of these dualities forms yet another duality with our inherent longing.
to be one with nature. The couplet form doubtlessly reinforces such multi-layered dualism conveyed in the poem.

“Good Friday, 1989” reconstructs the day of the oil spill, which is considered to be one of the most devastating human-caused environmental disasters. Like the previous two poems, it opens quietly, with noun phrasal fragments to introduce the setting: “Equinoctial days, light winds: a short fetch and a shallow swell.” The celestial harmony presents a stark contrast to what is to happen. In fact, contrasts permeate the poem: the white snow and the black oil, the wilderness of the environment and the dullness of routine life, the “slick up and tar” of the shore and the “greenhouse spring” of the town, the once and the now. In order to look into the face of such “human greed and grief,” the poet purposefully assumes an omniscient point of view as if imagining an all-embracing eye looking down at the human world, its stillness and occurrence, innocence and transgression, without judgment or differentiation. But it’s impossible to keep emotions at bay: the restrained voice soon gives way to an imperative one. The five “meanwhile”-led sentences build urgency and momentum, showing how closely linked the various life forms are and how rapidly and irreversibly human interference can destroy them. But meanwhile, “hot oil slides down the pipeline toward Valdez” and “a tanker plows through the swells off Las Palmas, Long Island, Galicia, the Niger delta...” Without direct diatribes against polluters, Atkinson draws our attention to the specific places that can potentially face the same devastation as Prince Williams Sound.

“Remembering Rexroth’s Li Ch’ing Chao in Cordova, Alaska” starts with an epigraph from a poem by an 11th century Chinese poetess and ends with a quotation from a local fisherwoman in Cordova, a city severely affected by the oil spill. Thus, a sense of universal grief frames the poem. The sky, “white shell / Mottled with thunder” is the same then and now. The struggle to come to terms with loss, to not “indulge my sad heart,” also remains the same. The dropped lines suggest the halting process of emotional acceptance as well as alternative paths the mind takes as it considers and responds to the urban and harbor scenes of the city. The scenes are depicted with resonate and lucid details, each line reading like a stroke in a painting. Yet the language is decidedly crisp and unsentimental, indicating that the poet too must not indulge her sad heart. In this shared space and timeless present the poem creates, Atkinson, Li Ch’ing Chao, and the woman in Cordova together lament what’s lost and together summon up strength to accept the loss and move on. As with the other poems, Atkinson chooses precise words to build the images and implications of the poem, which doesn’t tell us to think or feel a thing. Yet we do.
In Plain Sight

Ancient of days, old eskered land, rivered and laked, strewn
With stone and seeded with hemlock, hickory, oak,
Alder with an appetite for meadow, meadow with a hunger
For rain, rain with a passion for thunder, fire, whatever comes next,
I'm getting on and what I know wouldn't fill an acorn cap,
Doesn’t grant me the warrant to search beyond the plain-sight details—
Slug, turtle, snake in the grass, fox among the sea-oats,
Cottages, overturned kayaks, the not-yet-blooming lupine,
And a skunk body undone, its tail glued to the lawn,
Its black eyes alive with ants, its pelt torn clean through.
Judge, panel of judges, are you listening?
Lures

Off the starboard bow at 4 a.m.:  
Barred cloud and scaled-gold backlight,  

A musical staff—all but blank to score the near silence:  
Waves slop, ice clunks, an otter takes a breath.

Just under the ripple- and chop-flustered surface,  
A lion’s-maned jellyfish hangs in the slack tide, its stingers trailing like lures.

Nothing out there to note—thank God—  
The crank-up and fly-wheel jerked pulse of my own noisy mind.

From wilderness to wilderness, tide to tide—  
What is it I long for? What is it I have?

Sunlight the color of raw salmon flesh,  
A knife edge of ridge line, ice honed.
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Good Friday, 1989

Bligh Reef off Valdez, Alaska

Equinoctial days, light winds: a short fetch and a shallow swell.

All day snow rots in sooty, rain-riddled mounds, snow bulldozed off the tarmac, the dock, all but the corners of the Valdez parking lots. Nights under the streetlights, the cloud-dulled moon, the snow heaps freeze over, the day shift sleeps.

Bligh Island light, the Coast Guard lights, the Alyeska office lights show up like moth holes in a woolen sky. In retrospect I’m tempted to call it tenebrous dark, for the rich mythic sound, the liturgical grandeur, the once and once onliness of the words,

But that March night was all so routine— a night run’s insomniac boredom, a good drunk to numb it, See ya, a slip-up, another—as ordinary as a misplayed four of clubs.

And a single-hulled tanker rammed Bligh Reef.

It’s hard to give up the illusion of once, of before, of primordial clean, a world, a sound, a single pristine cove untouched by human greed and grief, the smear of human fingers. Meanwhile, black ribbons and reams, bolts of satiny stuff unfold, unfurl into the water. Meanwhile, the spilled oil spreads, sheets, finds its own level breadth. The sheen congeals to a lid, like the bland skin on a pan of boiled milk, the paraffin seal on a jar of preserves.

Meanwhile the wind picks up, the waves churn a greasy foam. Beach rock, sea stars, seals, fin fish, popweed, blue mussels, otters, kelp, ducks, plankton, alder, plover slick up and tar. Whole days pass, the spill’s range widens. Meanwhile Easter’s shipped-in lilies bloom in their pink and purple foil-wrapped pots. All over the Exxon-Alyeska company town the gorgeous, viscous scent of a greenhouse spring.

Meanwhile, money, media, and blame spill in, as the effort to hose things clean begins: more error to displace and efface error,
to trace back the cause to a single man’s fault,
too many whiskeys, too much trust, badly maintained equipment.

And hot oil slides down the pipeline toward Valdez . . .

And a tanker plows though the swells off Las Palmas, Long Island, Galicia, the Niger delta...
Remembering Rexroth’s Li Ch’ing Chao in Cordova, Alaska

“If I indulged my sad heart
The days would be still more
Frozen and sad. . . .”
—Li Ch’ing Chao, “Quail Sky”

Is this what Li meant by a quail sky:
white shell
Mottled with thunder, a brittle convexity sealed smooth to the touch,
Almost opaque, held up to the sun for candling? I doubt it.
But her Englished words are stuck in my head today like a pop song.

Inland the blue arcs of Solomon’s seal, sere yarrow stalks, fiddlehead ferns,
Kids’ bikes and buoys heaped at a shed door, trash cans
Lined up in the side yards, old pickups parked along Main Street—
Everything rinsed in salt-citrus wind off the sea.

Down in the harbor, gill netters and seine boats, bow pickers and tenders,
Green nylon nets on the docks for mending,
Rubber and fish guts, varnish, diesel, fog-soaked wool—an amalgam
Of stinks, of steeps and flats:
The duckboard ramp to the dock,
Gasoline rainbows warped over the wave swells, the lush reek
Of low tide—all that, and the translucent shell of the sky.

A twelve-hour opening’s announced today for tomorrow.
Cell phones go off all over the harbor: a red salmon run rich enough
For an all-out, all-day harvest only. Only one day. The day after,
The fish must be let go uncaught to the spawning streams.
“It’s not like the old days,” a woman (not Ginny)
says from the Ginny R’s stern.

“Those days, even the ’80s, there was money in fishing.
Enough and then some—but hey—”

she picks up a hose,

“I’m done complaining,” and aims for the fish-hold.

“When you’re heartsick, whining just makes things worse.”

Jennifer Atkinson is the author of three collections of poetry, including *Drift Ice*, in which these poems are included. A new book, *The Canticle of the Night Path*, is forthcoming in Fall 2012. She teaches in George Mason University’s MFA program.
**Questions**

**“In Plain Sight”**

1) How does the poem open? What are the effects of the fragmentations and dropped lines in the first stanza?

2) The poet uses very specific nouns: “hemlock,” “hickory,” “alder,” “sea-oats,” etc. What do you think such particularity in naming contributes to the overall impression of the poem?

3) The poem ends on a rhetorical question: “Judge, panel of judges, are you listening?” What kinds of emotions does the question evoke?

**“Lures”**

1) Why do you think the poem is in couplets? How does the form respond to the intellectual and emotional complexities of the poem?

2) What kind of sensual details does the poet use to create the atmosphere of the poem? How does she present the details?

3) In the last couplet, the color of sunlight is compared to “raw salmon flesh.” What does the metaphor evoke? Why do you think it directly follows the rhetorical questions posed in the previous stanza? Does it present some sort of answer?

**“Good Friday, 1989”**

1) How would you describe the voice and point of view of this poem?

2) In the second stanza, the speaker says, “In retrospect I’m tempted to call it tenebrous dark.” Why do you think the naming is important here?

3) How does the poet use contrast to recreate the scene of the oil spill?

4) The word “meanwhile” is repeated several times. What effect does the repetition produce?

**“Remembering Rexroth’s Li Ch’ing Chao in Cordova, Alaska”**

1) In the epigraph, the poet quotes an 11th-century Chinese poet. How does the epigraph contribute to the sentiment of the poem as a whole?

2) As in “In Plain Sight,” the poet frequently uses fragmentations and dropped lines in this poem. What visual, musical, and semantic effects do they generate?

3) How do you describe the tone of the woman quoted in the last stanza? Why do you think the poem ends on the woman’s voice?
Writing Prompts

1) Write a poem about an environmental issue that explicitly and/or implicitly offers a commentary about the relationship between the human and non-human world.

2) Write another poem on the same issue, but from a different angle and in a different lyrical form. Consider how formal choices can both inform and enhance content.

3) Write a poem using dropped lines. Examine the visual and musical effect of such lines and see how they can mirror the emotional movement of the poem.

4) Write a couplet poem that investigates the dualities between man and nature. See how the form reinforces such dualism.